



Suffering and the Saints

Let those who suffer according to the will of God
commit their souls to Him in well doing,
as unto a faithful Creator.

1Peter 4:19

John David Clark, Sr.

Suffering and the Saints
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Original Dedication

(1989)

To my father, George C. Clark, Sr.,
whose fiery zeal lighted the way for many.

To my mother, Martha Murray Clark,
whose grace under fire encouraged many broken spirits.

To the members and friends of the Pioneer Tract Society,
whose patience and generosity made this work possible.

And to every hurting person.

My Credentials for Writing This Book

Late in the afternoon of August 23, 1981, I was at home, engaged in a biblical study on suffering, giving particular heed to the way righteous men and women in the Bible reacted to their trials. At the conclusion of my study, as I was closing my Bible, the Word of the Lord came to me and said, "It tickles the Devil for God's people to blame their troubles on him."

The change which those few words made in me was immediate and profound. It was as if I had been living my whole life in a dark room, and suddenly, someone turned on the light. I remember walking out to my front porch and staring across the way, almost trance-like, in awe of what I now understood: it makes Satan happy for God's people to blame him for their sufferings! From that moment, when the Word of God came to me, I lost sight of the Devil, and beheld in awe my loving heavenly Father in every circumstance of my life, working all things together for my good. A thousand scriptures took on a new and more perfect meaning.

I had been carefully and prayerfully studying the lives of biblical characters who suffered, but until the Word of God came to me, I had failed to notice the simplest and most important point which they all had clearly made. That is, they all trusted God to be the Designer of their sufferings. None of them honored other gods, including the Devil, with responsibility for determining the unpleasant circumstances they faced.

This book is the fruit of the Word of God that came to me. Its length is regrettable, for the truth that inspired it is surprisingly simple. Yet, the simple truth God revealed to me on that long-ago Sunday afternoon is so different from what many of God's children are taught that it is necessary to cover more than the stories of a few biblical characters in order to make my point. We need to consider as well the story of ancient Israel and what her prophets said about her sufferings, and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles on the subject of suffering and the saints. With that, the reader hopefully will see that the doctrine found in this book does not rest on the feeble foundation of a few scriptures but that the entire Bible confirms the Word of God that came to me.

May He who graciously revealed to my searching heart this wonderful, hidden mystery also speak to your heart and give you light as you read what I have written.



Introduction

How wondrous is the thought of eternal life with God, a life of perfect bliss and rest! What unimaginable joys must greet those who awake to that glorious domain, into which neither sadness nor affliction will be permitted. Such is the promise of God to every person who believes in His dear Son, Jesus Christ.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away.
Revelation 21:4

Blessed as we are to be given such a promise, it is tragic that we should ever have needed the promise to be given, and not rather to have continued in that uncorrupted, happy state into which man was first created. Blessed as we are that the brunt of the Creator's fearsome wrath against sin fell upon His own innocent Son, the heat of that rage which so burned Jesus' soul is felt a little by all men in the vanity, difficulty, and necessity of labor (Gen. 3:17-18; Eccl. 5:15-17) and in the certain knowledge and painful foretastes of death (Gen. 3:19; Eccl. 2:17-26). And although "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the coming glory", until that glory comes, these present sufferings must be dealt with. For in righteous response to man's disobedience, the Creator has so ordered this present earthly life that for every soul conceived into being, suffering is an inescapable certainty. There simply is no such thing as living on earth without being hurt. In overwhelming measure, God has defined this life with pain, loss, hardships, and disappointments (cp. Eccl. 1:13). As a consequence, one's attitude toward suffering cannot be estranged from one's attitude toward life. And undeniably, one's attitude toward life cannot be estranged from one's attitude toward the Creator and Governor of life.

Bad things are going to happen to you. That is not a defeatist attitude; it is just the plain truth. Bad things happen to everybody. Bad things happened to Jesus. In fact, we can even say that bad things have happened to God, unless we think that a third of His angels and many of His earthly children rebelling against Him is not a bad thing. It is also certain that good things are going to happen to you, and to everybody else. To live in this Creation is to experience both good and bad things. No amount of positive thinking will prevent bad things from happening to you, and no amount of pessimism and fear will prevent good things from happening to you.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon emphasized that blessings and trouble befall both the righteous and the wicked, and Jesus confirmed this when he said that God sends sunshine and rain upon the good and evil alike. So then, the question is not whether you will experience joy and sorrow in this life, but what will you do when you experience them? The answer lies in what you think in your heart, for what you believe about God always determines what you do. The difference

between the wise and the foolish is not that different events happen to them but that they respond differently to the same events.

BELIEVING WHAT THEY BELIEVED

We are exhorted by the writer of Hebrews to be “followers of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Heb. 6:12). But if we are to follow those of greatest faith, must we not know God as they knew Him? For faith is a trusting *in*. It is not a vague hoping, nor is it reliance upon a nebulous, divine Somebody. Faith is a real knowledge *of*, an assured looking *to*. Therefore, to be followers of those who persevered and inherited God’s promises, must we not trust God to be what they trusted Him to be? Yes, if we are ever to be of like faith with them, our understanding of the Object of their faith – God – must be like theirs. After all, it is what God is which serves as the foundation, the reason, for true faith. The faith of righteous men and women did not rest upon presumption or empty theology. The hurt and loss inflicted upon them was far too real ever to have been endured, except that their faith was anchored in an equally real knowledge of God.

What does a righteous person do, say, or think when he has done what is right and yet bad things happen? To enable more of God’s faithful children to give answers to that question that are consonant with the answers given by biblical saints of greatest faith is the objective of Part 1, “Suffering without Cause”. On the other hand, the focus of Part 2, “Suffering with Cause”, is the response of biblical saints to suffering as punishment for sin, whether their own sin or that of others. Lastly, Part 3 examines the wisdom concerning suffering that the Son of God brought to man when he came to earth.

What a man thinks about God penetrates and colors every act of his living. In particular, it plays a determinative role in his ability to endure and overcome the suffering which will certainly confront him. There are misunderstandings about God which make the overcoming of suffering more difficult. The greater the misunderstanding, the greater the difficulty. On the other hand, there is a divine understanding which promotes and hastens victory over suffering, an understanding which is demonstrated in the faith and patience of Joseph, Job, and the Lord Jesus. From the testimonies of those men, we may learn how to face with steadfast hope the difficulties which will certainly rise against our lives and try the fiber of our faith.

This is more than a collection of stories of righteous, suffering saints, for in addition to what they suffered, we will pay close attention to what they thought about their suffering and about God’s part in it. Otherwise, we might only stand on the sidelines cheering them on but not really understanding the game. And in shaping our faith to theirs, we will surely partake of the healing and deliverance which crowned their determined trust in God, and learn, as they did, that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are the called, according to His wise and often hidden purpose.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

- * In English, there is no difference in spelling between the singular and plural forms of "you". However, in biblical Hebrew and Greek, the difference is obvious. In order to accurately convey the biblical message in scriptures where "you" appears, I have italicized the "y" of all Hebrew and Greek plural forms: you, your, yours, yourselves.
- * Scriptures are taken from the King James Version of the Bible, with some modernizations.

BOOKS OF THE BIBLE AND THEIR ABBREVIATIONS

Old Testament Books

Genesis	Gen.	Ecclesiastes	Ecc.
Exodus	Ex.	Song of Solomon	Song
Leviticus	Lev.	Isaiah	Isa.
Numbers	Num.	Jeremiah	Jer.
Deuteronomy	Dt.	Lamentations	Lam.
Joshua	Josh.	Ezekiel	Ezek.
Judges	Judg.	Daniel	Dan.
Ruth	Ruth	Hosea	Hos.
1Samuel	1Sam.	Joel	Joel
2Samuel	2Sam.	Amos	Amos
1Kings	1Kgs.	Obadiah	Obad.
2Kings	2Kgs.	Jonah	Jon.
1Chronicles	1Chron.	Micah	Mic.
2Chronicles	2Chron.	Nahum	Nah.
Ezra	Ezra	Habakkuk	Hab.
Nehemiah	Neh.	Zephaniah	Zeph.
Esther	Est.	Haggai	Hag.
Job	Job	Zechariah	Zech.
Psalms	Ps.	Malachi	Mal.
Proverbs	Prov.		

New Testament Books

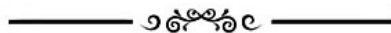
Matthew	Mt.	1Timothy	1Tim.
Mark	Mk.	2Timothy	2Tim.
Luke	Lk.	Titus	Tit.
John	Jn.	Philemon	Phlm.
Acts	Acts	Hebrews	Heb.
Romans	Rom.	James	Jas.
1Corinthians	1Cor.	1Peter	1Pet.
2Corinthians	2Cor.	2Peter	2Pet.
Galatians	Gal.	1John	1Jn.
Ephesians	Eph.	2John	2Jn.
Philippians	Phip.	3John	3Jn.
Colossians	Col.	Jude	Jude
1Thessalonians	1Thess.	Revelation	Rev.
2Thessalonians	2Thess.		

Part 1

Suffering “Without Cause”

This is praiseworthy, if a man for conscience toward God
endure grief, suffering wrongfully.

1Peter 2:19



CHAPTER 1

JOSEPH

He called for a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread.

He sent a man before them, even Joseph,
who was sold as a slave, whose feet they hurt with fetters;
he was laid in iron until the time that His word came.

The word of the LORD tried him.

Psalm 105:16-19



INJUSTICES

Joseph was only seventeen years old when his envious older brothers sold him to foreign slave traders. All his pleading and weeping did not move them from their purpose; namely, to rid the family forever of “this dreamer”. What anguish of spirit Joseph must have suffered! As the caravan carried him away from his sneering brothers and the familiar green fields of Canaan, the young man must have been torn in his soul and tormented at the prospect of slavery and death in some distant land. The reader of Joseph’s story is easily drawn to empathize with him and to feel indignation toward his wicked brothers. It is the reader’s first, natural response to want them to be held responsible for their wicked deed.

But this mistreatment of Joseph by his brothers was only the beginning of his sorrows. Having become chief servant to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officers, Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar’s adulterous wife when she could not lure Joseph into her bed. Innocent Joseph was summarily condemned to Pharaoh’s dungeon. Again, it is easy for the reader of Joseph’s story to feel disgust for Potiphar’s deceitful wife and to feel indignation for the injustices suffered by this righteous young man. Yet, Joseph’s afflictions still were not ended. After Joseph was cast into

prison, Pharaoh's chief butler was cast in there, too. Through a series of events, Joseph's righteousness and innocence were demonstrated to him, and prior to the butler's release and restoration to the personal service of Pharaoh, Joseph implored him,

“Think on me when it is well with you, and show kindness, I pray you, to me, and make mention of me to Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house. For I was indeed stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon.” Genesis 40:14-15

Who has not felt the quick stab of contempt for the released butler when the following terse report is read?

Yet, did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him. Genesis 40:23

NONE OF JOSEPH'S BUSINESS

When we read Joseph's story, our sense of justice is provoked by the injustices inflicted upon him. Our spirits are heated with empathy for Joseph and resentment toward his persecutors. Should we translate such feelings into words, they would be something like, “If I were God, I'd slap those evildoers down and take Joseph in my arms and comfort him.” We justify ourselves in such feelings with the certain knowledge that Joseph was suffering unjustly and that those who made him suffer were evil.

However, the spirit of “righteous indignation” which readers may feel when reading Joseph's story *is the very spirit that Joseph had to overcome* in order for God's will to be accomplished in his life. The authority of Egypt's throne, which God intended to place into Joseph's hand, was of such magnitude that it could not be entrusted to Joseph as long as there remained in his bosom any of the ungodly spirits of self-pity or desire for vengeance. But Joseph could not resist those spirits if he felt mistreated, and he could not but feel mistreated if he held his brothers and the others responsible for his miserable condition.

This is one of the Almighty's most terrible disciplines, reserved for those ordained to the highest callings. By the grace of God, along that agonizing journey into Egypt, or perhaps at some time in prison, in those desperate, lonely nights of half-sleep and weeping, young Joseph wrestled the spirits of self-esteem to the dust and, as his fathers had done before him, dared to believe in God's purpose in all things, *even in those things which seemed to be against him*. Because contention arises only where pride is (Prov. 13:10), Joseph was liberated from all contentiousness – even toward those who hurt him most – when through bitter disgrace and sorrow, the stubborn, flickering sparks of pride were extinguished. By his own experience, Joseph had to learn, without having any scriptures to confirm it, that “the LORD tries the righteous” and that if the LORD had chosen to use Joseph's brothers or anyone or anything else in the process of that trial, well, that was the LORD's prerogative. In one of those peculiar twists of truth, Joseph had to humble himself to confess that whatever happened to him was none of his business, that his life was not his own, but God's, to do with as He pleased.

In the light of that revelation, malice vanished. How could Joseph resent what had been done to him when he realized that his own God was responsible for its being done? Whom any longer could Joseph not love, regardless of what part that person had played in God's plan for Joseph's life?

“IT WAS NOT YOU.”

Twenty-two years after being sold as a slave, Joseph, now thoroughly subdued under the mighty hand of God, and having become ruler of Egypt, faced his brothers again when they came to purchase food for their starving families. His words then reflected the mystery of true faith, which he had learned well:

Joseph could not refrain himself before all those standing by him, and he cried out, “Cause every man to go out from me!” And there stood no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, and the Egyptians and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Does my father yet live?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were troubled at his presence. And Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near me, I pray you.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now therefore, do not be sorry or angry with yourselves, that you sold me here, for GOD SENT ME before you to preserve life! For these two years has the famine been in the land, and there are still five years in which there shall be neither plowing nor harvesting. And GOD SENT ME before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now, IT WAS NOT YOU WHO SENT ME HERE, BUT GOD.”

Genesis 45:1-8a

IRRELEVANT

None of this implies that Joseph’s faith required him to pretend that there had been no harm done to him. Joseph saw things as they were. But his faith in God created within Joseph the understanding that those who did him harm were not in control of his life. He knew that his brothers made the deal to sell him into slavery, but he committed his life into the hands of God and would not allow a vengeful spirit to cause him to act as if his brothers sold him into slavery without God’s knowledge or without God’s will. Therefore, even though Joseph had been unjustly hated and abused, both as a child and as a man, the very things which others intended for evil against him, Joseph trusted that God also intended to happen – but for good!

Because Joseph understood his enslavement to be God’s work, he was able to serve his master Potiphar from the heart, “as unto the Lord.” Because he saw his imprisonment as God’s work, Joseph could be the humble, hard-working prisoner he was. In both places, Joseph was acknowledged by those who ruled over him to be honest, capable, and devoted, as a servant to them (Gen. 39:1-6, 21-23). This is what patience is: unrelenting continuance in well doing, in times of suffering as well as in times of pleasure. Joseph’s continuance in well doing, his patience, was the expression of his faith in God. Through his brothers’ cruelty, Joseph found himself a slave in a strange land, yet he became the most diligent and trustworthy slave Potiphar had. Through a wicked woman’s deceit, Joseph found himself a despised prisoner, yet he made himself the hardest working and most submissive prisoner in the king’s dungeon. Joseph demonstrated his complete trust in God by his good works to men, obeying, thousands of years before it was written, Peter’s exhortation:

Let those who suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.

1Peter 4:19

Yes, Joseph believed that it was God who sold him into Egypt as a slave. It followed, then, that God was responsible for Joseph's being cast into prison and that it was God who let him linger there, forgotten by men, while with the fiery knife of suffering, God engraved mercy, truth, faith, and patience into Joseph's troubled spirit. And it was God, too, who at last raised up this bruised young saint out of the brambles and made him "a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 45:8). Joseph learned to see God's hand in it all.

The human beings who carried out the various details of God's plan for Joseph's life were not worthy to bear the responsibility for what happened to him. *It was God's plan.* And to God alone belonged all the glory. *As far as responsibility is concerned,* it is irrelevant that Joseph's brothers thought that it was their idea to sell him into slavery. *As far as responsibility is concerned,* it is irrelevant whether or not Potiphar's wife or Pharaoh's butler felt any guilt for Joseph's long imprisonment. And before God gave Egypt's power to Joseph, God made certain that Joseph knew that. Otherwise, upon seeing his brothers, Joseph probably would have slain in a fit of vengeance the very ones whom God had all along intended for him to save.

GOD'S PLACE

So far as the judgment of others is concerned, that was not Joseph's place. God alone was responsible for what He ordained others to do to Joseph, and God alone knew to what degree, if at all, any of them should be punished. When their father Jacob died, Joseph's brothers became fearful that Joseph would at long last retaliate for what they had done. So, they sent a messenger to Joseph, telling him that it was Jacob's dying request that Joseph should not avenge himself on them (Gen. 50:15-17a). Joseph no doubt knew they had invented that story out of fear, and it grieved him that his brothers still did not understand what God had done for them.

And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. And his brothers also went and fell down before him, and they said, "Behold, we are your slaves." And Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? But as for you, you thought evil against me, but GOD MEANT IT FOR GOOD, to bring to pass, as *it is* this day, to save the lives of many people. Now therefore, fear not. I will take care of you, and your little ones." And he comforted them, and he spoke kindly to them. Genesis 50:17b-21

Joseph was able thus to love and care for his brothers because he never lost sight of God's love and care for him. Joseph did not believe that his brothers were responsible for selling him into Egypt and that God only later managed to work it out for good. No, from the beginning, God "meant it for good." That is to say, God controlled and had a purpose for every event that befell Joseph. Joseph would not have wanted it, and God would not have allowed it, to be any other way.

CONCLUSION

For all their faith in God, the biblical characters of greatest faith were always those, like Joseph, of greatest suffering. Who suffered more than Jesus, or Job, or Paul, or David? Yet, in what is possibly the most astonishing paradox of true faith, all these holy men, the ones who knew God best, looked to Him not only as the Giver of life and hope and healing, but also as the

Designer of every suffering they faced. Hardships never caused righteous men and women to doubt God's power over their lives. On the contrary, hardships always served to remind them of it.

But why? What revelation of the Almighty inspired such a faith? After studying the stories of the suffering saints which you will read in this book, I realized that I didn't know. To acknowledge that Joseph held no one but God responsible for his sufferings is not the same as to understand why he did so, or why it was right for him to do so. So then, what did Joseph know about God which inspired him to believe as he did?

Please don't expect any high and mighty theology. There will be none. For, like the proverbial man who pursues happiness around the world, only to return home and find it, the revelation of God which inspired the faith of righteous biblical characters, I found, after long search, to have always been before me in full, clear view – truth so simple that its very simplicity causes it to be overlooked and its value vastly underestimated. The rock from which rose the highest and mightiest faith is the revelation contained in the very first words of the Bible:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

To the saints who found themselves in the darkest pits of suffering, what that single truth taught them about God's goodness and power and wisdom formed the foundation upon which all their hopes were secured. The revelation of God as Creator, when rightly understood, is of such commanding majesty that it demands perfect faith even as it inspires it. That wondrously simple, majestic revelation is of such purity and holiness that it purifies and sanctifies the very faith that perceives its meaning. To that end now, having Joseph's faith as a point of reference, we consider the meaning of the revelation of Creation. Then, entering into the stories of Job and Jesus, we may more fully appreciate their labor.

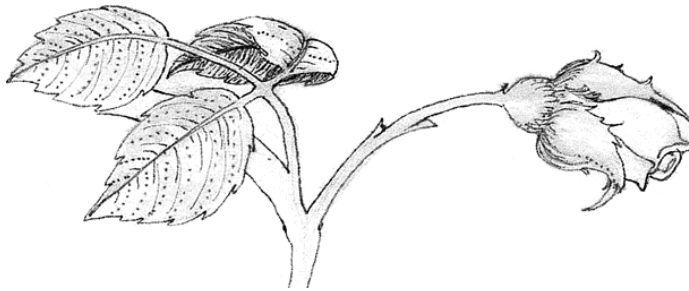


CHAPTER 2

THE CREATOR

He left not Himself without witness, in that He did good,
and gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons,
filling our hearts with gladness.

Acts 14:17



1. THE GOODNESS OF GOD

An astute and witty observer of life has speculated that the last reality a fish would discover is water. A fish could easily notice the water plants swaying with the currents, and other fish, gliding around him, he could easily see. Sol's bright light and the dark floor beneath him, any fish would perceive. Even garbage tossed into the fish's home would attract his attention. But that unseen, life-sustaining, life-enveloping substance surrounding him, that absolute necessity for his very existence – water – a fish might never discover at all.

Of course, this is a parable concerning mankind. For in a sense which is not far from literal, we all swim out our lives in the pervasive, sustaining, enveloping goodness of God. To the philosophers of Athens, Paul said of God,

“He gives to all life, and breath, and all things, . . . that they should seek the Lord, if perhaps they might feel after Him and find Him, though He be not far from any of us. For in Him we live, and move, and have our being.”

Acts 17:25b, 27-28a

As with the fish, the mundane realities of our world hardly escape our notice. Other people and the concerns of daily living demand much of our attention. Human garbage, literal and figurative, is commonly and easily seen. But that upon which our very life rests, that “first cause”, that elementary reason for our being – the goodness of God – is often among the last things realized or appreciated by men. Some, alas, never discover it at all.

Nevertheless, it is only of God's goodness that life on earth continues. It is God "who gives rain upon the earth, and sends waters upon the fields" (Job 5:10). It is God who "makes His sun to rise upon the evil and the good" (Mt. 5:45).

He causes grass to grow for the cattle, and herbage for the service of man, that he may bring forth food out of the earth, and wine that makes glad the heart of man, and oil to make His face to shine, and bread which strengthens man's heart. Psalm 104:14-15

How true are David's words: "The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD" (Ps. 33:5)!

Because God Is Good

If mankind merely evolved, if our existence is the result of pure chance, then we are not alive because God chose for us, especially, to live. If mankind is simply another plateau of an ongoing evolutionary process, then God is just as pleased that we not be, is just as pleased that some other temporary specimen of evolutionary impulse exist in our stead. There is not in that case any bond of love between God and man. It is said that in the evolutionary scheme, the odds against our coming to exist are virtually incalculable. Certainly, anyone who could, and then would have stacked the odds against us to that degree could not have been eager for us to live, could not have dearly loved and provided for our kind.

But God did create us. And He created us *only because He wanted to create us*. It is of immense spiritual value for us to appreciate that truth. In creating us, God was coerced by nothing. He had nothing suggested to Him and was advised by no one as to how or to what extent Creation was to be accomplished.

Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did He in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places. Psalm 135:6

We human beings did not have to be. There were no laws of physics which demanded our formation. *We exist only because God wanted us*. Out of the endless possibilities available to His mind, God chose for us to be. Of His own heart, He conceived the idea of man, and then He made a conscious choice that man should live. We are creatures of His design, our contours fashioned by His hand. And grace upon grace, He was pleased to bestow upon man the sacred honor of being created in His own image. Man has dignity and wisdom and dominion in the earth because it pleased God to give it to him. We are man only because God is good.

On Purpose

It is compellingly clear that God created what He wanted to create, no less and no more. On the seventh day, God did not scan with remorse His completed Creation, ruefully wishing He had done something better or differently. Quite the opposite is true. As the sun lowered upon the sixth and final day of Creation, God paused to look,

and God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good. Genesis 1:31

In accordance with this, we must acknowledge that when God created man, He created man the way He wanted man to be. It pleased the Creator to make man healthy and sinless and to give him dominion on earth. It was His heart's desire that man should be greatly and continually

blessed. There is comfort available to us in the knowledge that God created man well and happy *on purpose*.

Those of greatest faith believed that the goodnesses of God – His mercy, His justice, His compassion, etc. – were as certain as life, for life itself was irrefutable proof of it. In whatever evil circumstance they found themselves, they could not surrender hope, for they had committed their lives to the care of their almighty, unchanging Creator, believing that His will, as it was in the beginning, is that mankind should be happy, healthy, and pure.

2. THE POWER OF GOD

As Creation itself is the surest and most constant witness of the Creator's goodness, so it is with His terrible power. That God *wanted* to create is one thing, but that God could create what He wanted is altogether another. To believe in God as Creator is to believe in a good God of incalculable power and authority. So awesome is His creative power that God cannot lie. It is a power so terrible that whatever God says, is. Even the breath that proceeds from His lips performs deeds.

And the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. Genesis 2:7

By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth. . . . Let all the earth fear the LORD! Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him! For He spoke, and it was *done*; He commanded, and it stood fast. Psalm 33:6, 8-9

The magnificent implications of this truth are being decreasingly appreciated because (1) the doctrine of Creation is increasingly allegorized or neglected and (2) we confuse ourselves by applying the term "creative" or "creator" to men. Biblically, to speak very strictly, it is idolatrous to believe that man or any other created being can create anything. Man can invent. Man can rearrange particles of what God has created, and they can come up with many clever devices, as Solomon noted (Eccl. 7:29b), but he cannot create anything. But there is only one Creator, and there is none other even remotely like Him. Any being who can lie cannot create.

No Other Source

King David's reflection upon the power of the Creator which was demonstrated in His Creation inevitably led him to marvel at God's providence for men. Of particular interest was God's delegation of power to the beings which He had created.

"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have ordained, what is man, that you are mindful of him? or the son of man, that you visit him? For you made him a little lower than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him to have dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet." Psalm 8:3-6

As David observed, man's dominion on earth was graciously granted by God. The great King Nebuchadnezzar was given the mind of an animal, and for seven years, he ate grass with

cattle in the fields until he learned, in Daniel's words, "that the most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever He will" (Dan. 4:25).

But concerning dominion and the delegating of authority by God, there is much more to be considered than governments of men. For just as certainly as *man* would be powerless on earth had God not given him power, the same may be said of *every other creature in every other realm*. Whether earthly power, heavenly power, or powers of spiritual darkness, all life and all power exist only by the will of the Creator. There is no other source.

Every physical or spiritual strength of man, of nature, of fallen or faithful angels – even the power of Jesus Christ himself – all power, all authority, and all strength is subservient to God's power. No person, beast, or spirit has any power of his own or has received power ultimately from any source other than God. It came from God. It is a gift from God. And all creatures, great and small, carnal and spiritual, owe Him all fear and thanksgiving for it. To fail to pay that debt is sin.

To Bless Or To Curse

Numerous gods with various fabricated personalities were worshipped and feared in the ancient world. Not just the way of isolated barbarians, polytheism dominated the entire ancient history of man. The learned and the ignorant, the noble and the base, governors and the governed – virtually all men in all nations – were immersed in this kind of spiritual darkness. The dying request of Socrates, an intellectual giant among men, was that an offering be made to the god Asclepius. The businesses associated with idolatry were both prosperous and secure (see Acts 19:24-25). Among the most famous buildings on earth in those days were temples dedicated to particularly revered gods, such as the brilliantly designed Parthenon in Athens.

But the idolatry of the ancient world did not actually lie in the erecting of idols or temples, or even in the performing of worship rituals for imagined deities. Those things were only the outward expressions of idolatry, for idolatry is a spiritual disease. The real idolatry, the real disease, lay in believing that those gods had power, that they, like God, could do whatsoever they pleased, that they, like God, could determine and effect changes in the circumstances of the universe, and that they, like God, could bless or curse whom they would. In short, the real spiritual disease of idolatry is believing that there exists another like the Creator. Jeremiah pleaded with Israel concerning other gods,

"Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil; neither also is it in them to do good."

Jeremiah 10:5b

For those who received it, the revelation of God as Creator overcame the idolatrous spirit of the ancient world because included in that revelation is the truth that all power, whether to heal or to afflict, to lift up or to cast down, to save or to destroy (and therefore, all fear and all worship) belongs to God. It was during a blunt condemnation of Israel's fear of other gods that the Spirit of God, through Moses, proclaimed these stunning words:

"See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god with me. I kill, and I make alive. I wound, and I heal. Neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand."

Deuteronomy 32:39

It was neither God's nor Moses' intent to intimidate or harass the Israelites. God's goodness rules that out. The purpose for those words was to remind the people of the Creator's absolute power over His Creation and, so, to expose the foolishness of fearing or serving any other but Him. And the faithful in Israel rejoiced that that was true:

“My heart rejoices in the LORD! There is none holy as the LORD, for there is none beside you; neither is there any Rock like our God! The LORD kills, and makes alive; He brings down to the grave, and brings up; the LORD makes poor, and makes rich; He brings low, and lifts up. The pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and He has set the earth upon them.”
Hannah, in 1Samuel 2:1-8

Hannah gloried in God's power because she trusted in His goodness. But how did she glorify Him for His power? By acknowledging His authority over every circumstance of human life. Throughout Israel's history, in opposition to the idolatrous spirit of the times, the prophets declared the singular power of God:

“I am God, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil. I the LORD do all these things. I made the earth, and created man upon it. I, even my hands, stretched out the heavens, and all their hosts I commanded. I am the LORD. . . . And my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.”
excerpts, Isaiah 45

Strange as it may sound to our ears, the righteous men and women of the Bible never so much as considered the possibility that their whole lives – including their sufferings – were being directed by anyone but God. It was the idolatry of believing that other gods were at work in their lives which ruined Old Testament Israel, as it was the righteousness of proclaiming that Israel's life was in God's hands alone that set the prophets apart.

This truth is of such abiding authority, however, that it not only challenged ancient idolatrous notions about God, but it also challenges modern idolatrous notions. It is as distasteful to many modern ecclesiastical palates as it must have seemed queer to the ancient world, for the saints to confess that God is God of *all*, but it is as irrefutably true now as it was then. And we are not of the same faith, not followers of the faith of the holiest and wisest of men, until we see, as they saw, that all of our sufferings as well as all of our comforts are determined for us by God. Anything short of that is too reminiscent of the faith of the ancient world not to be labeled idolatrous.

For the saints living now, this is probably the most difficult truth to believe about God. For we are living in an era wherein, as during the latest Old Testament times (Mal. 2:17), the Creator is characterized as being ever gentle, never stern, ever loving, never doing harm. The power of God to afflict is denied by the many who have succumbed to the spirit of the times, and Satan, instead, is honored with responsibility for the suffering of the saints. Unwise ministers teach men to believe in God only as the God of all blessing and to trust Satan to be, in effect, the god of all discomfort. But you will never find any such doctrine in the mouth of righteous biblical characters. Later, we will speak more fully on this matter.

3. THE WISDOM OF GOD

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Or who has first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of Him, and through Him, and for Him, are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:33-36

Faith in God's goodness and His power, as secure a foundation as those provide, is not enough to sustain us in the hardest trials. If we know only of God's desire that we be nothing but blessed and of His power to accomplish that desire, then there is room for bitterness that He doesn't go ahead and do it. It is "a threefold cord" which is not easily broken, and when with faith in God's goodness and power, we are bound to Him with faith in His wisdom, there is no seat left in our hearts for any discontented visitor.

God has promised that He will end all suffering forever for those who love and obey Him. "He will make an utter end," wrote Nahum the prophet, "affliction shall not rise up a second time" (1:9). For the faithful in Christ, the apostle John saw in his revelation that

the sun will not light on them, nor any heat, for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them to living fountains of waters, and God shall wipe all tears from their eyes. Revelation 7:16-17

There are, of course, questions as to why we must wait for those promises to come, and why we must through all our lives be confronted by sorrow, disappointment, and pain. We know that Jesus himself was made perfect through the things that he suffered (Heb. 2:10; 5:8-9), and so, that we might be made perfect is one of God's reasons for suffering to continue. But that is actually beside the point, for even though some answers to our questions concerning suffering are revealed, we can rejoice even if we are completely ignorant, so long as we know that God knows all things. And it is the revelation of God as Creator which assures us that He does know all things, for He could not have created all things without His own knowledge.

Consider the Lilies

It is only by God's wisdom that birds take their flight (Job 39:26). Only by His wisdom do the stars gather in the evening skies (Job 38:31-32). By His wisdom, clouds darken to water the earth (Job 38:25-27). By His wisdom, microscopic unions form successive generations of men. By His wisdom, seasons change, beasts of the earth are nourished, fires can turn leaves into rising columns of white and grey, and men and women can think and feel and ask.

"O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all. The earth is full of your riches!" Psalm 104:24

In contemplating the heavens, King David was not being an impractical dreamer, neglecting the weightier matters of his kingdom. Nor was Jesus promoting indolence when he enjoined us to consider the lilies. The most unforgettable spiritual lessons contained in the holy Scriptures are those based upon natural phenomena: a vineyard, the rain, fish in the sea, the wind, the planting of seeds. Wise Solomon was made still wiser by observing the ant (Prov. 6:6-11). The ephemeral quality of grass instructed Isaiah's heart in the wonder of eternity (Isa. 40:6-8). By

His own immaculately wise design, the Creator's fingerprints remain, with subtle starkness, upon every article of His Creation, and within even the smallest element of Creation is hidden the potential of revelation of the God who created it.

For the invisible things about Him, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through the things that are made. Romans 1:20

Pondering Creation, King David was enamored of the revelation of God in the rain, or in the animals of the forest, or in the daily labor of men (Ps. 104:10-28). To David, there were testimonies in the trees, sermons in the silence of the stars. As if in a language both foreign and understandable, the skies to David seemed to be incessantly evangelizing the inhabitants of the earth:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Psalm 19:1-3

Oh, let us recapture this lost, holy sense of amazement at the Creator's labor! Let us, with childlike wonder, join in the prophet's song of praise:

O give thanks unto the LORD, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever. To Him who by wisdom made the heavens, for His mercy endures forever. To Him who made great lights, for His mercy endures forever. The sun to rule by day, for His mercy endures forever. The moon and stars to rule by night, for His mercy endures forever. He gives food to all flesh, for His mercy endures forever. O give thanks to the God of heaven, for His mercy endures forever. excerpts, Psalm 136

Even Our Ignorance

Like chapel bells in winter, echoing loud and clear against cold and closed buildings, the exhortations of the ancient men of faith rebound against the empty confidences of proud mankind:

“Look to the heavens, and see! And behold the clouds, which are higher than you!”
Elihu, from Job 35:5

Known but to God, there is a measure for that which men call the measureless. There is in His heart the knowledge of that which men call the unknowable. There is a hope beyond what men have dreamed or can dream (Isa. 64:4; 1Cor. 2:9).

But there are worlds even within our own of which we know nothing, secrets in the seas which man may never discover. On distant stars, what epic scenes of beauty and violence must surely play, beyond the realm of man's cognitive, even imaginative, capacities. All of these unperceived, mysterious realities declare the glory of our Creator every bit as much as did the discernible heavens to David's awe-stricken heart. For everything we do not know is a reminder of the awesome knowledge of our Creator. In a curious twist of His fathomless wisdom, God has determined that even our ignorance, along with every other part of Creation, should bear witness to His wisdom.

God's Purposes

Regardless of how much a parent loves a child or how much power a parent possesses to provide for a child's needs, both that love and that power can be unwisely demonstrated. But God is never like that. He is the perfect Father. He did not have to *learn* to be a good parent. He was good from the beginning. He does not make mistakes. Regardless of how much goodness and power Joseph trusted God to possess, had Joseph not trusted in the Creator's wisdom, he would have wondered if his suffering was really necessary, if it was serving any worthwhile purpose.

We, as the body of Christ, are letting slip from our grasp that thrilling sense of God's purpose in all things. To the eyes of faith, the sun does not just shine; it shines because the Creator has a purpose for its shining. To the eyes of faith, the sky itself never gives rain (Jer. 14:22); only God can do that. And when he does it, He does it for a purpose. "All things are full of labor" (Eccl. 1:8) because all things are fulfilling the oft-hidden purposes of God. Oh, that He would ever keep that truth alive in our hearts! Jesus encouraged us to trust in God's purposes with these amazing words (Lk. 12:7): "Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered."

Jesus' meaning was not that after you were born, God came while you slept and counted the hairs on your head. Rather, it is that the hairs on your head are numbered *to you* by the Creator, the point of Jesus' words being that God's care for us is so complete that every circumstance of our lives is contemplated by Him before it happens. That is, no circumstance, either pleasant or otherwise, is ever permitted into the lives of God's children that does not fit into His plan for their lives, or that is not tailored by Him to match their faith (cp. 1Cor. 10:13). The reliance upon that truth during times of great suffering was the one act of faith which most clearly set the Bible's righteous men and women apart from their idolatrous times.

CONCLUSION

Some have mockingly asked why, if all the circumstances of our lives, including our sufferings, are determined by God, should we desire to be delivered from suffering. The most obvious answer is that suffering hurts, and sane people do not enjoy pain. The prophets knew that God sent famine upon their land (2Kgs. 8:1), but they didn't pray for more famine. They prayed for rain, in humility and fear before God.

Secondly, we should desire deliverance because the suffering that God determines for us is not an end in itself; it is never intended to last forever. It is only used now to serve God's purposes. Therefore, it is never wrong to want, or to pray for, or to expect healing. Indeed, it is wrong not to want or expect healing because that betrays either an ignorance of or, worse yet, an unbelief in the Creator's goodness, power, and wisdom. It is always right to pray for healing, not only because healing would make us feel better, but also because God's purpose is always inextricably entwined with our healing. We cannot pray for healing without, at least implicitly, praying for God's purpose to be accomplished in our lives, for they are too much of the same thing. Joseph's deliverance from the dungeon cannot be separated from his rise to Pharaoh's throne. When he was praying for the one, he was working with the will of God toward the accomplishment of the other.

Thirdly, we should pray for deliverance because when things are made right in our lives, and when God's purposes are accomplished, God receives glory. And risking the appearance of too

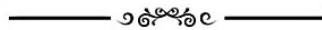
much spirituality, let me suggest that to bring glory to God may be the best reason to pray for healing and deliverance, even outweighing one's desire for personal comfort. Certainly we could not be wrong in attributing that depth of holy commitment to our Lord Jesus, whose only purpose in coming to earth was to do God's will (Ps. 40:7-8; Heb. 10:7).

To conclude, then, I say that to believe in the Creator is to believe in healing, in being made whole. I cannot imagine how we could know and trust God without expecting good things to happen to our lives. Goodness is so much a part of what He is. Faith asks for healing because faith knows God. Faith seeks for God's "way of escape" from every temptation (1Cor. 10:13) because it believes God has one. Faith knocks on the door of deliverance because it believes that door has hinges (Mt. 7:7-11). Regardless of the bleakness of their situations, the men of greatest faith still possessed the faith to call upon God for help. Indeed, our heavenly Father bids us to do so:

"Call upon me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you, and you will glorify me."

Psalm 50:15

All the righteous from the beginning of the world have heard that compassionate voice of the Creator, beckoning all who would to come find shelter in His care. In the ancient, forgotten land of Uz, the LORD chose a man named Job to demonstrate for us the value of following after that voice.



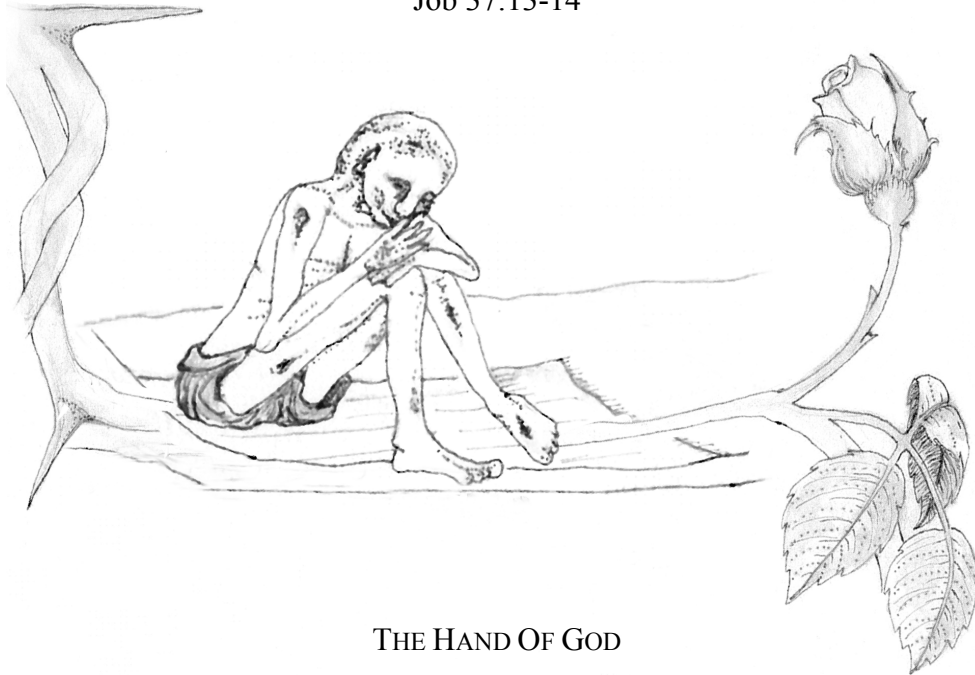
CHAPTER 3

JOB

(If you are unfamiliar with Job's story, please read the first two chapters of Job before you begin this chapter.)

He causes it to come, whether for correction,
or for His land, or for mercy. Hearken unto this, O Job!
Stand still and consider the wondrous works of God.

Job 37:13-14



THE HAND OF GOD

I evidently offended the concept of spiritual good taste which some held, when at a home Bible study I was asked, “Who was responsible for the sufferings of Job?” The expected answer was either “Job” or “Satan”, but my answer, “God”, was neither appreciated nor welcomed. Nevertheless, as even a simple reading of the book of Job reveals, it was never so much as suggested, either by Job or by his three friends who came to him, that anyone but God was responsible for Job's misery. The heated debate between Job and his friends centered on an entirely different matter; to wit, was the Almighty afflicting Job because Job had provoked Him by sin to do so, or, as Job maintained, was God afflicting him “without cause”? From either point of view, Job's suffering was rightly seen to be God's handiwork.

In the first chapter of Job, there is described a meeting of the sons of God, among whom was the creature named Satan. When asked of God, "From where have you come?" Satan replied,

"From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it." And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one who fears God and eschews evil?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for nought? Have you not made a hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land." Job 1:7-10

Let us examine this situation. Satan had been traveling and observing the inhabitants of earth. God, of course, was aware of that. Included among those whom Satan had been observing was the righteous man, Job. God already knew that, too. Had Satan possessed standing authority and power to destroy or even to trouble Job, he could have already done it. But Satan had not assaulted Job, nor could he, on his own, have done so. Both he and God knew that.

Please notice that it was God who brought up the subject of Job, and He did so because in His fathomless wisdom, at His own time, and for His own purposes, He had ordained a trial for Job that would match Job's transcendent faith, and He had chosen Satan as His instrument of affliction. God's question to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?" was not asked by God in order to find out *if* Satan had considered Job. God already knew the answer, as He knows the answer to every other question He may ask. By bringing up the name of Job, God was setting in motion the beginning of Job's trials. And upon sensing that, Satan responded,

"But put forth YOUR HAND now, and [YOU, GOD] touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." Then the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself put not forth your hand." So, Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD. Job 1:11-12

Until this moment, when God gave it to him, Satan had no power whatsoever over Job. Satan knew that he never could touch Job unless and until God ordained it to happen. The fact that Satan was, in this case, God's agent of destruction has led some to believe that Satan was carrying out his own plan. Not so. This was altogether the determination of God, who is neither advised nor coerced in His decisions concerning His children any more than He was advised or coerced in His decision to create man in the beginning.

Following this heavenly meeting, a torrent of tragedies pummeled innocent Job, but at the control of the floodgates was Job's Redeemer. Everything that happened to Job happened according to God's ordination, with God's limitations, in God's predetermined time. Satan knew that. God knew that. Even Job knew that. It was *God's hand*, not Satan's, that was stretched over Job. In his bitterness, Job cried to his friends,

"Have pity upon me! Have pity upon me, O my friends, for THE HAND OF GOD has touched me!" Job 19:21

In one day, Job suffered the loss of his children and all of his many possessions. It was a crushing, heart-rending experience, but not one that was able to crush either Job's faith or his

love for God. The suffering man “arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped.” Job and his wife mourned for their children and came to know the humiliation and frustration of abject poverty.

An indeterminate period of time passed, and then Satan was given permission by God to torment Job physically – but not to the point of death. Huge boils covered him, expanding with their piercing throbs until they erupted with foul-smelling, worm-infested corruption which matted his clothes to his body (Job 7:5; 3:18). When he sought refuge from his misery in sleep, gruesome nightmares chased him back to consciousness (Job 7:3-4, 13-15), leaving Job exhausted, confused, and, in time, prematurely wrinkled (Job 16:7-8). Invisible fingers around his throat would squeeze tight Job’s breathing passages (Job 9:18), leaving Job sprawled in his own squalor, kicking in desperation for breath, forgetting for the moment the pain that returned with renewed fury when he was allowed again to breathe.

Hardly a soul could bear to be around him. Virtually all of his friends forsook him. His servants ignored his plaintive cries for help. His wife, in utter frustration, offered the advice she considered best for him: “Curse God and die!” With no strength to provide for himself and no one able to help him, Job wasted away to a stick-man appearance. “My bone cleaves to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth” (Job 19:20). Contributing also to his dramatic loss of weight was an excruciating bowel disorder (Job 30:27) which prevented normal digestion. Moreover, crippling bone and muscle diseases tortured Job with relentless pains (Job 30:17, 30). Day and night, without rest, Job cried out for respite, even for death (but death was not allowed), and month after month no respite was given.

“Oh, that I were as in months past, when God preserved me, when His candle shined upon my head, and when by His light, I walked through darkness. As I was in the days of my youth when the secret of God was upon my tabernacle, when the Almighty was with me, when my children were about me, when I washed my steps with butter, and the rock poured me out rivers of oil!

“The young men saw me and hid themselves, and the aged arose, and stood up. The princes refrained from talking, and laid their hand on their mouth. The nobles held their peace. When the ear heard *me*, then it blessed me, and when the eye saw *me*, it gave witness to me because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him.

The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy. I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame. I was a father to the poor, and I broke the jaws of the wicked and plucked the spoil out of his mouth.

“Unto me men gave ear, and waited, and kept silence at my counsel. After my words, they spoke not again. They waited for me as the rain. I sat as chief, and dwelt as a king in the army.”
excerpts, Job 29

Formerly the paragon of success and status, Job now groveled like a dog for crumbs from his master’s table. In appearance almost inhuman, Job was mocked by heartless low-lives in the community. “Children of fools!” Job cried, “Yea, children of base men. They were viler than the earth, and now, I am their song. Yea, I am their byword. They abhor me; they flee far from me,

and spare not to spit in my face” (30:8, 10). Job, weeping and bleeding, was verbally and physically abused (30:11-14). A repulsive and ridiculed shell of a man, he was repeatedly accused of hypocrisy by his three close friends for hiding what they believed were secret sins. They accused him, supremely confident of being in the right, because according to their doctrine, righteousness is evidenced by one’s wealth and health; therefore, Job’s poverty and sickness proved his guilt. So it was that, while Job slept, he was tormented by horrific nightmares, and while awake, he was persecuted on every side, by family, friends, and strangers. And whether awake or asleep, there was pain. Always pain.

Most grievous of all, and adding weight to the heaviest of his burdens, was the inexplicable silence of God. Why did God hide Himself? This was the hot knife’s edge of Job’s sufferings. But even at his lowest, loneliest point, Job remained determined to do what was right.

“Oh, that I knew where I might find Him! That I might come even to His seat! I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.

“Behold, I go forward, but He is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him; on the left hand, where He is working, but I cannot behold Him. He hides Himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him. But He knows the way that I take. When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held His steps; His way have I kept, and not declined. Neither have I gone back from the commandment of His lips.”

Job 23:3-4, 8-12a

“God is faithful,” wrote a man of God long after Job’s time, adding, “He will make a way of escape” (1Cor. 10:13). Job found his “way of escape” by following the road that leads out of all suffering, the road which Isaiah called “the way of holiness” (Isa. 35:8). By refusing to do evil, and persisting in doing good, Job finally overcame all the evil which befell him. “Until I die,” he firmly argued through his searing pains, “I will not remove my integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go. My heart shall not reproach me so long as I live!” (Job 27:5-6).

CHARGING GOD FOOLISHLY

Job called his three friends “miserable comforters” because with their cruel and false accusations, they failed miserably to comfort him. And as if Job’s “miserable comforters” failed to accuse Job enough, many believers today still find fault with this incredibly righteous man. “Job deserved what he got,” one man at the aforementioned home Bible study said to me, “because Job said that the thing which he ‘greatly feared’ had come upon him, and his fear of the Devil opened the door for the Devil to attack him.” But “the thing” which had come upon Job, “the thing” which he greatly feared, was God, as we are told in the very first verse of the book (Job 1:1). I find no fault in that. Indeed, it is a serious fault in anyone not to fear God, as both David and Paul taught (Ps. 36:1; Rom. 3:18), and as the author of Hebrews admitted when he said, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). Jesus himself feared God (Heb. 5:7), and he commanded his disciples to do the same (Lk. 12:5).

During his sermon, a pastor acquaintance of mine accused Job of “teaching false doctrine” for holding God responsible for taking away his children, possessions, and health. He could not agree with these words of Job, which are among the most quoted of all Scripture:

“Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither. The LORD gave, and THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY. Blessed be the name of the LORD!”

Job 1:21

Have you ever really noticed what Job was, and was not, saying here? Job was glorifying God both for having given him blessings *and for having taken them away*. A man who does not know that God loves him cannot do that. A man who does not trust God’s wisdom cannot do that. And a man who believes in other gods, including Satan, as having power to determine destruction for the saints cannot do that. Job knew his Creator too well to believe that anyone could take God’s blessings away unless God Himself determined that it should be done. Yet, of even more importance than Job’s saying that God was responsible is the Bible’s immediate commentary (Job 1:22):

In all this, Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.

The Bible’s judgment – God’s judgment – concerning what Job said is that it was neither sinful nor foolish for Job to attribute responsibility for his suffering to God. For us, the question is this: Is our understanding of God such that we disagree with Job, as my pastor friend did? That, for us, is the whole issue. Are we of like faith with this righteous man? Does our faith rest in God, as He was to Job’s mind, or to Joseph’s? Do we think that God is not the kind of God that those holy men knew Him to be? Or is it our position that they really did not fully understand their situations?

Job’s knowledge of God as Creator made sure his faith in God’s goodness and power and wisdom. Nothing could move him from that faith as long as it was anchored in that knowledge. When his wife’s counsel was that Job should “curse God and die,” Job’s answer reflected his hope and faith in God’s providence:

But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women speak. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?”

Job 2:10

And then again, as if to assure us most firmly of divine approval of Job’s words, the Bible immediately adds this note:

In all this, Job did not sin with his lips.

Unquestionably, it behooves us to agree with Job in believing that he received evil (meaning here, “harm”) from the hand of God, *if the holy Scriptures confirm it*. Or do we fear that somehow we would be wrong, were we to believe what Job believed about God?

“WITHOUT CAUSE”

“He breaks me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds WITHOUT CAUSE.”

Job 9:17

“My face is foul with weeping, and on my eyelids is the shadow of death, not for any injustice in my hands; also, my prayer is pure!”

Job 16:16-17

Statements as these can seem at first to be irreverent and self-serving. By uttering such words, Job risked appearing proud, even arrogant, stubbornly justifying himself. That was certainly the conclusion reached by Job's three "comforters":

Eliphaz:

"Who ever perished, being innocent? Or where were the righteous cut off? . . . Your own mouth condemns you, and not I. Yea, your own lips testify against you!"

Job 4:7; 15:6

Bildad:

"Does God pervert judgment? Or does the Almighty pervert justice? . . . If you were pure and upright, surely now He would awake for you, and make the habitation of your righteousness prosperous. . . . Behold, God will not cast away a perfect man! Neither will He help the evil doers."

Job 8:3, 6, 20

Zophar:

"Should not this multitude of words be answered? And should a man full of talk be justified? Should your lies make men hold their peace? And when you mock, shall no man make you ashamed? For you have said, "My doctrine is pure," and "I am clean in your eyes." But oh, that God would speak and open His lips against you! . . . Know that God exacts of you less than your iniquity deserves!"

Job 11:2-5, 6b

Job's friends were indignant when they heard Job say that God was destroying him "without cause". But what would those wise men have thought, could they indeed have heard God "speak and open His lips", as He spoke to Satan after Job's afflictions had begun?

"Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one who fears God, and eschews evil? And still, he holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him WITHOUT CAUSE."

Job 2:3

Now, I should quickly note that for God or for Job to say that Job's suffering was "without cause" is not at all to say that his suffering was without *purpose*. Job, believing in God's purpose, spent much of his time of suffering in prayer, trying to discover what God's purpose was. To say that Job's suffering was "without cause" is only to say that Job had not, by committing sin, provoked God to afflict him. But that there was at least one purpose in Job's sufferings, multiplied thousands of saints can bear witness who have been strengthened in the face of sorrow by Job's example.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar vehemently disagreed with Job because they did not believe that God would cause suffering without being provoked by sin to do so. Unfortunately, many of the saints today would disagree with Job, too, principally because we are being bombarded with the insane notion that God will not cause suffering under any circumstance. But surely we can admit that Job was right in saying God was afflicting him "without cause" *if God Himself said the same*. It is the least we can do to confess that God spoke the truth, even if it is difficult to bring ourselves to confess that Job did.

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

It was the knowledge of the goodness, power, and wisdom of the Creator, constantly affirmed in Creation, which so firmly upheld the faith of Joseph and Job under enormous pressures. Any other foundation would have collapsed. Had they been any less understanding, they could have found some other god or person to hold responsible for their suffering. But to hold others accountable was the heathen way of believing. It was the heathen way to hold grudges against men, to hate, to seek revenge for being mistreated. It was the heathen who had good gods and bad gods, gods of love and gods of war, lovely gods and hideous gods, wise gods and foolish gods, a god to hold the keys of hell, a god to pull the sun across the sky, gods who lived and governed in the seas, and gods who ruled upon the land. That is how they believed, being chained to ignorance of the Creator. Their love, their worship, their fear, their faith, their whole lives were divided in their ceaseless efforts to keep the gods appeased. What a liberation, what a joy was the revelation of the truth!

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God is the LORD alone. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

It is no wonder that Jesus would say that this is the greatest commandment contained in the holy Scriptures (Mk. 12:29-30). It is of the highest spiritual benefit, of first importance to an unadulterated faith, to know that there is but one God who is all things to His beloved people.

THE OTHER GOD

Of course, the kind of idolatry which dominated the ancient world is all but gone, but there exists in its stead another, more devious kind. For, to many believers, Satan has replaced those gods which once were thought to try the hearts of men. Whereas God was, even by many of the Israelites, thought to have been one among many gods, now He is believed by many in the body of Christ to be one of only two. He is still rightly trusted to be the God of love and healing and truth, but at the same time, Satan is thought by many saints today to be the god of our suffering. Satan has become the “other gods” of New Testament believers, and it is made nonetheless idolatrous that saints are taught to dislike Satan for doing them harm. There were unlikable gods in the ancient world, too. Nobody liked the disgusting Furies, or the hideous Gorgons, or man-eating Skylla; nevertheless, men believed in and feared them. Personal feeling for or against other gods has nothing to do with the fact that it was idolatry to believe in the power of those gods to determine circumstances, either in the lives of God’s people or in any other part of God’s Creation. Why, it is the fear of, faith in, respect for, or any other form of reverence for any other god, which was the *very first thing forbidden* in the Ten Commandments! The fear of God, and no other, is the beginning of all wisdom (Prov. 1:7).

What does it matter to Satan if men do not like him? It is their reverence of God that he covets. For if people think of him as they think of God, as being free to do as he will to our lives, then he has, in the hearts of men, accomplished his ancient goal to “be like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14). Long ago, there was a vast number of angels in heaven who thought of Satan as they thought of God, but when Satan was cast out of heaven, they were cast out with him.

What, then, do you suppose God will do to those on earth who likewise believe in Satan's power as they believe in God's?

GOD IS GOD

I overheard an older saint attempt to woo a young girl to Christ with these words, "You don't ever have to fear God, honey. But you'd better be afraid of that old Devil." I caught my breath in disbelief. What kind of doctrine is that? In whose power was this saint persuading that young girl to believe?

Oh, that God would circumcise the ear of our souls to hear words of the men who walked by God's light! It is, to me, as though Job were screaming the truth so that he might be heard, even by us, over the din of confused tradition:

"Know now that GOD has overthrown me, and has compassed me in HIS net. . . . HE has fenced up my way, that I cannot pass, and HE has set darkness in my paths. HE has stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head. HE has destroyed me on every side, and I am gone." Job 19:6, 8-10

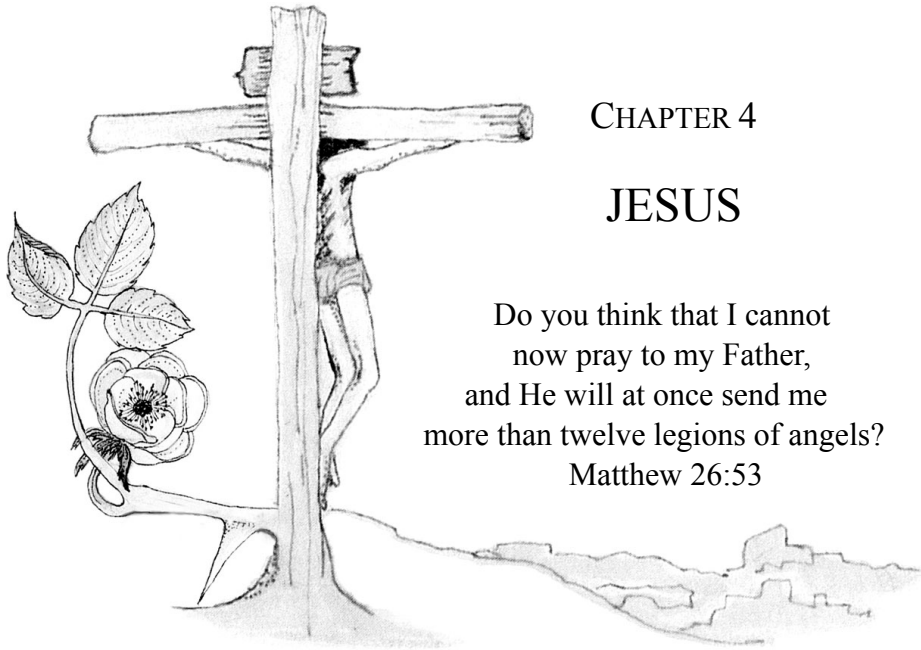
It was Job's knowledge of God as Creator that gave him the faith to say those things. That those things were true was actually his only hope. For if God had not "destroyed" him, then who had? And if Satan or some other god were responsible, where had God been when it happened? No, either God was responsible, or God is not God. But Job knew that God *was* responsible, and that God loved him and would be glorified in his complete deliverance (Job 13:15-16) if he would patiently wait for that salvation in the way of righteousness. That is perfected faith. That is faith that is rooted in the unshakable foundation of God's goodness and power and wisdom. That is the beauty and the benefit of the knowledge of God as our Creator.

And should there remain any doubt that Job's attitude concerning his afflictions was correct, serious consideration should be given to God's final appraisal of the faith which Job had shown. Speaking to one of Job's friends, God said,

"My wrath is kindled against you, and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me the thing that is right, AS MY SERVANT JOB HAS." Job 42:7

CONCLUSION

The life of every one of God's people is the sole responsibility of the Owner. He may use it or leave it upon the shelf. He may brand it, break it, twist it, or melt it. But whatever happens to the Master's instruments is determined by no one but the Master. Faith, when it is matured, rejoices in that. Who better than our God to be in control of our fate? This is the faith which guided Joseph and Job to victory over suffering, and it is the faith that guided our Lord Jesus through his sufferings to eternal glory.



CHAPTER 4

JESUS

Do you think that I cannot
now pray to my Father,
and He will at once send me
more than twelve legions of angels?
Matthew 26:53

AS A LAMB

In the first seven chapters of Leviticus, God's laws for sacrifice are given. We learn there that before the priest could make the offering to God, *the one to whom the sacrificial animal belonged* was required to kill the animal.

If his offering be a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish. He shall offer it of his own voluntary will at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation of the LORD. And he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. And he shall kill the bullock before the LORD, and then the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood round about upon the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.

Leviticus 1:3-5

The requirement that the owner should personally slay his offering should be kept in mind whenever we speak of Jesus as the Lamb of God. He was not the Lamb of men or of Satan, and only the One to whom he belonged had the authority to "put him to grief."

Isaiah was moved to prophesy of the suffering Savior in just this manner:

He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. . . . It pleased THE LORD to bruise him. HE has put him to grief. . . . YOU [God] shall make his soul an offering for sin. Isaiah 53:7b, 10a

From the beginning, Jesus knew that God's will was for him to "give his life a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28). But his faith in God was such that he thoroughly expected his suffering to be the gateway to eternal blessing, and he "became obedient unto death, even the death of the

cross” (Phil. 2:8). He was never bitter, never vindictive. Rather, by doing good to all men, he demonstrated that he had committed his life to God “as unto a faithful Creator” (1Pet. 4:19).

NOBODY BUT JESUS

Some, however, were provoked by Jesus’ submissive attitude toward his suffering. Pilate, angered by Jesus’ silence, demanded,

“You do not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to crucify you, and I have power to release you?” Jesus answered, “You have no power against me at all except it were given to you from above.”
John 19:10-11

Pilate did not know that his authority over the Jews at that particular moment in history was a gift from the God of the Jews. But ignorance of God’s hand in these events was not reserved to Pilate. The Jews thought that the crucifixion of Jesus was their idea. They could never have dreamed that the plans they were fulfilling had actually been made by the Father of the victim. Even Jesus’ closest friends were unaware of the terrible truth they were witnessing. When Judas led the evil mob to the garden of Gethsemene, Peter drew his sword to protect Jesus, but

Jesus said to Peter, “Put up your sword into your sheath! The cup which MY FATHER HAS GIVEN ME, shall I not drink it?” Then the band and the captain and officers of the Jews took Jesus, and bound him, and led him away.
John 18:11-13a

Nobody but Jesus saw beyond the angry mob and the sadistic Roman soldiers. Nobody but Jesus saw beyond the humiliation and horror of his crucifixion to see the loving hand of God at work, providing hope of eternal life for all mankind. Neither Pilate nor the Jews, not even the disciples – nobody but Jesus – knew that what they were doing had been ordained by God since the foundation of the world. Nobody but Jesus knew.

And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him. . . . Then said Jesus, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
Luke 23:33a, 34b

It was only after Jesus ascended into heaven and the Spirit of truth had come that the disciples began to grasp the truth, the awful, wondrous truth: Christ Jesus had been purposely delivered into the hands of wicked men “by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). It was only when the purpose of Christ’s suffering was accomplished and his followers were filled with the Spirit of truth that the knowledge of what God had done enabled them to pray “with one accord” to the Father,

“LORD, you are God, who has made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is, who by the mouth of your servant, David, said, ‘Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the LORD, and against His Christ.’ For of a truth, against your holy child Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together FOR TO DO WHATSOEVER YOUR HAND AND YOUR COUNSEL DETERMINED BEFORE TO BE DONE.”
Acts 4:24-28

It was a “vain thing” for Pilate to imagine that he had power either to crucify or to set free the Son of God (Jn. 19:10). It was a “vain thing” for the rulers of the Jews to conspire against Jesus to put him to death (Jn. 11:47-53). It was a “vain thing” for Roman soldiers to guard the tomb, lest the body of Jesus leave it. All these were “vain things” because none of them to the least extent determined what happened to the One against whom they were directed. The Jews’ conspiracy against Jesus was just as vain as was the Roman effort to keep Jesus in the tomb, the only difference being that what the Jews conspired to do, God’s plan included, and what the guards were sent to do, God’s plan did not include. The fact that God allowed some men to imagine that they were accomplishing their purpose when they were only accomplishing His speaks to the greatness of His goodness, power, and wisdom; it does not in any respect make less vain the intentions of men. It is altogether fitting to genuine faith in Christ that we should acknowledge and confess that if God had not sent His Son to the cross, there is no power in heaven or in earth that could have forced him to go there. He came into this sin-sick world so that God’s will would be done, not man’s (Heb. 10:5-7).

Not of man’s design or purpose, the sacrifice of Christ “was foreordained before the foundation of the world” (1Pet. 1:20). “The Son of man shall be delivered into the hands of men,” said Jesus (Lk. 9:44). But by whom? Judas? Think again. “God delivered him up”, Paul wrote, “for us all” (Rom. 8:32). The Father “sent the Son”, said John, to be “the propitiation for our sins” (1Jn. 4:10).

GOD USED THE JEWS

Jewish people have been maligned for two millennia by foolish men as being responsible for the pain and death of the Savior. But Jesus said, in reference to his life, “No man takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself” (Jn. 10:18). No person, or nation, or world of people, are responsible for Christ’s sufferings; nor could they be. Indeed, everyone on earth should be thankful to God for the Jews, for it was through that people that God chose to provide a human body for His supernal Son to indwell, the offering of which body opened the door of salvation for all people. Beyond that, what the Jews, with all the rest of us, contributed to Christ’s excruciating sacrificial death was simply the need for it. All mankind was in bondage together. All mankind, both Jew and Gentile, to Calvary’s magnificent story only contributed the disease of sin; it is God alone who provided the cure.

The wisdom that Christ’s atonement entailed, the love that inspired it, and the power that accomplished it are far beyond man’s little capacity to perform. Let us no longer, then, bicker or accuse one another of responsibility for Christ’s sufferings. None of us are worthy of it. And who could doubt that if the tender Shepherd would now speak to his beloved fellow Jews, his words would echo those of weeping Joseph, who, too, was despised by those dearest to him:

“You thought evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save many people alive . . . and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

Genesis 50:20; 45:7

Yes, Jesus knew that the Jewish rulers made plans to kill him. He knew that Judas betrayed him, that an evil mob arrested him, and that a Gentile governor ordered his scourging and his crucifixion. His faith in God did not blind his eyes to the reality of Roman soldiers pounding

spikes into his hands and feet. But neither did his awareness of what men were doing blind his spirit to the reality of his Father, determining moment by moment what would and what would not be done to His dear Son. At every point in his earthly pilgrimage, despite what everyone else thought they knew, Jesus humbly maintained that his sufferings were “things that belong to God” (Mt. 16:21-23). But at the time, nobody but Jesus knew.

It is the very soul of the gospel that what happened to Jesus at Calvary was the will and plan of God. We should follow Jesus’ example and never lose sight of that, lest the deceiver deceive us into honoring him with responsibility for what happened at Calvary. Satan, too, despite what he would have us to think, was merely an outwitted pawn in God’s inscrutably wise plan. The glorious truth now and forever remains that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,” and His accomplished purpose remains with it, “that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16).

TIMES

Listen to Solomon’s wisdom:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted. A time to kill, and a time to heal. A time to break down, and a time to build up. A time to weep, and a time to laugh. A time to mourn, and a time to dance. A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together. A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to get, and a time to lose. A time to keep, and a time to cast away. A time to rend, and a time to sew. A time to keep silence, and a time to speak. A time to love, and a time to hate. A time of war, and a time of peace. . . . He has made everything beautiful in His time. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11

In each of our lives, there is a time for all things: birth and death, joy and sadness, gain and loss. It is a matter of unspeakable joy to discover that all our “times” are determined by our loving heavenly Father!

“I trusted in you, O LORD. I said, ‘You are my God. My times are in your hand.’”

Psalm 31:14-15

When men would have killed Jesus before God’s appointed time, they repeatedly failed. And the only reason they failed is that “his hour was not yet come” (Jn. 7:30; 8:20). Early in his ministry, Jesus plainly told his brothers, “My time has not yet come” (Jn. 7:6), but the night before his crucifixion, we hear him praying, “Father, the hour is come” (Jn. 17:1). Neither men nor demons, nor any other creature, could have determined the time of Jesus’ death. His times were in his Father’s hands. He was his Father’s Lamb, not theirs.

It remains for us to consider the sobering truth that we, too, are called to be lambs in God’s flock (Jn. 10:1-16; 21:15-17) and to commit ourselves entirely to His care “as unto a faithful Creator.” We, too, can “show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end” (Heb. 6:11). We, too, can “trust in Him at all times” (Ps. 62:8). Amen.

ALL THINGS

None of those whose stories we have thus far studied were mistaken in looking beyond the agents of their shame and suffering to see nothing but God at work, accomplishing His good purposes. Neither shall we be mistaken by following their perfect example. But it is very likely that we will languish in immature spiritual confusion as long as we fail to acknowledge the hand of God working in all things at all times for us.

We know that all things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28

In the few sorrows, hardships, and disappointments in which Satan is personally involved, his intentions are as irrelevant as are the intentions of men. Satan and wicked men were both involved in Jesus' crucifixion, but none of them determined what happened to God's Lamb. The faith which overcomes the world believes that if our sufferings, regardless of who brings them to us, were of such weight that we could not overcome them, God would not have sent them our way. "God is faithful," wrote Paul, "who will not suffer you to be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1Cor. 10:13).

GOD IS FAITHFUL

Say it to yourself when you are hurting. God is faithful! Say it to the spirits of depression and fear! God is faithful! Say it to those who would have you to surrender your faith and hold a grudge against someone who has wronged you! God is faithful! Concerning the miseries, distresses, and persecutions that confront us, the apostle Paul asks, "What shall we say to these things?" And then to answer his own question, he writes that to all these things we should say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . Nay! In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord! Romans 8:35, 37-39

Say it to the spirits which would have you to fear anything, from catching a cold to a nuclear war: "God is faithful!" Confess the truth and overcome the world! Look for God's good purposes in the trials of your faith. See them as from His hand and be encouraged, rather than be embittered as though an enemy had broken through His defenses.

Sometimes I think God has more confidence in our faith than we do. He certainly places us in situations in which we wonder if we will ever be healed, or ever be happy again, or ever again be free in spirit. But having already measured that hurt or loss to our faith, the Father knows that we will be even healthier, happier, and freer than ever, if we will but trust Him and be faithful. If we trust Him through the hard times, we will discover that our greater blessing was His purpose all along. But He has determined that those greater blessings will be received only by faith. Yes, we can joyously expect all things to be working for our good, but only if we *do* love God and are "the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). For those who do not love God and are not

“the called, according to His purpose,” there is nothing working for their good. Even the pleasant things of their lives will eventually amount to nothing, as Solomon noted:

“If a man beget a hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, . . . yea, though he live a thousand years twice told . . . and his soul be not filled with good, . . . I say that a stillborn child is better than he.” excerpts, Ecclesiastes 6

Then, let our souls seek to be filled with the goodness, power, and wisdom of God, for God has ordained the trials of our faith to work for our good only if we love Him, only “if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast until the end” (Heb. 3:14).

I believe that the key to this kind of steadfastness in faith is a genuine knowledge of God and that the key to that knowledge is the revelation of Creation. When we experience the revelation knowledge of God as Creator, the rope of trust in God is no longer something at which our wondering hearts desperately grasp; rather, faith becomes woven into the fabric of our mind and spirit so that it becomes part of who we are. It becomes our foundation instead of our goal. Then, growing in this grace and knowledge of our Savior, we survey past experiences which we once denounced as evil attacks against us and perceive the short-sightedness of such a view. We see those experiences as the very stones upon which we now stand and view the glory of God, as stepping stones which were hewn by caring hands to match our toddling steps. Yes, evil spirits or men may have shoved those stones into our pathway, but they did neither determine the size of those stones nor when in our pilgrimage we would face them.

I am reminded of Jesus’ words to the saints in ancient Smyrna:

“Fear none of those things which you shall suffer. Behold, the Devil shall cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life.” Revelation 2:10

Yes, it was Satan who would cast some of these faithful saints into prison, but why just “some”? And why for just ten days? The purpose of this suffering, according to Jesus, was that they “may be tried”, not that “they may be destroyed.” So then, whose purpose was this trial serving? Who matched this trial to the faith of these saints so that they could overcome it and be crowned with eternal life?

It is the proclamation of perfected faith that the Lord both “tries the righteous” (Ps. 11:5) and “saves the upright in heart” (Ps. 7:10). The apostle Peter rejoiced in this and saw absolutely no contradiction in saying that the saints were being “kept by the power of God” and in the following verse adding, “though now for a season, if need be, you are in heaviness through manifold temptations” (1Pet. 1:5-6). That you are being tried does not mean that God’s power is no longer protecting you. In fact, God’s power may be more at work in your life during your weakness and sorrow than at any other time (cp. 2Cor. 12:7-10). Wrote James,

Count it all joy when you fall into diverse temptations, knowing this, that the trying of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and entire, lacking nothing. James 1:2-4

Only a man who knows that he loves God and who knows how much God loves him could pray, as righteous David prayed,

“Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Psalm 139:23-24

Our faith must be tried. If we trust in God’s faithfulness to provide for us only those trials which we can overcome, our faith will be perfected as we struggle through our hurt to understand and accomplish the will of our heavenly Father. If we do not see beyond our difficult circumstances to behold the hand of God at work for our good, our faith will never be perfected. We will always have trouble forgiving from our hearts those who have wronged us, and we will always be victimized by bitterness at our “fate”, as though God were unmindful of us, or still worse, unjust. Faith in God’s goodness, power and wisdom will save us from falling into such bitterness, but it cannot be denied that, as the man of God warned us, such bitterness has “defiled many” of God’s people (Heb. 12:15).

CONCLUSION

Is there anyone among us who has been treated more unjustly than Joseph was treated? Is there anyone among us who has been hurt more than Job was hurt? Is there anyone among us who has been more misunderstood, maligned, and hated than our dear Lord Jesus? Pain was poured like a river into the lives of those holy men, as if to dare them to believe in the purposes of God. One by one, each in his turn according to the will of God, they met that challenge, and they overcame the evil which befell them with the good which God had taught them to do. Will we? Are we as committed to our Creator as we are to our human spouses, “for better or worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, until death”?

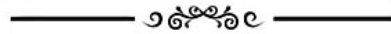
God can be trusted with our lives. That means that He can be trusted to be doing the right thing with the life that is entrusted to Him. To trust God, that is the real spiritual warfare, not warfare against flesh and blood but against the spirits of this age which are envious of the love and fear and trust which belong solely to the Creator.

Dare to hope in God’s goodness. Dare to rely upon His power. Dare to believe in His wise purposes. Dare to abandon your life, your circumstances, and your future to His will. Dare to speak to despair, to worry, “God is for me! You cannot destroy me!” Dare to say to sickness, depression, even death itself, “God is faithful – and so will I be!” Go beyond the spirits of vengeance and ill-will. God can be trusted with your life! Dare not to grumble at the trial He has prepared for you. Dare to believe that you will overcome it, that you will be healed, that things will be made right in your life again, and that that was God’s plan from the beginning. Our Lord Jesus, Joseph, and Job all clung tenaciously to that blessed hope. So should we. We may with every confidence follow their wise, righteous examples into eternal rest in the presence of God.

Part 2

Suffering “With Cause”

Whom the LORD loves, He chastens,
and He scourges every son whom He receives.
Hebrews 12:6



Introduction to Part 2

As there is a suffering for righteousness, there is also a suffering for the lack of it. All the righteous men whose stories we studied in Part 1 suffered “without cause”, but some of the men of greatest faith have also suffered greatly “with cause” when they strayed from righteousness and provoked the Lord’s wrath. Moses was denied entrance into Canaan’s land when his explosive temper caused him to disobey God’s commandment (Num. 20:7-12). Righteous King Uzziah spent the last years of his life as a quarantined leper, after a spirit of pride prompted him to sin against God in the temple (2Chron. 26:16-21). And Jonah the prophet spent three days in the hell of a whale’s belly because he refused to preach in Nineveh (Jon. 1:1-3).

In our time, many hold the erroneous view that when a believer sins, he places himself in a position where, as some have phrased it, “the Devil can get you.” Said one brother, “When you sin, you’re in the Devil’s territory and make yourself subject to his power.” In the light of the clear and consistent biblical evidence to the contrary, it is incredible that such an opinion commands so great a following. Yet, it is a very widely and, I have found, very strongly held belief that control over our lives automatically shifts from God to Satan when we err from righteousness, that the act of sin removes us from God’s sheltering love to suffer whatever blows that Satan may choose to deliver.

I myself used to picture the people of God as a flock of sheep safely grazing in a wide, green pasture surrounded by a waist-high fence. Just beyond the fence were all manner of evil, ravenous wolves, salivating in hopes of dining upon one of these tender lambs. When a brother would err in his walk with the Lord, as I viewed it, it was as though he had leaped over God’s protective fence and was at the mercy of the vicious demons that waited just beyond that fence of God’s loving care. In short, with many others, I believed that God’s protection ended when we sinned.

Over a period of years, I referred to that pastoral scene on numerous occasions to my congregation, and it was always received with an assenting nod or a somber “amen.” It had not yet dawned upon us that, were that scene an accurate one, no errant lamb would ever make it back to safety. The fact is that, while the saints are referred to as a “flock” (e.g. 1Pet. 5:2), and we do feed in God’s “pasture” (e.g. Ps. 23:2), *there is no fence* beyond which God’s authority over the circumstances of our lives ceases to exist. Disobedience does not remove us from God’s love. His correction of those who err is as much a part of His love as is His gift of eternal life. After all, without His correction, which begins when He first convicts us of sin, would anyone ever inherit eternal life?

I think now that at the root of that distorted view of the flock and the fence that I used to hold was a spirit lacking in mercy, a spirit which instead of “having compassion on them that are out

of the way” would rather excuse its lack of compassion by thinking, “they shouldn’t have jumped over the fence. The Devil gave them what they deserved.” But when, by God’s grace, I learned that the chastisement of saints is God’s province, not Satan’s, a very real compassion began to awaken in my heart for those who were in trouble for doing wrong. I understood that their suffering was not apart from God’s care, but was a part of it. And I feared God’s disapproval if I failed to help them in their trouble (cp. Gal. 6:1-2). No longer did I see their suffering as proof of my righteousness. (After all, I thought, I was not suffering; therefore, I was obviously right with God.) Rather, I prayed for the ones who had erred and were hurting. And I prayed for myself, that God would love me enough to correct me when I was in the wrong. I discovered that the fence which I imagined that erring brothers jumped over was not a fence which marked the limit of *God’s* love and concern for His wayward children; it marked my own. And the wolves that I imagined, waiting just beyond that fence, I discovered to be nothing in the world but my own ill-will toward those I thought were less righteous than myself. It was a sobering discovery.

To understand God as Creator is to perceive that no deed, whether good or bad, brings its own consequences apart from God. We reap what we sow *only* because God’s justice cannot be escaped.

Be not deceived; God is not mocked. For whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap.
Galatians 6:7

AN ACT OF FAITHFULNESS

Righteousness and wickedness do have their rewards (cp. Prov. 13:6), but only because God is just and faithful. The reward of both good and bad deeds is the sole determination of the Almighty, for He is the only one capable of making that determination. To think otherwise is characteristic of the idolatrous spirit that blighted the faith of ancient Israel with fear and worship of other deities.

Just a cursory reading of the Bible will reveal the truth of Solomon’s words, “Every man’s judgment comes from the LORD” (Prov. 29:26). Not only was Moses correct in saying that “the LORD shall judge His people” (Dt. 32:36), but the Psalmist was also right in saying that God “chastens the heathen” (Ps. 94:10). The patriarch Abraham knew the Creator well enough to call Him “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen. 18:25).

It was God who cursed Adam and Eve, as well as the serpent, for their sin (Gen. 3:14-19). It was God who cursed Cain for murdering Abel (Gen. 4:11-12). It was God who destroyed the world with a flood (Gen. 6:7, 13; 7:4, etc.). It was God who divided the inhabitants of the earth with various languages (Gen. 11). It was God who obliterated Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim with fire and brimstone from heaven (Gen. 19:23-25). It was God who humbled Egypt with plagues, at last slaying the first-born in every house (Ex. 3:19-20; 11:1-5) and burying the Egyptian army in the waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:17-31). It was God who struck Miriam with leprosy for gossiping about Moses (Num. 12) and who opened the earth to swallow them alive who led the great wilderness rebellion (Num. 16). It was God’s wrath against sin which condemned the Israelites to forty years of wandering in the deserts of the Sinai peninsula (Num. 14:26-34). The whole miserable situation of humanity is God’s response to man’s sin. “I have

seen the sore travail which God has given to the sons of men to be exercised in it,” said Solomon, “and God does it, that men should fear before Him” (Eccl. 3:10, 14).

The responsibility of the serpent for his part in the fall of man should not be confused with God’s responsibility for the punishment of man’s disobedience. Afflictions, disasters, diseases, and death are all evidences, not of Satan’s wrath against sin, but of God’s. Every hardship, every discomfort, every loss which anyone on earth has ever known, are hard evidences of the absolute holiness and perfect justice of our Creator. They are not reasons to fear what Satan can do.

With no exceptions, every account of suffering for sin recorded in the Scriptures exposes the senselessness of believing that sin is punished by Satan. Realistically, why would Satan even want to punish sin? He would be chasing people *away from his kingdom* by doing that! Many of us have entertained for so long the most contradictory picture of the Enemy; namely, that he desires that we follow him in his sin *and* that *he* punishes us when we do so. That view of Satan, while very popular, is neither scriptural nor sensible.

Pity the man whom God does not chasten, for such a one cannot repent. How blessed is the man who, having erred, can feel remorse and is chastened and corrected; there is hope for that man.

“Blessed is the man whom you chasten, O LORD, and teach out of your law, that you may give him rest from the days of adversity.”
Psalm 94:12-13

It was with this attitude that a chastened King David sang, no doubt with tears,

“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now have I kept your word. . . . It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. . . . I know, O LORD, that your judgments are right, and that YOU, IN FAITHFULNESS, HAVE AFFLICTED ME.”
Psalm 119:67, 71, 75

Yes, it is an act of faithfulness, a part of God’s goodness, for Him to afflict His wayward children. There is a blessing in being able to feel guilt when we err. There is glory in suffering God’s chastisement when we stray from righteousness. Pity the man who can do wrong and feel no pangs of guilt. Pity those who prosper in iniquity, those whom God does not convict or chasten for sinning. God has delivered them to the delusive power of darkness!

King David’s tragic fall from righteousness could have been his soul’s destruction, except that God, graciously, would not let him “get by”. David’s submissive, even thankful attitude for the chastening of the LORD is an attitude from which we all may receive profound insights into both the love and the fear of God. It is for that very reason that God inspired men to record not only David’s story but the story of David’s people, too. “All these things happened unto them for examples,” wrote the apostle Paul, “and they are written for our admonition” (1Cor. 10:11; Rom. 15:4). And upon the sure presupposition that Paul’s words are true, that Israel’s history is relevant to our lives, we now enter into an examination of some of that history and of some of the characters who bore witness to the faithfulness of their Creator both to chasten and to save.

CHAPTER 5

THE JUDGES

And when the LORD raised them up judges,
 then the LORD was with the judge,
 and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies
 all the days of the judge, for it repented
 the LORD because of their groanings by reason of them
 that oppressed them and vexed them.
 Judges 2:18

FOURFOLD PATTERN

For several centuries following their conquest of Canaan, the Israelites were led by divinely selected and empowered men and women, called “judges” who acted as military leaders, or prophets, or teachers, or in whatever other capacity God deemed necessary for the time and circumstances occurrent. This system of government had no regal overtones. The judge was not a king (cp. Judg. 8:22-23). God was Israel’s King. The judges were simply commoners in the kingdom of God, chosen by God to perform services for the other commoners. Although their words would have borne great weight, the judges had no authority to make law. Deference would have been shown them, but the judges had no inherent rights to privileged treatment. And though the judges may have occasionally received gifts, they had no power to tax. The Israelites demonstrated respect for God’s judges, but they did not bow the knee at their presence. The distinction between a judge and a king is, however, most pronounced by the lack of a line of succession among the judges. There is not a single person called to be a judge in the book of Judges, whose father was also a judge. The anointing of the Spirit of God was the distinguishing feature of a judge, and that anointing was not biologically transferred.

This era of judges was characterized by the repetition of a fourfold pattern, described in the second chapter of the book of Judges:

- (1) After the death of the judge, the Israelites would forsake God and worship other gods (2:11-13).
- (2) God would subject the Israelites to heathen rulers (2:14-15a).
- (3) The Israelites would repent and cry out to God in distress (2:15b).
- (4) God would raise up another judge to deliver them (2:16-19).

This cycle of (1) Israel's sin, (2) God's punishment, (3) Israel's repentance, and (4) God's deliverance is found throughout the book of Judges, as in Judges 10:

And (1) the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria. . . . And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and (2) He sold them into the hands of the children of Ammon . . . so that Israel was sore distressed. And (3) the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, saying, "We have sinned against you, both because we have forsaken our God and also served Baalim." . . . And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD, and (4) His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.

Thus begins the story of Jephthah, a judge from the tribe of Manasseh. And, according to the pattern, after Jephthah died,

the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. Judges 13:1

It is inconceivable that there could have been any deliverance for Israel had God not determined it, regardless of how valiant any Israelite leader was. But the biblical attitude, which is so seldom acknowledged, is that *it is equally inconceivable that there could have been any suffering for Israel had God not determined it*, regardless of how strong Israel's enemies were. Both the instruments of God's deliverance (the judges) and the instruments of God's chastisement (Israel's enemies) are acknowledged in the Scriptures, but they are ultimately acknowledged *only* as instruments of God.

It was always the desire of Israel's enemies to afflict and to dominate Israel, but they could not accomplish that desire so long as God was pleased with Israel's manner of life. It was, as well, always the desire of Israel's righteous few to see Israel free of heathen oppressors, but they could not accomplish that desire so long as God was displeased with Israel's manner of life. *Israel's condition was entirely dependent upon Israel's relationship with her God.*

If, as the apostle Paul taught, the stories of the judges are written for our learning, then what is it that we are to learn from the fact that Satan is never mentioned in the book of Judges, even though Israel suffered much during that time? Certainly, it doesn't mean that Satan was inactive or nonexistent. But it does clearly reveal the Bible's attitude concerning the suffering of disobedient saints; that is, God alone is responsible for determining the suffering of His people, just as God alone is responsible for any deliverance that they receive, and the instruments He chooses to use are relatively unimportant. What is important is that the people being chastened get the point, repent, and have their relationship with God restored.

THE END OF THE JUDGES

The last of the judges was Samuel, a prophet from the tribe of Levi. It was during the years of his labor that the Israelites, intimidated by the bellicose actions of the neighboring Ammonites, became discontent with God's system of government by judges. They wanted a system which seemed, to them, more reliable.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel at Ramah. And they said to him, "Behold you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways.

Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.” But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, “Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them. . . . Now, therefore, hearken unto their voice. Howbeit, yet protest solemnly unto them.”
1Samuel 8:4-7, 9

Samuel returned then to the council of elders and protested strongly against their request, but the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel, and they said, “No! But we will have a king over us, that we may be like all the nations and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.”
1Samuel 8:19-20

A short while after this meeting, God directed Samuel to anoint as king of the united tribes of Israel a stalwart young man from the tiny tribe of Benjamin, by the name of Saul.

And when he stood among the people, he was higher than any of the people from his shoulders and upward. And Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen, that there is none like him among all the people?” And all the people shouted, and said, “God save the king!”
1Samuel 10:23-24



CHAPTER 6

THE MONARCHY: SAUL, DAVID, AND SOLOMON

I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath.
Hosea 13:11

SAUL

At the beginning of his reign, Saul appeared to possess an abundance of humility. He was, in Samuel's words, "little" in his own sight (1Sam. 15:17). On the day of his inauguration as Israel's first king, Saul timidly "hid himself among the stuff," and "could not be found" (1Sam. 10:21-22). Yet, sadly, the weight of kingly glory and authority proved to be more than Saul's humility could bear. A capable military leader, he overpowered all foreign threats to Israel's national security, but he himself fell victim to fear of his own people's displeasure (1Sam. 15:24). Following one particularly blatant failure to obey God's command, King Saul sought to mollify his aching conscience by promising to offer many sacrifices. Samuel was sent to confront Saul with his sin and to deliver heaven's reply to his promised sacrifices:

"Does the LORD have as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from being king." . . . And as Samuel turned about to go away, Saul laid hold upon the skirt of his mantle, and it rent. And Samuel said to him, "The LORD has rent the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you."

1Samuel 15:22-23, 27-28

Saul's "neighbor" who was better than he was David, the youngest son of Jesse the Bethlehemite. At God's direction, Samuel journeyed to Bethlehem and anointed there the music-loving shepherd-boy to be Israel's next king (1Sam. 16:4-13).

And the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward. . . . But the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, AND AN EVIL SPIRIT FROM THE LORD troubled him.

1Samuel 16:13-14

Evil Spirits

The men of greatest faith rested in the knowledge of God's patience and compassion. They (not to say we) knew how it felt to stand before Him, naked and bruised in spirit, without defenses, trusting only in the hope of His mercy and love. And they knew how it felt to be forgiven and blessed with God's miraculous gift of encouragement to face life anew. But they stood repentant before *Him*, and no other god, not only because they trusted in His compassion, but also because they knew that it is *His* wrath against unconfessed sin which is to be feared.

Had they believed that the punishment for their error was determined by Baal, or Molech, or some other deity, they might well have followed the lead of the idolaters of their time and sought to appease those other gods. But understanding God as Creator, the righteous could only humble themselves to the One who was in command of the circumstances of their lives and whose holiness their sin had offended. Their fear, indeed terror, of God's wrath was not ill-founded. It was rooted in the reality and certainty of God's vengeance against sin.

That the LORD will send evil spirits to afflict His own people if they stubbornly set themselves in disobedience, as He did to King Saul, is a position from which the Bible never wavers. We see it during the time of the judges in the story of Abimelech and the men of Shechem (Judg. 9:23). We see it during the time of the kings in the story of Micaiah and the false prophets (1Kgs. 22; 2Chron. 18). We see it in the time of Jesus and the apostles as an explanation of the Jews' rejection of the Messiah (Jn. 12:37-40; Rom. 11:7-8). And it will be seen again, possibly in our own time when, as the apostle Paul prophesied, many of God's New Testament children are turned over by God to the power of a delusive spirit:

Because they did not receive the love of the truth . . . GOD WILL SEND THEM A STRONG DELUSION, that they should believe a lie, that they all might be damned who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in unrighteousness. 2Thessalonians 2:10-12

Resorting to Witchcraft

In Saul's case, the evil spirit which God sent upon him drove him not to the refuge of God's forgiveness, but into the confusing wilderness of self-preservation. An ever-intensifying paranoia distorted his perception of reality, at one point leading him to annihilate an entire city of innocent priests on the basis of a foreigner's false accusation that they were conspiring against him (1Sam. 21, 22). His memory swiftly deteriorated. Whom he in the morning would favor, he could the same day forget (1Sam. 16:19-23; 17:32-58). He became a disordered, tormented soul, one moment raging in the heights of arrogant wrath, only then to plummet for a short season into an abyss of depressed submissiveness (cp. 1Sam. 24, 26).

The last years of King Saul's life were thus miserably spent. He erroneously suspected young David of harboring aspirations for the throne (1Sam. 18:6-9), and the resulting drama concerning this increasingly deranged King and his fugitive but loyal servant from Bethlehem provides us with some of the Bible's most poignant episodes. Sadly, at the last, the King who had begun his reign with a purging of witchcraft from Israel, now himself resorted to it:

And Saul disguised himself, and put on other raiment, and he went, and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night. And he said, "I pray thee, divine for me by the familiar spirit, and bring me him up, whom I shall name to you." And the woman

said unto him, “Behold, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off those that have familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?” And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, “As the LORD lives, there shall no punishment happen to you for this.” Then said the woman, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” And he said, “Bring me up Samuel.” And when the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice.

And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground, and bowed himself. And Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disquieted me, to bring me up?” And Saul answered, “I am sore distressed, for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answers me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams. Therefore, I have called you, so that you may make known to me what I shall do.” Then said Samuel, “Why, then, do you ask of me, seeing the LORD is departed from you and is become your enemy? And the LORD has done to him, as he spoke by me, for the LORD has rent the kingdom out of your hand and has given it to your neighbor, even to David. . . . Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. 1Samuel 28:8-17, 19

God's Retribution

We will have disregarded an essential lesson that Saul's story contains, should we fail to acknowledge that it was *God* who destroyed Saul. It is a matter only of momentary note that the way God chose to destroy Saul was with an evil spirit. God could have instead sent a pernicious disease upon Saul, or struck him with lightning, or simply taken Saul's breath from his body. What difference does it make, *as far as responsibility is concerned*, which agent was employed or what particular circumstances led to Saul's pathetic, despairing demise? It was *God's* wrath that had been provoked, and it was *God's* retribution for sin which Saul suffered. David understood it well, and it was a lesson he would never forget.

DAVID

Within eight years after King Saul's ignominious death, David had consolidated the factions which Saul's death had caused and was incontestably the sole ruler of the reunited kingdom of Israel. He abandoned the provincial capital of Hebron, relocating in the more centrally located city of Jerusalem (1Sam. 5:1-10). Thus, Israel began to enjoy nearly seventy years of unprecedented happiness, first under David's righteous guidance and then by virtue of Solomon's inspired leadership.

David's long and joyous reign was, unfortunately, blemished by his adulterous relationship with the wife of one of Israel's noblest fighting men, Uriah the Hittite. But in David's story of suffering for his sin, we learn that virtually no failure need be final, except, as in Saul's case, the failure to repent.

“My Son! My Son, Absalom!”

When Bathsheba, Uriah's beautiful young wife, was found to be with child, the guilty King David successfully devised to have Uriah killed (2Sam. 11:1-17). David then took Bathsheba into his own house, and shortly thereafter, she bore him a son (2Sam. 11:27). But when at last

his sin “found him out”, David listened with dread as his punishment was pronounced by Nathan the prophet:

“Thus says the LORD: Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them unto your neighbor, and he will lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.” And David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD!” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD has put away your sin; you will not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed, you have caused the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the son that is born to you will certainly die.” And Nathan went to his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore to David, and he was very sick. . . . And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died. 2Samuel 12:11-15, 18

Following the death of the infant son whom David so dearly loved, God did, as He said, raise up evil against David from his own house.¹ In one case, David’s son Absalom gathered an army and rebelled against the king, driving him from Jerusalem. David barely escaped the city, but even as he fled Jerusalem, he knew that he was being chastened by the Lord, and he harbored no ill-will toward the human instrument of God’s wrath. On the contrary, though driven from his kingdom by his own son and forced to fight for it again, David was crushed with grief at the news of Absalom’s gruesome death:

“O my son, Absalom! My son, my son, Absalom! Would God I had died for you! O Absalom, my son, my son!” 2Samuel 18:33

David knew the rebellion was not the fault of anyone but himself. If he had kept the commandments of God, he would never have had to flee from Jerusalem into the wilderness as he had fled in his youth from the mad King Saul, nor would he have been tormented by the thoughts of Absalom, mutilated, hanging from a tree. David had caused it all. And he knew it. And that was half the pain.

And the victory that day was turned into mourning unto all the people, for the people heard say that day how the King was grieved for his son. And the people got them by stealth that day into the city, as people being ashamed steal away when they flee in battle. But the King covered his face, and the King cried with a loud voice, “O my son, Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!” 2Samuel 19:2-4

Those around David didn’t understand his grief (2Sam. 19:5-6), because they didn’t understand God as David did. They saw Absalom as an enemy to be hated. David saw Absalom as the instrument of God’s wrath, and he could not hold his son Absalom responsible for what he himself had provoked God to do. This doesn’t mean that Absalom unwillingly rebelled, but Absalom’s intentions did not determine what happened to David; only God’s intentions did.

¹ When Nathan came in to speak to the King about his stealing Bathsheba from her husband Uriah, Nathan compared Bathsheba to a little lamb (1Sam. 11:1-4). According to the law of Moses, a thief had to repay his theft of one sheep with four sheep (Ex. 22:1). And so, because David stole Uriah’s one lamb, his wife, God took four of David’s sons: this one, which Bathsheba bore, then his oldest, Amnon (2Sam. 23:28-19), his beloved Absalom (2Sam. 18:14), and finally, Adonijah (1Kgs. 2:23-25).

During his flight from Jerusalem, David demonstrated this same utter reliance upon God in another circumstance, though David's companions failed then, too, to comprehend:

And when King David came to Bahurim, behold, there came out from there a man of the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gera. He came forth, and cursed still as he came. And he cast stones at David, and at all the servants of King David. And all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. And thus said Shimei when he cursed, "Come out! Come out, you bloody man, and you man of Belial! The LORD has returned upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose stead you have reigned, and the LORD has delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom your son. And, behold, you are taken in your mischief, because you are a bloody man."

Then said Abishai the son of Zeruiah unto the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over, I beg you, and take off his head." And the King said, "What have I to do with you sons of Zeruiah? So let him curse, because the LORD has said to him, curse David. Who shall then say, Why have you done so?" And David said to Abishai, and to all his servants, "Behold, my son, which came forth of my own bowels, is seeking my life. How much more now may this Benjamite do it? Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has bidden him to do so. It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction and that the LORD will requite me good for his cursing this day." And as David and his men went by the way, Shimei went along the hill's side over against him, and cursed as he went, and threw stones at him, and cast dust.

2Samuel 16:5-13

In David's time, it was known that God had given commandment to all people not to harm those whom He anointed (1Chron. 16:22). Who, then, would have believed that God had sent Shimei to curse David and to throw stones at him? But it was true. And David knew it to be true because he could see through the glove being worn to behold *nothing* but the chastening hand of God at work. And David saw nothing but God's hand at work because he believed that the God to whom David had entrusted his life was faithful not to let slip through His fingers the reins of authority over David's life. In a sense, David wasn't hearing Shimei's curse; he was hearing God's curse, and he knew that he himself had caused that curse to come.

Bearing the sacred ark of the covenant, Zadok and Abiathar, the priests, followed after the King and met up with him just outside Jerusalem's walls, wanting to flee with him. David's words there, too, reflected his faith in God as being in sole command of his fate:

"Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, He will bring me again, and show me both it, and His habitation. But if He says, 'I have no delight in you,' behold, here I am. Let Him do to me as seems good to Him." . . . Zadok therefore and Abiathar carried the ark of God again to Jerusalem, and they tarried there. And David went up by the ascent of the Mount of Olives, and wept as he went up.
 excerpts, 2Samuel 15

BROKEN BONES

Some of the most touching of all verses of Scripture are found in the Psalms that David composed while bearing the grievous burden of his sin. Of them, none exhibits more fear or more hope than this one, written, according to tradition, “when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba”:

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your lovingkindness. According to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is continually before me. . . . Purge me with hyssop, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which YOU HAVE BROKEN may rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew within me a right spirit. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy Spirit from me!”

excerpts, Psalm 51

God’s Spirit was not taken from David, as it had been taken from King Saul. And God did bring David back to his beloved Jerusalem. But the man whom God returned to the throne was a chastened man, a man broken with grief, a wiser man – much wiser – and with a heart closer to God’s heart than he otherwise would have possessed. Fitting to David became the sobering praise of Psalm 118:18-19:

The LORD has chastened me sore, but He has not given me over to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness! I will go into them, and I will praise the LORD.

Yes, God had “broken David’s bones”, so to speak, with suffering, but it had been done justly, with care, and with purpose. For, though God had broken his bones, David knew God would not despise his broken heart (Ps. 51:17), and it was in certain knowledge of God’s eagerness to heal as much as in certain knowledge of His terrible power to destroy that David approached the Almighty with his plea for forgiveness. But, oh, what a difference we would have seen in David, had he denied his guilt and held some other than God responsible for his sorrow! What anger, what hatred he would have felt! What harm he would have done to Israel! What eternal loss he may well have suffered!

It is in part because David was so desperate to obtain mercy from God that he was so willing to show it to Shimei, Absalom, and others. But underlying even that was David’s understanding that it was *God’s* mercy that he needed because it was *God’s* wrath that he was suffering. No one could have persuaded David to believe that evil forces or other gods were dictating those tragic events in his life, and because of that, no one could have persuaded David to hate those who were carrying out the dictates of God.

David’s story bears witness to a truth which is unaffected by either time or customs of men; to wit, escape from the bondage of bitterness is realized only when we stop blaming others for the suffering that God determines for us. David could submit to the chastening hand of God only by doing good to the human instruments of God’s wrath. There is, in fact, no other way that David could have regained God’s favor. In other words, David knew how to behave so as to escape his trouble because he never lost sight of who was troubling him. David’s glory, then,

was not in his own wisdom or physical prowess, but it was simply that he knew whose hands were both beating him and holding up his bruised head. As the boy-prophet Jeremiah would proclaim centuries later,

“Thus says the LORD: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might. Let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him who glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, says the LORD.”
Jeremiah 9:23-24

Because David understood, and proved by his good deeds toward those wanting to harm him, that his trust was in God, he was received and blessed again by God. He willingly “turned the other cheek” because he knew that none but God would determine if he would be struck again and that if God did again strike him, it would be just and good.

As bold a step of faith as that may seem to be, it is no more than what a genuine knowledge of our Creator demands. We are all called to trust God, really trust Him, as the biblical heroes of faith trusted Him, so that we may sing with David of that comfort which this unbelieving and fearful world cannot understand: the comfort of God’s chastening rod:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”
Psalm 23:4

As a youth values discipline only as he matures, so the discipline of God is appreciated only by mature saints. None but those who have grown to understand the Father’s goodness, power, and wisdom can be comforted by His chastening rod. It is the immature mind which thinks that the care of the Father stops where the inflicting of pain begins. “My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD,” wrote Solomon, “for whom the LORD loves, He corrects” (Prov. 3:11-12). Such is the gist of the counsel which the prophets of old gave to Israel, and it is instruction which will always be needed as long as the congregation of the LORD is blessed with young believers or confused by misguided teachers.

SOLOMON

Bathsheba’s murdered husband, Uriah, having been a foreigner, had no near-kinsman in Israel to raise up a child by Bathsheba for him, as Moses’ law commanded. As for Bathsheba, she would not have been allowed to marry any other than the king, since she had already been with him. And if Bathsheba were left childless, that would have been considered a cruelty beyond her shame of having been summoned to David’s bedchamber in the first place. The responsibility to see that Bathsheba was not left desolate of children, then, fell upon the chastened king. Thus was conceived the child Solomon, a child conceived this time not of wicked lust, but of obedience to the law of God. If ever a child was conceived through tears, Solomon was surely that child. And though Solomon was not David’s oldest son, or even close to it, David swore to Bathsheba that Solomon would reign after him, for God loved Solomon (1Sam. 12:24) and chose him to reign in David’s stead (1Chron. 28:5; 1Kgs. 1:16-17).²

² Because Solomon was conceived for the dead Uriah in order to fulfill the requirements of the law (Dt. 25:5-6), one could argue that Solomon was Uriah’s son, not David’s, but that legal issue is never brought up in the Scriptures.

As a child, Solomon was given much attention by the aging King David. Above all else, David stressed to Solomon the value of wisdom, as Solomon would later relate in his book of Proverbs:

I was my father's son, tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said unto me, "Let your heart retain my words. Keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom! Get understanding! Forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she [wisdom] will preserve you. Love her, and she will keep you. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom." Proverbs 4:3-7

Solomon continued through six chapters (Prov. 4-9) to recount his father's exhortations to him concerning the need for and the value of wisdom. And those fatherly instructions had a lasting effect on the young man. After David's death, Solomon was told by God in a dream to ask for anything, and it would be given to him. Solomon's request was only for wisdom to govern well and to make right judgments:

"O LORD, my God, you have made your servant king instead of David my father, and I am but a little child. I know not how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people which you have chosen, a great people that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give, therefore, your servant an understanding heart to judge your people, that I may discern between good and bad. For who is able to judge this, your so great a people?" And the speech pleased the LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing. 1Kings 3:7-10

God then promised Solomon such wisdom as no man had ever possessed. With that, God added riches almost beyond reckoning, and honor "such as none of the kings have had who have been before you, neither shall any after you have the like" (2Chron. 1:12). Then, God added this promise:

"And if you walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days." 1Kings 3:14

God was not slack concerning any of these promises. Solomon's administration was a marvel of efficiency in complexity. Under his direction, Israel's dominion expanded to encompass, at long last, all the territory which God had promised to Abraham a thousand years before (Gen. 15:18; 1Kgs. 4:21). Solomon's wealth is staggering to consider. Fabulous apparel, rare spices, precious jewels, exotic plants and animals, specially bred horses, precious minerals, prized building materials, gifts and tribute from vassal nations, brass in such abundance that it could not be counted, silver in such abundance that it became "in Jerusalem as stones", and in one year alone, there came to Solomon "six hundred threescore and six talents of gold."

All of King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; none were of silver. It was nothing accounted of in the days of Solomon. 1Kings 10:21

Solomon recalled,

“I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits. I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that brings forth trees. I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house. I also had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me. I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces. I got me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So, I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem. Also, my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired, I kept not from them. I withheld not my heart from any joy. . . . And this was my portion of all my labor. Then, I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do. And, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.”
 excerpts, Ecclesiastes 2

With this last statement, Solomon confronts us with the heartthrob of the wisdom which he possessed. Like so much of the hidden wisdom of God, it is a simple reality that is hidden only because vain man overlooks it in his quest for complex profundities by which he can flatter himself for his reasoning capacity.

“Wisdom is before him who has understanding,” wrote Solomon, “but the eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth” (Prov. 17:24). Solomon thus describes the phenomenon I just mentioned. That is, while vain men are straining to gain wisdom from distant places and from deep, twisted pits of reason, others are filled with the instruction of wisdom simply by observing the ordinary things of life everywhere before them. While some men are “never able to come to the knowledge of the truth,” others cannot keep from increasing in wisdom any more than they can keep their eyes from seeing, their ears from hearing, or their chests from inhaling God’s invisible streams of life.

Wisdom stares us in the face when we wake in the morning, regardless of where we wake. Birds sing it; flowers show it; rocks declare it; the whole earth exudes wisdom as the heart of a mother exudes pained compassion for a wayward son. It is not esoteric; it is simple, though often ignored and hungry for acceptance.

Does not wisdom cry, and understanding put forth her voice? She stands in the top of the high places, by the way in the places of the paths. She cries at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors. “To you, O men, I call. And my voice is to the sons of man. O you simple ones, understand wisdom! And you fools, be of an understanding heart! Hear! For I will speak of excellent things, and the opening of my lips shall be right things. My mouth shall speak truth, and wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing froward or perverse in them. They are all plain to him who understands, and right to them that find knowledge.”
 Proverbs 8:1-9

There is nothing perverse in Creation’s declaration of wisdom because everything it tells us about the Creator is true. And everything it tells us about the Creator is true *because the Creator created it*. Creation is the work of the Creator! That is the reason that Creation’s message can be trusted and, ultimately, that is the very message of wisdom itself. Creation is an immovable,

irrefutable revelation, always present, in all ways pleading with all mankind to learn something of God in her.

“Hearken unto me, you children! For blessed are they who keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man who hears me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and will obtain favor of the LORD. But he who sins against me wrongs his own soul. All they that hate me love death.”
Proverbs 8:32-36

The wisdom to be received from Creation is a consuming concern in Solomon’s writings, but were that the extent of these comments, I would, for discussing it here, be at fault for pointless repetition. The certainty of Creation’s witness to the Creator has already been shown in the second chapter of this book. The value of Solomon’s wisdom is not merely the declaration of the reality of Creation’s witness to the Creator, not merely that Creation *is* saying things about God. Rather, the value lies chiefly in Solomon’s explanation of the things about God that Creation is saying. It is an attainment of great spiritual value to become aware of Creation’s witness to the Creator; it is of even greater value to be able to interpret that witness for men, so that suffering mankind may better understand their God, themselves, and their situation in life.

THIS CREATION

We say that Solomon learned of God from Creation. It may seem queer, but it is necessary to point out the obvious fact that the Creation from which Solomon learned of God was *this one*. And before we examine some of what he learned, it is imperative that we think about that, for that single, obvious truth is of importance to those who must suffer and struggle in faith to hope. In other words, it is of importance to us all.

If God created everything perfectly pleasing to Himself, as He did, and then Creation was redefined or recreated by Satan to include sickness, pain, disaster and death, then this miserable, fallen state of man is not a testimony to the goodness, power, and wisdom of its Creator. Instead, it bears witness to the wickedness and power of Satan. If suffering is Satan’s curse upon mankind, if the presence of disease, disasters, and pain are his “creations” for man, then God’s fingerprints are not upon them, and there is, then, another to whom Creation bears witness, another whose power men should fear, another who determines the circumstances of human life. But an opinion such as that fails to distinguish between Satan’s ability to deceive men into sin and God’s power to punish men for sinning. Suffering and death are not Satan’s curses upon mankind; they are God’s. They are evidence of *His* holiness and *His* power, and they serve as inspiration for all men to fear God, although not all men receive that inspiration.

One may ask, “Does not Creation teach us about Satan as well as about God?” Yes, it does, but only indirectly, as we may also learn lessons in life about ourselves and others. Primarily, what Creation indirectly teaches us about Satan is the dreadful results of believing his lies and of following his example of doing evil instead of doing good. The result of man’s sin is man’s present predicament of misery, war, confusion, fear, and endless toil. The One who thus afflicted man is *God*. So we learn, so this Creation in which we live teaches us, by the terrible, tragic condition of humankind, that God is to be revered. The sorry consequences of a contrary course are both obvious and ubiquitous.

TIME, PURPOSE, AND JUDGMENT

The wisdom that God gave to Solomon was the ability to see Creation and understand it the way it was intended to be seen and understood. It was not a philosophical, impractical intellectualism. Solomon's wisdom was his ability to learn eternal truths by observing temporal phenomena. As much as most of us sail through this life ignorant of Creation's constant proclamation of eternal truth, so much was Solomon's heart opened by God to hear and to see, and to be instructed by everything he heard and saw. And of the many profound truths which glared before Solomon's eyes, there are three which dominated much of Solomon's attention: Man's prison of *time*, the reality of *purpose* in all things, and the certainty of results, or *judgment*, for every action or inaction in the universe.

Time

As Solomon meditated in his gardens, his ears heard the crack of dried, dead twigs under his feet. Lifting up his eyes, he beheld blossom-bearing, green twigs on the tree limbs above. Only a matter of time. He felt the warm easterly breeze from the burning Arabian sands, remembered the bitterly cold winds from the north, and knew they would return. Only a matter of time. Rising with the sun, he strolled in the morning to the tomb of his father, felt the cool stone, and noticed that the morning's long shadows had already grown shorter. Only a matter of time. He observed Jerusalem's inhabitants from the battlement of his palace, laughing children racing heedlessly, recklessly past tottering, white-headed elders. Time. He feasted to the full and, not many hours afterward, again felt the gnawing demand of human flesh for sustenance. Time.

Time! Time! Time! The tyranny of it! The blessing of it! The misery and the joy! Solomon seemed obsessed with time. Without God's help, the wisdom which God gave to Solomon would have driven him insane. Solomon's ears were opened to the plaintive cry of a Creation cursed with Time! It was the greatest curse that the angry Creator imposed upon disobedient man, yet it was an act of incredible mercy. A curse, because "time" means "not eternal"; it requires death. Mercy, because death wasn't immediate; we are given time to prepare for the end of our time. A curse, because there is a time for love and for peace, but only a time. Mercy, because there is a time for hatred and war, but only a time. Solomon could find nothing on earth that was not cursed with Time, nothing that was not dying or decaying or being spent. Even unborn babies were already cursed and blessed with Time. It vexed Solomon incessantly:

Vanity of vanities! says the Preacher. Vanity of vanities! All is vanity! . . . I have seen all the works that are done under the sun, and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14

By "vanity", Solomon meant "temporal", or "subject to time", and in his commentary on the condition of fallen man, Solomon described everything in the human condition as "vain". That is, nothing in this Creation is eternal.

Truly, the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is to behold the sun. But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all, yet, let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. All that comes is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 11:7-8

For Solomon, the day of death is better than the day of one's birth because death is our escape from Time (Eccl. 7:1-4). If you think that a person would be a happier person if he did not think on such matters, Solomon would wholeheartedly agree (Eccl. 1:18). If you think that a person would be a *better* person if he did not think on these matters, Solomon would disagree, for in this Creation, sorrow is better than laughter.

For by the sadness of the countenance, the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Ecclesiastes 7:3-4

A constant awareness of Time, a constant mindfulness of the certainty of death and ending, is encouragement in times of suffering because we know that suffering, like everything else in this Creation, is only for a time. In times of pleasure, that same awareness will keep us sober-minded, humble, and save us from being lured into excess by the deceitfulness of riches and of ease. Nothing in this Creation is timeless. Awareness of that is part of the profound wisdom which God gave to Solomon. But it is only a part.

Purpose

In addition to Time, Solomon discerned another pervasive quality of this Creation: Purpose. Everything God created has Purpose. Everything God does has Purpose. Solomon saw Purpose in the blossom-bearing twigs, Purpose in the dead ones snapping beneath the weight of his sandals, Purpose in the sandals themselves, Purpose in the light of the sun which illuminated the scene for Solomon's eyes. Solomon understood that the sun shines not by its own power, but by the will of its Creator, to fulfill His many, many Purposes. Solomon would tell us that flowers do not just grow; rather, God "purposes" them to grow. God purposes sorrow and joy in our lives; He purposes snowfall and wind; He purposes war and peace. And the fact that we sometimes cannot discern God's purposes is no reason whatsoever to doubt their existence.

So glutted with Purpose are the experiences of our lives that Solomon does not call them "events"; he calls them "purposes". He saw birth as a purpose, weeping as a purpose, gain, loss, silence, speech, and every other human experience, as purposes (Eccl. 3:1-17).

If knowing that suffering is only for a Time provides the sufferer with a measure of relief, then knowing that it has Purpose provides the sufferer even greater consolation, for the accomplishment of God's Purpose for our suffering is the means of escape from suffering. Herein lies the wisdom of continuing to do good in times of suffering. Only the pathway of right conduct leads to God's door of escape from suffering because only right conduct will accomplish God's Purpose for the suffering. There is time in this Creation only for God's Purposes; something without Purpose does not exist. And when the Purpose for suffering is accomplished, the Time for suffering ends. Otherwise, suffering without Purpose would exist, and there is no such thing.

Judgment

Lastly, with the iron rule of Time and the permeating reality of Purpose, Solomon could not for a moment fail to hear wisdom crying out, through every element of Creation, concerning the certainty of Judgment.

We might more fully appreciate Solomon's word "judgment" if we would use the word "reward", or "result". Solomon saw result in every word spoken and every silence maintained. If a man walked, he got somewhere. If he stood still, he stayed where he was. If it rained, the earth was watered and would bear fruit. If there was drought, the earth was dry, and plants died. If a man labored and cared for his goods, he had plenty to eat. If he was lazy, he fell into need. This is the way of God's Creation, and it tells us something about God. Solomon's book of Proverbs especially focuses on the quality of results, or Judgment. Read the twenty chapters of Solomon's proverbs (Prov. 10-29) and place a "J" beside every verse which suggests or speaks of Judgment (or Result), and you may need to sharpen your pencil before you are finished! Yes, "to every Purpose" there is not only a time but "there is Time and Judgment" (Eccl. 8:6).

To the one who is suffering, it is perhaps the greatest comfort of all to know that for every deed there is a Judgment. However, it is a comfort only when it is understood that all Judgment belongs to God, or, we could say, all Results are determined by God.

What a thrilling realization! What a liberation from fear and worry, to realize that suffering is only one more of Time's subjects, that if our suffering had no Purpose, it would not exist (and will cease to exist when its Purpose is accomplished), and that our "patient continuance in well doing" during times of suffering will have a Result which will be determined by the very God whom we have trusted!

The picture of the universe which Solomon painted for us is one of remarkable simplicity and consistency. All of Creation is subject to Time, filled with Purpose, and rushing toward Judgment, and all Creation is declaring those truths to all people, every moment. There are those who have eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear, and hearts but do not understand. But the ear that hears Time in the cry of an infant learns to fear the Creator's wrath against sin. The eye that sees Purpose in the movement of the stars, learns to rest in hope of the Creator's care for all that He has made. And the heart that discerns in the earthly results of human behavior a foretaste of Judgment to come, wastes none of its life in foolishness and sin.

After Solomon's consideration of all these things, after he had absorbed from Creation such a vast amount of wisdom, Solomon, the practical counselor, reached a simple conclusion that belies the unsearchable depths of wisdom which inspired it:

Let us hear the end of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

IRONY

Of Solomon's 1005 songs, only the Song of Solomon is extant. Of his 3,000 wise sayings, about 1,000 are preserved in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Of all his proverbs, however, Proverbs 16:7 remains one of the most haunting, in light of Solomon's inexplicable turn from righteousness in his latter years:

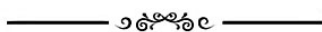
When a man's ways please the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.

It teases the heights of irony that the man who spoke those words should later himself so displease the LORD that, instead of making Solomon's enemies to be his friends, God turned some of Solomon's friends into enemies.

For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. . . . And likewise did he for all his strange wives, who burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods. And the LORD was angry with Solomon. . . . Wherefore the LORD said unto Solomon, "Forasmuch as this is done by you, and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. Notwithstanding, in your days I will not do it, for David your father's sake, but I will rend it out of the hand of your son. Howbeit, I will not rend away all the kingdom but will give one tribe [Judah] to your son, for David my servant's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake which I have chosen." And the LORD stirred up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite. . . . And God stirred him up another adversary, Rezon the son of Eliadah. . . . And he was an adversary to Israel all the days of Solomon, besides the mischief that Hadad did. And he abhorred Israel, and reigned over Syria. And Jeroboam the son of Nebat . . . Solomon's servant . . . even he lifted up his hand against the king. . . . And it came to pass at that time, when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, that the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him in the way . . . and Ahijah caught the new garment that was on him, and rent it in twelve pieces. And he said to Jeroboam, "Take ten pieces. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and will give ten tribes to you (but he shall have one tribe for my servant David's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel) because they have forsaken me and have worshiped [other gods]."

excerpts, 1Kings 11

Did Solomon repent of his idolatry before he died? How could this man, so full of wisdom, have become so foolish? How could the author of three powerful books in the Bible turn from the righteousness and faith to which those very books guide hungry souls? Solomon's apostasy proves to be as mysterious and enigmatic as was his mighty wisdom.



CHAPTER 7

THE DIVIDED KINGDOM:
THE FALL OF ISRAEL

And Ahijah caught the new garment that was on him,
and rent it in twelve pieces.
And he said to Jeroboam, You take ten pieces:
for thus says the LORD, the God of Israel,
Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon,
and will give ten tribes to you.
1Kings 11:30-31

THE NORTHERN KINGDOM

After Solomon's death, the kingdom over which Saul, David, and Solomon reigned was divided into two kingdoms (1Kgs. 12:1-24). When Rehoboam, Solomon's son, would have by military force attempted to quell the rebellion of the ten northern tribes, he was stopped by a prophet named Shemaiah:

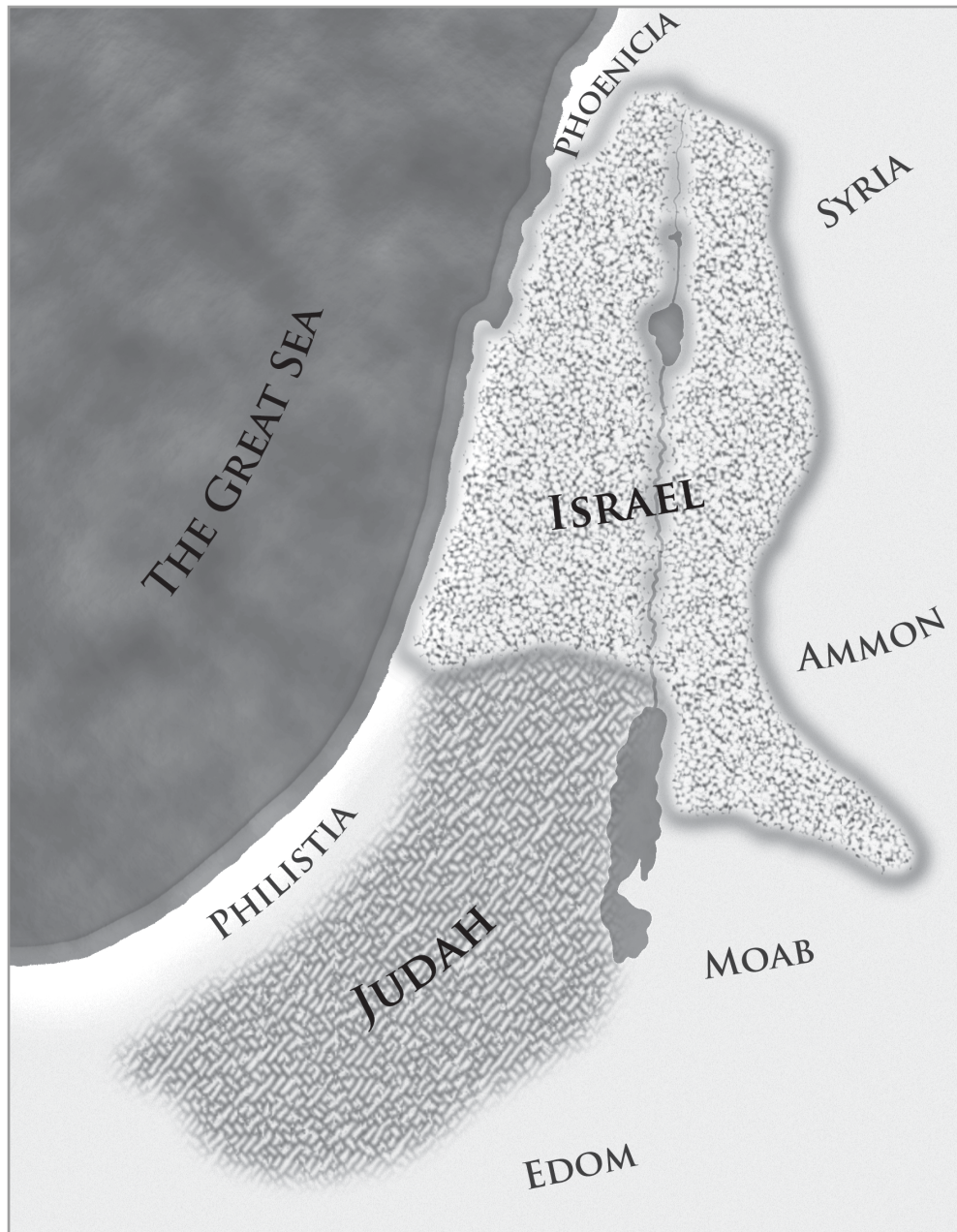
“Thus says the LORD: You shall not go up, nor fight against your brethren the children of Israel. Return every man to his house, for this thing is from me.” They hearkened therefore unto the word of the LORD, and returned. 1Kings 12:24

The division of God's people into two kingdoms was never healed. The northern ten tribes retained the name “Israel” for their kingdom. The southern tribes became the Kingdom of Judah. The fate of both these small nations demonstrates the grim truth of Jesus' words: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation” (Mt. 12:25).

Jeroboam, the first king of the northern Kingdom of Israel, feared that if the people continued their yearly religious observances at Jerusalem, Judah's capitol, their hearts would “turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam, King of Judah, and they will kill me, and return to Rehoboam, King of Judah” (1Kgs. 12:27). Jeroboam sought advice on this matter and, having received it, decided to invent a new religion for his kingdom like the true religion which was still practiced in Judah. He hoped that this new religion would dissuade his people from making the pilgrimages to Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, which Moses' law required.

Jeroboam's first act of apostasy was to construct two golden calves, one to be placed in Bethel, near his southern border with Judah, the other to be placed in the northern part of his

kingdom. “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem,” he disingenuously told the people. “Behold [these calves are] your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (1Kgs. 12:28). Next, Jeroboam built a house for the worship of various gods, and though it could not have rivaled Solomon’s magnificent temple in Jerusalem, it proved to be a successful rival for the hearts of many in Israel. Jeroboam also “ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like the feast that is in Judah” (1Kgs. 12:32).



A thorn in Jeroboam’s side were the Levites, whom God had ordained to teach the law of Moses to the people. Joshua had scattered the Levites throughout the Promised Land, giving them forty-eight cities, so that Israelites in every place might always be near someone able to instruct them in the ways of the LORD. What was Jeroboam to do with this tribe of holy men,

who among Jeroboam's ten northern tribes possessed a total of thirty-five cities? He decided to forbid them to practice their divinely ordained office any longer, "and he made priests of the lowest of the people, who were not of the sons of Levi" (1Kgs. 12:31). In doing this, Jeroboam was divorcing himself and his nation from the covenant made with God at Mt. Sinai. He thought it was the only way to save his nation, but eventually, it would result in its complete destruction.

Jeroboam's unnamed advisors had also counseled him to find men who would teach the people to worship God as did the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; that is, to build altars on hilltops (Gen. 12:8), to plant groves for places of worship (Gen. 21:33), and to have close ties to heathen nations (Gen. 14:13). All these things, permitted in the days of those patriarchs, were strictly forbidden by the law of Moses (Dt. 12:1-5; 16:21; 7:1-5; 23:1-6). Recalling Abraham's way of worship while he lived in Beersheba, the rallying cry of Israel's false priests and prophets, for generations to come, became "the manner of Beersheba lives!" (Amos 8:14).

With this tactic, they persuaded many Israelites to believe that in returning to the patriarchs' manner of worship, they were returning to an original, unadulterated faith. Moses' law was rejected, possibly as being unsophisticated, superstitious, dictatorial, and too nationalistic. Likewise, David's doctrine, that Jerusalem was divinely chosen as "the place" to worship (Dt. 12:13-14; Ps. 87:2), was rejected. Israel's new class of religious leaders quickly seized upon the theme of friendship, even confederacy, with surrounding nations, no doubt accusing both Moses and David not only of having a restrictive, nationalistic attitude, but also of nepotism; Moses, for claiming that God had chosen his own tribe of Levi for the honor of priestly and judicial service; David, for claiming that God had promised him a perpetual line of successor kings. The new religious leaders of Israel would have condemned Moses' destruction of the infamous golden calf at Mount Sinai as an effort to keep the Israelites enslaved to his self-serving law. And their own construction of golden calves would be interpreted as a step toward freedom, a freedom which now, at long last, Jeroboam's priests and prophets offered to the nation.

This new class of clergy which Jeroboam invented for his nation became polished professionals of their craft. They painted for the northern kingdom of Israel a deceitful picture of their southern sister nation of Judah as hopelessly naive, clinging to misinformed doctrines and antiquated ideas. Not infrequently does the Bible indicate that the northern kingdom's opinion of Judah was that she was a silly "country bumpkin", far less sophisticated than her northern sister. Going to Jerusalem to sacrifice to Jehovah probably became something of a joke. It would have been made to seem unbecoming to an enlightened faith. Israel's prophets probably laughed to scorn the very notion of traveling to Solomon's temple and very likely accused Judah of trying to "can God up" into one little building in Jerusalem. Anyone with an inclination to obey God and go to His altar in Jerusalem probably suffered reproaches and persecution; that is, if he was courageous enough to face the shame by admitting his feelings. Or, he may have been pitied by those of a kinder disposition, as being someone overcome by superstition or sentiment for the old days. But the truth is that every one who refused to sacrifice only in Jerusalem had been overcome by the deceit of cunning men, the professional prophets and priests.

Jeroboam's sin provoked God's wrath, and that wrath resulted in a grievous curse upon that religion "which he had devised of his own heart" (1Kgs. 12:33), and upon himself and his descendants (1Kgs. 14:1-16). But for Solomon's son Rehoboam, King of Judah, Jeroboam's sin provided strength, for

the priests and the Levites that were in all Israel resorted to him out of all their coasts. For the Levites left their suburbs and their possession, and they came to Judah and Jerusalem. For Jeroboam and his sons had cast them off from executing the priest's office unto the LORD. 2Chronicles 11:13-14

Israel's great loss became Judah's great benefit, but when those in Israel who loved God's law saw that the Levites were leaving and Moses' law was abrogated, Israel's loss became even greater, for many righteous men from the ten northern tribes followed the Levites southward.

Out of all the tribes of Israel, such as set their hearts to seek the LORD God of Israel came to Jerusalem to sacrifice unto the LORD God of their fathers. So they strengthened the kingdom of Judah, and made Rehoboam the son of Solomon strong. 2Chronicles 11:16-17

THE KINGS

According to the word of the LORD, Jeroboam's entire family was slain, just two years after he ended his twenty-two year reign (1Kgs. 15:25-30). Baasha, the man who killed Jeroboam's descendants, then suffered the same fate, for two years after his death, his son was assassinated, and all his descendants were put to death (1Kgs. 16:8-14). Zimri, the soldier who slew Baasha's descendants, committed suicide one week later when Omri, general of Israel's army, surrounded Zimri in Tirzah (1Kgs. 16:17-18).

Omri's dynasty was relatively prosperous. He had three descendants to follow him on the throne, the most notable of them being his wicked son Ahab, who married Jezebel, persecuted Elijah, cunningly took advantage of Judah's upright but naive King Jehoshaphat, and incurred upon his house the same curse which God had inflicted upon the houses of Israel's other kings: complete slaughter. Jehu was the soldier who accomplished this bloody task having been anointed by Elisha to assume control of the northern kingdom (2Kgs. 9-10). His was the most successful of all the short-lived dynasties of Israel. Four of his descendants followed his twenty-eight year reign with reigns of seventeen, sixteen, and forty-one years, and then six months. The forty-one year reign belonged to Jehu's great-grandson, Jeroboam, whom we distinguish from Israel's first king by calling him Jeroboam II. In the final forty, tragic years of Israel's history which came after Jeroboam II's death, six kings ruled. Four were assassinated (including Jeroboam II's son, Zachariah), and the last one was taken in chains into captivity. The nation collapsed, never to rise again.

In all, only eight of Israel's twenty kings managed to die a natural death. The average length of time on the throne was about ten years. In contrast, the average length of reign for Judah's kings was about eighteen years, and all those kings belonged to the same family, the house of David.

None of the twenty kings who presided over the northern kingdom of Israel were considered righteous, for none of them departed from Jeroboam's false religion, "wherewith he made Israel to sin" (1Kgs. 15:26, 34). On the other hand, of Judah's nineteen kings (Athaliah excluded) were some righteous men, such as Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah. The salt of righteousness which did exist in Judah preserved the kingdom for a century and a half longer than her northern sister.

THE PROPHETS

The few centuries following Solomon's death and the dividing of the united kingdom of Israel into two smaller kingdoms was an era of great prophetic activity. Though none of God's prophets were limited in their labors to either one of these nations, their messages usually associated them with one nation more than the other. For example, Elijah's ministry had more to do with Israel than with Judah. And the same may be said of Elisha, Micaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Jonah. Among the prophets whose voices were heard principally in the southern kingdom were Isaiah, Micah, Joel, Jeremiah, and Zephaniah. And it is the message of these prophets concerning the suffering of Israel and Judah which we should especially heed. Every one of these true prophets, though speaking in different locations, sometimes centuries apart, proclaimed the absolute sovereignty of God over the tragic events which befell His people.

Of the sixteen prophetic books which are preserved in Scripture, only five fail to tell us when the prophet spoke (Joel, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Malachi). The earliest of those whose times are given are Jonah (2Kgs. 14:25), then Amos and Hosea. But even their prophecies are associated with the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel; so, we see that the time of the prophets whose books survive is relatively late in Old Testament history, beginning about fifty years prior to the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel.

AMOS

Amos was an obscure herdsman and fruit gatherer from the quiet Judean village of Tekoah. While tending sheep on the peaceful, green slopes near his home, Amos was visited by the Almighty and commissioned to bear His commination to the prosperous northern kingdom and her king, Jeroboam II.

The nine chapters of Amos' prophecies are gluttled with "gloom and doom". Except for the last five verses of the book, his messages are completely without those bright, sudden bursts of hope which characterize other prophetic books. His was an unpleasant task, a relentless indictment of the northern kingdom of Israel for her departure from the kind of worship and lifestyle which the law prescribed (Amos 2:6-12). But by the time of Amos, those in Israel to whom Amos spoke had been without Levites, the teachers of the law, for over a century and were completely absorbed into the idolatrous, polytheistic understanding of their world. To combat this darkened spiritual attitude, Amos proclaimed anew the ancient revelation of God as Creator:

"Prepare to meet your God, O Israel! For, lo, He that forms the mountains, and creates the wind, and declares unto man what is his thought, that makes the morning darkness, and treads upon the high places of the earth, Jehovah, God of hosts, is His name!

"Seek Him that makes Pleiades and Orion, and turns the shadow of death into morning, and makes the day dark with night, that calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out upon the face of the earth. Jehovah is His name!

"It is He that builds his stories in the heavens and has fixed His vault over the earth. He who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the face of the earth, Jehovah is His name!"

Amos 4:12b-13, 5:8, 9:6

Beyond this, Amos combated the idolatrous view of the world, into which his northern brothers had fallen, by declaring that responsibility for Israel's sufferings, and Israel's hope of deliverance, rested in no one's hands but her Creator-God, Jehovah, and that it was Jehovah who had afflicted her in order to drive the nation back to the true worship of God.

"I have given you cleanness of teeth [i.e. famine] in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places, yet have you not returned unto me, says Jehovah. And also, I have withheld the rain from you, . . . yet have you not returned unto me, says Jehovah. I have smitten you with blasting and mildew. When your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmer worm devoured them, yet have you not returned unto me, says Jehovah. I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt. Your young men have I slain with the sword, and have taken away your horses. And I have made the stench of your camps to come up to your nostrils, yet have you not returned unto me, says Jehovah. I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, . . . yet have you not returned unto me, says Jehovah."

Amos 4:6-11

These verses, taken alone, might not have incited ire from Israel's idolaters, for they could have believed Jehovah was responsible for *some* of Israel's sufferings. But Amos insisted that God alone was responsible for every painful or pleasant circumstance that Israel had experienced, that *it was impossible for harm to befall the cities of Israel unless Jehovah did it* (3:2-6). Of course, Amos' message exposed the foolishness of Israel's fear and worship of other gods and, so, infuriated the professional, idolatrous priests and prophets of his time. Their angry reaction is especially easy to understand when we consider that Amos was prophesying gloomy things to a relaxed, prosperous nation.

Jeroboam II, during these years, was guiding Israel through a truly independent and comfortable time (the last such rest she would ever know). For forty-one years, Jeroboam II enjoyed military successes, as the prophet Jonah had foretold (2Kgs. 14:25), which restored much of the northern kingdom's lost territory and provided the land with respite from the civil strife, murder, intrigue, and foreign oppression that characterized most of Israel's two centuries as a nation. It was only of the tender compassion of God that so capable a governor sat upon Israel's throne (2Kgs. 14:25-27), but neither Israel nor Jeroboam II believed that.

That sad fact may account for some of the vehemence of Amos' denunciations. What is certain is that his fiery prophecies did not fit the confident, complacent contented mood of Israel during Jeroboam II's reign. Amos was denounced as an unwelcome alien to Baal's turf, an old-fashioned conspirator against the independence of the nation of Israel, trying to frighten the people into returning to Judah and to the kings of the house of David:

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to Jeroboam, King of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words! For thus says Amos: 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be led away captive out of their land.'" And Amaziah said to Amos, "You Seer! Go, flee to the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there! But never again prophesy in Bethel, for it is the king's chapel, and it is the king's court."

Amos 7:10-13

Bethel being one of the principal places of worship in Israel, and Amaziah having access to the king's ear, we can safely assume that Amaziah, though wicked, was a religious leader of great ability and importance, no doubt possessing a developed intuition concerning spiritual matters and personal survival. It is no wonder that Amaziah so strongly condemned Amos as a threat to the safety of Israel, for Amaziah would have known that if the King listened to Amos and turned to the LORD with all his heart, Amaziah's own life would be in danger. Moses' law required the death penalty for idolatry (Dt. 13), and though the common folk in Israel, by this time in Israel's history, had virtually no knowledge of the law, Amaziah would hardly have been so ignorant. Amaziah slandered Amos in order to save his own neck. He made himself appear to be the defender of the nation, when in fact, he and others like him were leading Israel into indescribable misery and complete destruction.

Again, Amaziah's deceitful accusation against Amos was not simply a response to Amos' declaration of coming destruction. That prophecy, in itself, might have been tolerated. His rage was sparked by Amos' declaration that Israel would be destroyed by the God of Moses' law who had delivered the Israelites from Egypt (2:9-16) and that Israel's only hope of escape lay in obeying *Him*. Had Amaziah allowed that part of Amos' message to go unchallenged, the inhabitants of Israel might have been persuaded to reconsider their lifestyle, to be curious about Moses' law and their own history. As long as Amaziah could persuade the people to see Amos only as a Judean spy, sent to lead them into the harness of Judah's King Uzziah, Amaziah was safe. Amaziah may even have persuaded himself to believe that what he was saying was true. But Amaziah knew – it was obvious – that if Amos' message were ever received by the people, he would be out of a job or, more probably, stoned. As it was, Amos himself may have been put to death by the idolatrous priests of Israel or officers of the king. That certainly would explain the brevity of his time as a prophet, which apparently was only a handful of years.

HOSEA

A bold voice which was not to be silenced, however, was Hosea, whose work may easily have spanned half a century, beginning about the same time as Amos and continuing possibly even to the fulfillment of his prophecies of Israel's doom (Hos. 1:1). But if he did escape execution, it was not because his prophecies were of a softer tone than Amos', nor because he credited God with less responsibility for the sufferings of His wayward people. He bluntly warned Jeroboam II that his descendants would be slaughtered, as had been slaughtered the descendants of Israel's other kings (1:4), and that it would be *God* who would slay them, as it had been He who had destroyed the houses of Israel's other kings (13:11). Hosea told Israel that her blessings of corn, wine, money, clothing, and other goods had been given by God, not Baal (2:8), that she had wronged God by thinking otherwise, and that now, God would demonstrate His authority over their blessings by taking those blessings away:

“Therefore, I will return and take away my grain in its time, and my wine in its season, and take back my wool and my flax, given to cover her [Israel's] nakedness. But now, I will uncover her private parts to the eyes of her lovers [other gods and their worshippers], and none shall deliver her out of my hand. And I will cause all her joy to cease, her feast days, her new moons and her sabbaths, and all her sacred assemblies. And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees, about which she said, ‘They are my rewards that my lovers

have given me.’ . . . And I will visit upon her the days of the Baalim, in which she burned incense to them, and she decked herself with her earrings and her jewels, and she went after her lovers and forgot me, says Jehovah.”
Hosea 2:9-13

The greatest difference between the prophecies of Amos and Hosea is Hosea’s revelation of the depth of God’s hurt because of Israel’s unfaithfulness to Him, as well as Hosea’s proclamation of God’s great sorrow for the terrible suffering which He would shortly inflict upon the nation:

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt. . . . Yet, it was I who taught Ephraim [another name for Israel] to walk, taking them by his arms, but they knew not that I had healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love; but I was to them like those who lift the yoke onto their jaws, though I bent down to feed him. . . . How shall I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah, or treat you like Zeboiim [two cities destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah]? My heart is turned within me. . . . O Israel, you have destroyed yourself, but in me is your help. I will be your king. Where is there any other who can save you in all your cities?”
excerpts from Hosea

But Amaziah and the many other idolatrous priests like him had too firm a grip on the minds of the people for them to believe that their hope, their only hope, was in Jehovah, or that He was the only one whose wrath they needed to fear. The warnings of Amos and Hosea were rejected as dangerous, perhaps antiquated, doctrines. The idolatrous priests themselves claimed to be anointed to bring the true message to the people: the days of blessing and prosperity would continue so long as the gods were appeased.

ISAIAH

So, Israel followed on confidently behind the professional prophets, refusing to countenance either Hosea’s compassionate, pleading voice or the stern voice of the shepherd from Tekoa who claimed to be sent by God. But even as they did so, another thundering voice began to be heard in Jerusalem, the voice of the great prophet Isaiah, announcing which nation Jehovah had chosen to inflict His terrible, final blow upon this foolish, sinful northern kingdom:

“O Assyrian, the rod of my anger, and the staff in their hand is my indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.”
Isaiah 10:5-6

The length of Isaiah’s time in God’s service approximately equaled Hosea’s (Isa. 1:1), and they may have been acquainted. It seems doubtful that Isaiah knew Amos, though, for Amos prophesied in the earlier part of King Uzziah’s reign, when Jeroboam II ruled in Israel, and Isaiah began his career, it appears, in Uzziah’s last days (Isa. 6). But the difference in time did not alter the somber message of the Spirit which spoke through them both: the very God who had saved the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage was now contemplating for them a much worse fate than Egyptian bondage had ever been. Still, in His fathomless love and mercy, the Creator pleaded with His chosen people to the very end to repent.

MICAHA

Very shortly after Isaiah joined Hosea and Amos in the battle for the hearts of God's people, Micah was also given the burden of bearing the sword of the word of God:

“Jehovah’s voice cries out to the city, and the man of wisdom will fear your name. Hear the rod, and the one who has appointed it! . . . The good man is perished out of the earth, and there is none upright among men. They all lie in wait for blood; they hunt every man his brother with a net. That they may do evil with both hands earnestly, the prince asks, and the judge asks, for a bribe. . . . The best of them is as a brier; the most upright is sharper than a thorn hedge. . . . Therefore, I will turn Samaria [capitol of the northern kingdom] into ruins in a field. . . . And all her graven images shall be beaten to pieces. . . . Hear, O mountains, Jehovah’s case, and you strong foundations of the earth! For the LORD has a controversy with His people, and He will plead with Israel. O my people! What have I done to you? Wherein have I wearied you? Testify against me!”
 excerpts from Micah

DESTROYED FOR LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

Even as these words from Micah the prophet were being spoken, Israel's borders, which the deceased Jeroboam II had enlarged, were already in retreat before Assyria's expanding military and political dominion. God's ominous, angry shadow loomed nearer to Israel with every passing day, ever more certain to cover the land with suffering. Prophetic activity, both true and false, became intense, the way a sunset sky may burst into brilliant, dazzling hues before turning dark.

When Israel's gruesome end finally came, it came with surprisingly little biblical elaboration. In just four verses of Scripture are reported, in matter-of-fact language, Israel's subjugation to Assyria, the subsequent rebellion of Hoshea, Israel's last king, the capture and imprisonment of Hoshea, Assyria's siege and destruction of Samaria, and then, the captivity and deportation of the population of Israel (2Kgs. 17:3-6). The remaining thirty-five verses of that chapter are devoted to insuring that the Reader understands that all these tragedies were decreed and directed by *God*, and not by the Assyrians, nor by other supposed deities. To sum it up:

The LORD was very angry with Israel, and He removed them out of His sight. There was none left but the tribe of Judah only.
 2Kings 17:18

Israel miserably failed in two key areas of faith. First, she failed to acknowledge God's complete, unshakable authority over His Creation, both the pleasant and the unpleasant elements. Secondly, and contingent upon the first, she failed to do what was good in the LORD's sight. Believing the truth, which God's messengers tried so valiantly to persuade Israel to believe, could have provided Israel the strength to repent and obey the law of God. But the more desperate became Israel's situation, the more feverishly she provoked God's wrath, in seeking the favor and aid of other gods. Her lack of the knowledge of God was her destruction, as God, in profound grief, said, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:6).

Now, half the house that was divided against itself had collapsed around its idols and was carried away like scrap to distant dumping grounds. Little Judah, the only part of the house of

Jacob remaining, now stood alone against the winds. And as the frighteningly dark cloud which had fallen with such fury upon Israel continued to sweep southward, many must have doubted that this small remaining part of the household of faith would be able to stand.

BLURRED JUDGMENT

After destroying Israel, the Assyrian King Sennacherib ordered his war-hardened forces to continue their offensive in the land of Canaan. Meeting no significant opposition, the Assyrian army marched onto the pleasant hills of little Judah, wreaking havoc as they advanced toward Jerusalem, the “city of the Great King”. True and false prophets had long striven with one another as to whether these ruthless Assyrian soldiers were working for God or against Him. Now, in a bizarre twist, the Assyrian General Rabshekah would settle the issue. Standing just outside the walls of a terrified, besieged Jerusalem, Rabshekah’s testimony lent overwhelming weight to the true prophets’ words:

“Am I now come up without Jehovah against this place to destroy it? Jehovah said to me, ‘Go up against this land, and destroy it!’” 2Kings 18:25

Within Jerusalem’s walls, the righteous King Hezekiah, the now aged prophet Isaiah, and all Jerusalem sought the face of the LORD in fasting and prayer. Tales of the horrors of Samaria’s siege were still fresh in Jerusalem’s worried mind. At night, the flickering flames of a thousand Assyrian campfires swaggered and danced about Jerusalem in rude mockery of the inhabitants’ fears. By day, the relaxed, confident soldiers could be seen attending to the routine of camp as nonchalantly as a carnivorous bird may preen its ruffled feathers, waiting for a bleeding victim to cease its frantic and useless efforts to escape the sharp, gripping claws.

The intoxicating gratification of successive military conquests, however, blurred King Sennacherib’s judgment. Forgetting that it was Jehovah who had sent him against Israel and Judah, he stumbled into the pit of pride. And from that darkened abyss, he blasphemed the very God who had given nations into his hand, and claimed for himself the glory which belongs to no earthly king.

Sennacherib, King of Assyria, sent his servants to Jerusalem, unto Hezekiah, King of Judah, and unto all Judah that were at Jerusalem, saying, “Thus says Sennacherib, King of Assyria: Whereon do you trust, that you abide in the siege in Jerusalem? Does not Hezekiah persuade you to give yourselves over to die by famine and by thirst, saying, Jehovah our God will deliver us out of the hand of the King of Assyria?

“Know you not what I and my fathers have done to all the people of other lands? Were the gods of the nations of those lands able to deliver their lands out of my hand? Who was there among all the gods of those nations that my fathers utterly destroyed that could deliver his people out of my hand, that your God should be able to deliver you out of my hand? Now, therefore, let not Hezekiah deceive you, nor persuade you on this manner, neither yet believe him, for no god of any nation or kingdom was able to deliver his people out of my hand, and out of the hand of my fathers. How much less shall your God deliver you out of my hand?”

And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it. And Hezekiah went up unto the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD. And Hezekiah prayed unto Jehovah, saying, “O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, who dwells between the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear. Open your eyes, O LORD, and see, and hear all the words of Sennacherib, who has sent to reproach the living God.

“Of a truth, LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries, and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were no gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone. That is how they have destroyed them. Now, therefore, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you are the LORD, even you only.”

Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent unto Hezekiah, saying, “Thus says Jehovah, God of Israel: Whereas you have prayed to me against Sennacherib, King of Assyria, this is the word which Jehovah has spoken concerning you: ‘The virgin, the daughter of Zion, has despised you, and laughed you to scorn. The daughter of Jerusalem has shaken her head at you. Whom have you reproached and blasphemed? And against whom have you exalted your voice? Even against the Holy One of Israel. By your servants, you have reproached Jehovah and have said, ‘By the multitude of my chariots [not because Jehovah sent me] am I come up to the height of the mountains. . . . I have dug and drunk water, and with the soles of my feet have I dried up all the rivers of the besieged places.’

“Have you not heard long ago, how I [Jehovah] have done it, and of ancient times, that I have formed it? Now have I brought it to pass, that you should exist to lay waste defended cities into ruinous heaps. . . . [This is why] their inhabitants were of small power. . . . I know your abode, and your going out and your coming in, and your rage against me. Because your rage against me, and your tumult, is come up into my ears, I will put my hook in your nose, and my bridle in your lips, and I will turn you back by the way which you came!” excerpts from 2Kings 18-19; 2Chronicles 32; Isaiah 36-37

We can only imagine the anger which this message provoked in the Assyrian high command. Sennacherib himself must have been made livid by this insulting, taunting response to his demand for Hezekiah’s surrender. As darkness deepened and brought its spell of slumber upon the generals who camped around Jerusalem, they laid themselves down in their tents, no doubt, with but one thought in mind: to bring haughty Jerusalem to her knees before Assyria’s mighty gods and to make a public example of Hezekiah and the prophets who, so they thought, had so foolishly misled the King to put his trust in Jehovah. But as those mighty men laid themselves down that evening and drifted into sleep amid the somniferous crack of campfires and crickets, they could not have dreamed of the scene which, with the light of dawn, would greet their waking eyes, for

the angel of the LORD went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and eighty-five thousand. And when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. So, Sennacherib, King of Assyria, departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh.

Isaiah 37:36-37

It was a blow from which the Assyrian empire never recovered.

GRIM LESSON

Israel's failure to acknowledge God's hand in Assyria's military advances led to her downfall. Despite all that Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah said, God's people in Israel did not believe that God *would* destroy them. It was the same failure to acknowledge God's control over those same military successes which led to Assyria's downfall. Despite what the true prophets said, those heathen did not believe that Jehovah *could* destroy them. Too late, both Israel and Assyria learned the truth. And they both provided for little, lonely Judah a powerful, though woefully grim, lesson.

Before continuing with this history, we should pause to examine our own thoughts concerning Israel's destruction. Do we really believe that the pain and death inflicted upon Israel was the work of God against His own people? That is a question which, because of its enormous implications, requires of every saint an answer – but constrains us to prayerful study before we dare render one. Actually, it is not altogether correct to say that we must *give* the answer to that question. For the question is as old as suffering itself, and the answer is always already given. Therefore, it would be more correct to say that we must prayerfully prepare ourselves to *receive* the answer which in every turn of the Bible's pages confronts us. The people of Israel were called upon by the prophets of God to receive that answer and be saved from death, but they were pathetically unprepared. And from my experiences as a pastor and teacher, I have learned that, sadly, there exists among us now a large number of equally unprepared believers.

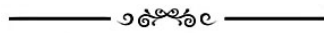
There is a phrase used by the prophets which is especially instructive if we can grasp its meaning. It is "receiving correction". By enjoining Israel to "receive correction", the prophets were calling upon Israel, first, to acknowledge that their sufferings were from God, second, to confess that God was righteous to afflict them because of their sins and, third, to turn from their error and do good in God's sight. Israel did not receive God's correction and do good in God's sight because false prophets had convinced the people that God was not responsible for the circumstances which confronted them. Believing that, what need could the people see for altering their lifestyles according to God's commandments?

We now are living in a time in which it has become increasingly unpopular to acknowledge the truth that Israel ignored. The dangers are obvious. When we fail to trust God to be God of our every moment, and believe instead that some other is determining the sufferings which we face, we cannot receive correction, for we will not believe that it is correction that we are receiving. Then, instead of receiving God's correction, we will denounce it (possibly even as being demonic), rebel against it, and in the end, find ourselves fighting against God.

We cannot say that Judah's deliverance was of God but Israel's destruction was not. We must not allow ourselves to be misled by those who teach that the blessings and pleasures of the saints are from God, while the sufferings of the saints are from some other source. That doctrinal stance, always available and attractive, betrays a warped perception both of life and of life's Creator. Though, at first, that doctrine seems to glorify God by removing Him from involvement in the hard, hurting times of our lives, it is actually a satanically inspired attempt to rob men's fear of and trust in God. It is an idolatrous, spiritually enervating persuasion. God is more than merely involved in the sufferings of His people; He is in authority over of those sufferings, either

to lighten those burdens that press upon us or to increase them. Understanding that truth is a very real part of the knowledge of God to which the Scriptures, through these accounts of Israel's history, call us.

But the lesson which Israel's fall supplies us is declared to our hearts in even clearer terms by the events which subsequently befell the little kingdom of Judah. May God open our hearts to hear His holy Word, for as the apostle Paul so wisely pointed out, these events are recorded for our admonition and instruction (1Cor. 10:11; Rom. 15:4).



CHAPTER 8

THE DIVIDED KINGDOM: THE FALL OF JUDAH

Although you, Israel, play the harlot, yet let not Judah offend!

HOSEA 4:15



MANASSEH

It would seem that for Judah and Jerusalem, their miraculous escape from the claws of the Assyrian beast would have prompted a long, long time of fear, thanksgiving, and devotion to God and His law, and for the remaining fifteen years of righteous Hezekiah's reign, this was true. Unfortunately, Hezekiah's successor was only twelve years old at Hezekiah's death, which means that he was born three years after the great deliverance from Assyria. And the significance of the event seemed completely lost to his little, twisted mind.

Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem, but he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, like the abominations of the heathen, whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had broken down, and he reared up altars for Baalim, and made groves, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them. Also, he built altars in the house of the LORD, whereof the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem shall my name be forever." And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. And he caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom. Also, he observed times, and used enchantments, and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit, and with wizards. He wrought much evil in

the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger. And he set a carved image, the idol which he had made, in the house of God, of which God had said to David and to Solomon his son, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen before all the tribes of Israel, will I put my name for ever. Neither will I make the feet of Israel move any more out of the land which I gave their fathers, only if they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them."

So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel. Moreover Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin wherewith he made Judah to sin, in doing that which was evil in the sight of the LORD. And the LORD spoke to Manasseh, and to His people, but they would not hearken.

excerpts from 2Kings 21 and 2Chronicles 33

When the boy Manasseh began his fifty-five year reign, the scars which God's Assyrian servants had left upon Judah were very nearly healed. At Manasseh's death, and principally because of his wretched life, the much deeper scars that God's Babylonian servants would inflict upon Judah were barely another fifty-five years away.

The nameless prophets who immediately succeeded Isaiah and his fellows risked their lives to proclaim God's displeasure with Manasseh:

And the LORD spoke by His servants the prophets, saying, "Because Manasseh, King of Judah has done these abominations . . . and has made Judah also to sin with his idols, therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'Behold, I am bringing such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah that whosoever hears of it, both his ears shall tingle. And I will . . . wipe Jerusalem as a man wipes a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down. And I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance and deliver them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies because they have done that which was evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day.'"

But they hearkened not. And Manasseh seduced them to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the children of Israel.

excerpts from 2Kings 21 and 2Chronicles 33

Judah's patient and merciful God was infuriated by Judah's ingratitude and ignorance. Even the greatest revival in Judah's entire history, twenty years after Manasseh's death, would fall short of quenching the hot displeasure that now burned in the Almighty's bosom. So very far from righteousness had Manasseh led Judah that the copy of Moses' law which was kept in Jerusalem's temple was laid aside and eventually lost. God's precepts were at first ignored, and then forgotten. It is possible that there was a fifty-year period, or longer, when God's law was never read or practiced at the temple which Solomon built. There may have lived and died an entire generation of Judean Israelites to whom, in large measure, the stories of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses were unknown. Manasseh's reign and the few years that followed were without question the darkest time in Judah's history. At Manasseh's death, this little kingdom was

entirely given to the worship of heathen gods. The voices that had denounced that idolatry had been silenced with the sword or driven into hiding.

JOSIAH'S REVIVAL

In his short-lived reign, Manasseh's son, Amon, proved to be as perverse as his father had been. In his old age, Manasseh had humbled himself, albeit weakly, to God's chastening hand (2Chron. 33:11-17),

but Amon trespassed more and more. And his servants conspired against him and slew him in his own house. . . . And the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead. 2Chronicles 33:23-25

Eight-year-old Josiah ascended to the throne of a nation whose hills were desecrated by idolatry. By the altars of fertility deities, as an act of worship, God's beloved people joined heathen travelers, or idolatrous priests, or anyone else who had the price, in ritual immorality. Babies that should have been reared in the study of God's commandments were instead laid upon the searing coals of Molech's altars, as a demonstration of faith in that blood-thirsty god of the Ammonites. Justice was nonexistent. It was every man for himself, and, as always in such cases, the poor were plundered and without judicial recourse.

But the spirit of these times was not to find a home in King Josiah's tender heart. What struggles of spirit and mind the youth suffered during his first seven years on the throne, we do not know. But in this eighth year, the sixteen-year-old King made a momentous decision, the eventual results of which he could not have imagined.

For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David. 2Chronicles 34:3

For four long years, until he was twenty years old, King Josiah, still without a copy of Moses' law to guide him, sought the face of King David's God. We are not told the details. Perhaps a prophet came out of his hiding place, now that Manasseh and Amon were dead, to help the young man. Probably, David's psalms and Solomon's proverbs had not been lost with the law and were available. Some faithful, aged men, possibly, were found to counsel Josiah in the ways of the LORD, as used to be practiced long ago. It had been sixty-nine years since Josiah's righteous great-grandfather, Hezekiah, had died, and might not it have seemed fantastic to this young King to be told of days when idols darkened none of Judah's holy hills, of days when the priesthood was pure and the temple used to honor no god but Jehovah? Might it not have strained his imagination as he was told of days when sodomites, harlots, witches, and the like were put to death rather than being paid to live, and of days when the poor and oppressed among the people found refuge, not scorn, in the courts of the king? One by one, these scenes entered into his searching mind, and they did not resemble Judah as Josiah or anyone in his generation had known it; nevertheless, these scenes found in his hungering spirit a resting place and became for Josiah the kind of haven of righteousness he very much wanted Judah again to be:

And in the twelfth year, he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images. 2Chronicles 34:3

The tentacles of spiritual corruption extended into virtually every corner of Judah. Having been allowed free growth for over half a century, the roots of that corruption had sunk deep and secure into Judah's heart. To rid Judah and Jerusalem of all vestiges of ungodliness would be a monumental task for the young king. Nevertheless, like a husbandman tearing into an overgrown, entangled vineyard, determined to make it live and bear fruit again, Josiah began jerking at the tenacious, entwined overgrowth of sin in his beloved Judah. Sincere as he was, however, his efforts, for the time being, were relatively ineffective.

Clearly, the young King needed help. He needed encouragement, too. The ancients could tell him he was doing the right thing, but Josiah needed more than that. He needed companions in his zeal, other inspired souls. He was embarking upon a course of action which hardly a person living in his time had ever witnessed, and probably not many had heard of, for it had been almost one hundred years since the young Hezekiah had begun his reign with similar dedication to God (2Kgs. 18:1-7). Certainly, to many of Josiah's contemporaries, Josiah seemed to be an impractical, foolishly idealistic dreamer, trying to live in the past. Josiah was twenty years old, resisting established schools of thought and behavior, defying and irritating the darkened spirits of most of Judah's inhabitants. And he needed help.

In the thirteenth year of his reign, the year immediately following the beginning of his struggle against idolatry, Josiah's help came, but in God's own peculiar, immaculately wise way. For He brought to Josiah's aid, not a respected elder, nor an experienced statesman, nor yet any of Judah's valiant fighting men, but another child, a boy from a family of priests who lived just northeast of Jerusalem, in the small town of Anathoth. It was a boy by the name of Jeremiah. At a later time, Jeremiah would record the moment of his call from God:

“Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the belly I knew you, and before you came forth out of the womb I sanctified you, and I ordained you to be a prophet to the nations. Then said I, ‘Ah, LORD God! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a child.’ But the LORD said to me, ‘Say not, “I am a child,” for you shall go to all that I shall send you, and whatsoever I command you, you shall speak. Be not afraid of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.’”
Jeremiah 1:4-8

So joined the child Jeremiah with the young King Josiah in the task of cleaning the vineyard of God, Josiah pulling at the stubborn tentacles of idolatry and lawlessness, and Jeremiah laboring to persuade the reluctant Judah to be willing to let them go. It was an enormously difficult undertaking. Judah's resistance to the revival of old ways was strong, as glimpses of Jeremiah's efforts bear witness:

“Thus says the LORD: Stand in the ways, and see! And ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and you shall have rest for your souls.”

But they said, “We will not walk therein.”

“[Thus says the LORD:] Hearken to the sound of the trumpet!”

But they said, “We will not hearken.”

Jeremiah 6:16-17

We can imagine the disdain which much of Judah must have felt for these two anointed youngsters. “Boy king and boy prophet. And both of them gone nuts over Jehovah. Where will

it all end?" It can hardly be doubted that some, remembering the assassination of Josiah's father, might even have considered whether, for the good of the nation, Josiah ought to experience the same end. It was a turbulent time, a stimulating time, a time of awakening to spiritual warfare. No longer did Jehovah's relegation to being one god among many go unquestioned. Josiah and Jeremiah, and their growing number of followers, saw to that.

Much like the message that Amos had proclaimed to lawless Israel 150 years earlier, the centerpiece of Jeremiah's message was a renewed proclamation of the incomparable majesty of Judah's Creator-God, and the foolishness of fear and worship of any other:

"Hear now this, O foolish people, and without understanding, who have eyes, and see not, who have ears, and hear not. Fear you not me? says the LORD. Will you not tremble at my presence, who has placed the sand for the bound of the sea? But this people has a revolting and a rebellious heart; they are revolted and gone. Neither say they in their heart, 'Let us fear Jehovah our God, who gives rain, both the former and the latter in its season.'

"Thus says the LORD: What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain? Pass over the isles of Chittim, and see, and send unto Kedar, and consider diligently, and see if there be such a thing. Has a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. But where are your gods that you have made? Let them arise, if they can save you in the time of your trouble. For according to the number of your cities are your gods, O Judah. Why would you contend with me? You all have transgressed against me, says the LORD. In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction. Your own sword has devoured your prophets, like a destroying lion. Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number.

"Thus shall you say unto them: The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth, even they shall perish from the earth, and from under these heavens. But Jehovah is the true God; He is the living God, and an everlasting King. At His wrath, the earth shall tremble, and the nations will not be able to abide His indignation. He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom, and He has stretched out the heavens by His discretion. When He utters His voice, there is a multitude of waters in the heavens, and He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth. He makes lightnings with rain, and brings forth the wind out of His treasures.

"There is none like you, O LORD. You are great, and your name is great in might. O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, so that you may be saved! How long shall your vain thoughts lodge with you? excerpts from Jeremiah

"THE PRIEST HAS GIVEN ME A BOOK"

For five years they labored, a maturing king, smooth-faced prophet boy, and an ever increasing number of converts to their message and their efforts. The hills of Judah were beginning to look as though they belonged to another time, a good time, long past. Jeremiah, with others now, was restoring a courage of conscience to the people while Josiah provided the

means of accomplishing what that conscience demanded. Reaching his eighteenth year on Judah's throne, the twenty-six-year-old king's developing confidence lent firmness to his undiminished zeal. Now, in commanding kingly authority, Josiah made a bold, startling move which would lead to the turning point in his life's battle against idolatry and godlessness. For it was in this year of his reign that

he sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, and Maaseiah the governor of the city, and Joah the son of Joahaz the recorder, to repair the house of the LORD his God. 2Chronicles 34:8

For over sixty years, Moses' book of the law had lain in some dusty corner of the temple, or maybe in a neglected room piled full of "junk", to make room for the images that Manasseh had erected in the holy place. The length of time it had been lost and forgotten, and the spiritual dullness which those lawless years had effected upon the people of Judah, can by no better means be demonstrated than by the unimpassioned reaction of Shaphan to its discovery.

Shaphan's reaction reminds me of the time that I, as a boy, found a valuable mid-19th century history book. It had been carelessly tossed with other "useless" stuff into a plywood box which sat on the floor of our poor neighborhood's only junk store. It was an interesting discovery, but not one that caused me any great excitement. After laying it down and walking away, I returned to look at it again and decided, after several minutes of inner debate, to pay the ten cents and take it home. After perusing its yellowed pages at the kitchen table, I placed it on a shelf in the pantry beside my arrowhead collection. It came up missing once, and I found it. It came up missing again, and I have never seen it since.

To be fair, though, to Shaphan (and to Hilkiyah the High Priest, who found the book and whose interest only a little surpassed Shaphan's), we should acknowledge that we expect, at the discovery of God's law, shouts of joy and thanksgiving and dancing and worship, because we know the value of the book. Shaphan didn't do any of that. He had never seen it before, never heard it read. In fact, no one in Shaphan's generation had. When he brought the book to the king, Shaphan mentioned it only after the "important" business, his report on the progress of the temple's restoration, was completed, and then he mentioned it almost as an afterthought:

And Shaphan carried the book to the king, and brought the King word back again, saying, "All that was committed to your servants, they do it. And they have gathered together the money that was [collected] in the house of the LORD, and have delivered it into the hand of the overseers, and to the hand of the workmen." Then Shaphan the scribe told the king, saying, "Hilkiyah the priest has given me a book." 2Chronicles 34:16-18

JOY AND TERROR

Something of Josiah's initial excitement is indicated by the fact that he immediately required Shaphan to read the book to him. Shaphan read, "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth," and Josiah listened, enraptured, to the story of his people's beginnings. No doubt, long into the night, Shaphan read by the flickering light of the palace candles, as Josiah listened in stunned silence to the revelation of the God he had so feebly known, yet struggled to serve. He learned of Creation and must have been stricken both by its profound implications and by its consonance with what Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and God's other prophets had been saying about Jehovah. What a help that book was to Josiah in determining which prophets were really

declaring the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! What a testimony was that book to the prophets who were really bearing God's message!

As Shaphan continued to read, Josiah learned of the faith of Abraham, and Josiah's own faith increased. He watched with his mind's eye as this patriarch of all the faithful wandered from distant Ur to this land of Canaan, this land where Baal was thought to rule over the heathen inhabitants. And Josiah learned, as Shaphan read, that Abraham's first act upon entering "Baal's territory" was to build an altar of sacrifice, not to Baal, but to "Jehovah, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth."

Josiah learned of Jacob's sufferings and well understood Jacob's seemingly endless quest for quietness and rest with God. Josiah wept at the story of Joseph, identified with his being misunderstood and maligned by his own brothers, and took courage in Joseph's steadfast confidence in God's power and purpose for every circumstance in his life. And had Moses actually persevered against the same spirits of idolatry which Josiah had, for these ten years now, fought? Why, Moses taught exactly the same doctrine that Jeremiah and a few others taught now! Oh, what exultation! What thankfulness and amazement! Josiah's heart must have leaped in him that night! And Shaphan continued to read.

As Shaphan continued, it became apparent that these thrilling stories of the men of greatest faith, found in Genesis and Exodus, only precede what is the heart of Moses' writings, the law itself. And what Josiah heard his servant Shaphan read from that part of the old and dusty scroll filled his heart with every bit as much terror as he had been filled with joy, moments before:

"Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it, that it may be well with you, and that you may increase mightily, as the LORD God of your fathers has promised you, in the land that flows with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel! Jehovah is our God, Jehovah alone! And you shall love Jehovah your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

"And it shall be, when the LORD your God shall have brought you into the land which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob . . . then beware lest you forget the LORD, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. You shall fear the LORD your God, and serve Him and shall swear by His name. You shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the people who are round about you (for the LORD your God is a jealous God among you) lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and destroy you from off the face of the earth."

excerpts from Deuteronomy 6

And Shaphan continued to read. . .

"And it shall come to pass, if you shall hearken diligently to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe and to do all His commandments which I command you this day, that the LORD your God will set you on high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come on you, and overtake you, if you will hearken unto the voice of the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your kine, and the flocks of your sheep. Blessed shall you be when

you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. The LORD shall establish you an holy people for Himself, as He has sworn to you, if you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. And all the people of the earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD; and they will be afraid of you. The LORD shall open to you His good treasure, the heaven to give the rain unto your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. And you shall lend unto many nations, and you shall not borrow. And the LORD shall make you the head, and not the tail, and you shall be above only, and you shall not be beneath, if you hearken unto the commandments of the LORD your God.”

Moses’ ancient farewell sermon continued, and Shaphan, with Josiah in the midnight stillness, continued to read it

“But it shall come to pass, if you will not hearken unto the voice of the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command you this day, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed you shall be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your land, the increase of your kine, and the flocks of your sheep. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. The LORD shall send upon you cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that you set your hand to do, until you be destroyed

“The LORD will make the pestilence cleave to you, until He has consumed you from off the land The LORD will smite you with a consumption, and with a fever, and with an inflammation, and with an extreme burning, and with the sword, and with blasting, and with mildew, and they will pursue you until you perish. The LORD will make the rain of your land powder and dust. From heaven shall it come down upon you until you be destroyed. And your carcass shall be meat for all fowls of the air, and for the beasts of the earth, and no man shall fray them away. The LORD will smite you with the botch of Egypt, and with the hemorrhoids, and with the scab, and with the itch, whereof you cannot be healed. The LORD will smite you with madness, and blindness, and astonishment of heart, and you will grope at noonday the way the blind man gropes in darkness, and you shall not prosper in your ways. And you shall be only oppressed and spoiled evermore, and no man will save you.

“You shall betroth a wife, and another man shall lie with her. You shall build a house, and you shall not dwell in it. You shall plant a vineyard and shall not gather the grapes thereof. The LORD shall smite you in the knees, and in the legs, with a sore botch that cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot unto the top of your head. The LORD shall bring you and your king (which you will set over you) unto a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there shall you serve other gods, wood and stone. And you shall become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword among all nations where the LORD will lead you. You shall beget sons and daughters, but you shall not enjoy them, for they shall go into captivity. And your eyes will look, and fail with longing for them all the day long. And there shall be no might in your hand.

“Moreover, all these curses shall come upon you, and shall pursue you, and overtake you, till you be destroyed because you hearken not unto the voice of the LORD your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you. Because you serve not the LORD your God with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things. Therefore shall you serve your enemies which the LORD shall send against you, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things. And He shall put a yoke of iron upon your neck until He has destroyed you.

“The LORD shall bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose tongue you will not understand, a nation of fierce countenance, which will not regard the person of the old, nor show favor to the young. And he will besiege you in all your gates until your high and fenced walls come down, wherein you trusted, throughout all your land. And he shall besiege you in all your gates throughout all your land, which the LORD your God has given you. And you shall eat the fruit of your own body, the flesh of your sons and of your daughters, which the LORD your God has given you, in the siege, and in the straitness wherewith your enemies will distress you.

“If you will not observe to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and fearful name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will make your plagues astonishing, and plagues of your seed, even great plagues, and of long continuance, and sore sicknesses of long continuance.

“Moreover, He will bring upon you all the diseases of Egypt, which you were afraid of, and they will cleave to you. Also every sickness and every plague which is not written in the book of this law, them will the LORD bring upon you until you be destroyed. And it shall come to pass, that as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good and to multiply you, so the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought. And you shall be plucked from off the land where you go to possess it. And your life shall hang in doubt before you, and you shall fear day and night, and shall have no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, ‘Would God it were evening!’ And at evening, you shall say, ‘Would God it were morning!’ for the fear of your heart wherewith you shall fear, and for the sight of your eyes which you shall see.”

excerpts from Deuteronomy 28

[And Moses said to Israel,] “I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore, choose life, that both you and your seed may live, that you may love the LORD your God, and that you may obey His voice, and that you may cleave to Him, for He is your life, and the length of your days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

Deuteronomy 30:19-20

Upon hearing these and the other last, strong words of Moses, Josiah tore his kingly robes in astonishment and fear, and humbled himself before the LORD. He knew that in every evil which the law forbade, his nation had been very guilty, and deserved every curse Moses described. He

summoned the high priest and elders and sent them to the prophetess, Huldah, who lived nearby, saying,

“Go enquire of the LORD for me, and for those who are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that is found, for great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out upon us because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do after all that is written in this book.”
2Chronicles 34:21

Huldah’s response to the king’s messengers confirmed Josiah’s fears:

“Thus says the LORD God of Israel: Tell the man that sent you to me, ‘Thus says the LORD: Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the curses that are written in the book which they have read before the King of Judah, because they have forsaken me and have burned incense to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands. Therefore my wrath shall be poured out upon this place, and it shall not be quenched.’

“And as for the King of Judah who sent you to enquire of the LORD, so shall you say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the words which you have heard: Because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words against this place and against the inhabitants thereof, and humbled yourself before me, and rent your clothes and wept before me, I have even heard you also, says the LORD. Behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, neither shall your eyes see all the evil that I will bring upon this place, and upon the inhabitants of the same.’” So, they brought the King word again.

2Chronicles 34:22-28

Where genuine fear of God dwells, fear of men or other gods cannot. And if there still lingered in Josiah’s youthful breast a timidity or reluctance to challenge the idolatrous ways of Judah, it dissipated before the fear of God as morning fog is dissipated by the rising sun. His zeal, which had seemed so forceful before, was now weak compared to the flames which hereafter raged in his soul. If Manasseh had filled Judah with wickedness, Josiah would now flood it with righteousness. No longer a searching, struggling youth, Josiah’s commandments now exhibited an established heart, an enlightened mind, and an utter fearlessness of men or their vanities which nothing but the fear of God can bring.

And the King sent, and they gathered unto him all the elders of Judah and of Jerusalem. And the King went up into the house of the LORD, and all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests, and the Levites, and the prophets, and all the people, both small and great. And he read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the LORD. . . . And the King stood in his place, and he made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD, and to keep His commandments, and His testimonies, and His statutes, with all his heart, and with all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant which are written in this book. And he caused all that were present in Jerusalem . . . to stand to it.

excerpts from 2Kings 23 and 2Chronicles 34

King Josiah would not live long enough to see the powerful, lingering effect which his display of devotion to Jehovah would have on the lives of certain of Judah's children who were made to stand before the LORD that day. But standing in wide-eyed wonder amid the multitude, or possibly being held in the arms of their parents, were children whose names would, after Josiah's death, become synonymous with righteousness and faith. It is well within the borders of reason to assume that a little boy named Daniel was there, with Buzi the priest, holding his infant son, Ezekiel, who twenty-eight years later in a distant land would be anointed to be a prophet to the children of God in captivity. A younger pauper named Mordecai may have fidgeted about the fringes of the crowd for a better view of the king, but his beautiful cousin, who would become Queen Esther, was still years from being born. And three Hebrew children, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, probably heard the words of the law read aloud that day, not knowing that in fifteen short years, they would stand as captives before Babylonian lords and be given new names, their more famous Babylonian names of Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego.

These all, with Jeremiah, may well have witnessed Josiah's zeal for God that day, which zeal was intensified by every new convert to its cause and by every new prophetic voice, such as the mournful voice of Zephaniah, which reminded Josiah of the sentence of death which was still upon his nation:

"Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city! She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to her God. . . . The great day of the LORD is near! It is near, and is hastening greatly, even the voice of the day of the LORD. The mighty man shall cry there bitterly.

"Gather yourselves together! Yea, gather yourselves together, O nation not desired! Before the decree bring forth, before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD come upon you. Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have wrought His judgment. Seek righteousness; seek meekness. It may be you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger." excerpts from Zephaniah

Josiah did just that, with every fiber of his being. Having renewed the covenant between the people and God, Josiah left no stone unturned in his effort to do God's will.

And the King commanded Hilkiah the high priest, and the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the door, to bring forth out of the temple of the LORD³ all the vessels that were made for Baal, and for the grove, and for all the host of heaven. And he burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron, and carried the ashes of them unto Bethel. And he exterminated the idolatrous priests, whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah, and in the places round about Jerusalem; them also that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the host of heaven.

And he brought out the grove from the house of the LORD, outside Jerusalem, to the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and stamped it small to powder, and

³ Just how deeply the nation had fallen into sin is indicated by the abominations which were still being practiced at God's temple, though Josiah had already been laboring for ten years to know and to serve God.

cast the powder thereof upon the graves of the children of the people. And he broke down the houses of the sodomites that were by the house of the LORD, where the women wove hangings for the grove.

And he defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the children of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech. And he took away the horses that the kings of Judah had given to the sun . . . and burned the chariots of the sun with fire. And the altars that were on the top of the upper chamber of Ahaz, which the kings of Judah had made, and the altars which Manasseh had made in the two courts of the house of the LORD, did the King beat down and break them from thence, and cast the dust of them into the brook Kidron. And the high places that were before Jerusalem, which were on the right hand of the mount of corruption [the Mount of Olives], which Solomon the King of Israel had built for Ashtoreth, the abomination of the Zidonians, and for Chemosh, the abomination of the Moabites, and for Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites, did the King defile.⁴ And he broke in pieces the images, and cut down the groves, and filled their places with the bones of men. excerpts from 2Kings 23

But Josiah's zeal was not to be contained within the borders of little Judah. From Mount Zion into the territory of the north, where only scattered remnants of his fellow Israelites remained, marched the determined king, the prophecies of Jeremiah toward these scattered survivors of Assyrian captivity serving only to fuel his impassioned spirit:

“Return, O backsliding Israel, says the LORD, and I will not cause my anger to fall upon you, for I am merciful, says the LORD, and I will not keep anger for ever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God . . . and that you have not obeyed my voice, says the LORD. Turn, O backsliding children, says the LORD, . . . and I will take you, one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion, and I will give you pastors according to my heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.” Jeremiah 3:12-15

Boldly, King Josiah came upon the altars to which Israel had long ago turned for help in her last, desperate hours, and Josiah stamped each one to dust, after that he had burned upon those altars the bones of the idolatrous priests who served them:

And all the houses also of the high places that were in the cities of Samaria, which the kings of Israel had made to provoke the LORD to anger, Josiah took away. . . . And he slew all the priests of the high places that were there upon the altars, and burned men's bones upon them, and returned to Jerusalem. 2Kings 23:19-20

The highlight of the revival, however, was yet to come. For Josiah now called for the keeping of the Passover. It was to be the greatest celebration of the Passover feast ever held in the land of Canaan. Every Israelite who could be found, even from the wasted northern territory, was commanded to attend. For the poor who could not afford to slay a lamb for the Passover, Josiah provided 30,000 lambs from his own flocks. It could not be remembered when

⁴ Solomon's altars, just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, would have been within sight from God's temple. They had been in use for centuries, surviving even Hezekiah's great revival almost hundred years prior to this one.

Jerusalem's streets had been so crowded. It could not be remembered when such celebration filled the hearts of so many.

Surely, there was not held such a Passover, from the days of the judges that judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel, nor of the kings of Judah. 2Kings 23:22

It would, of course, be wrong to assume that there were not strongholds of resistance remaining in Judah. Many who joined in the festivities with Josiah were doing so only to avoid provoking the young king's wrath (cp. Jer. 3:10). But Josiah had inspired a true awakening and a genuine revival, so that glimmers of hope were even raised that God would change His plans for Judah's destruction. And all the more did those glimmers shine when God held out to Jerusalem's inhabitants a precious, golden opportunity for reprieve:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, "Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Let all Judah hear the word of the LORD who enter in at these gates to worship the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. . . . For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, if you oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt, then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land I gave to your fathers, forever and ever." Jeremiah 7:1-3, 5-7

This prophecy, and others like it, must have sparked excitement and encouraged some hearts to hope that disaster might be avoided, but probably not many. In order for hope to be renewed, there must first have been hope lost. In order for these prophecies of hope to excite the people, the earlier prophecies which made disaster seem inevitable must also have been believed. And there is no evidence to suggest that the earlier prophecies of destruction had caused any great consternation in Judah.

The vast majority of Israelites probably were celebrating the Passover because everybody else was doing it, rather than because of a personal devotion to their Creator. There was a small number of wise and righteous men who were guiding this ignorant nation into a style of life which could result in happiness, peace, and blessing. But as surely as those righteous few existed, there was on the other extreme a group whose hearts were decidedly against this revival of old ways. Most of the inhabitants of Judah stood somewhere in between. But those who were as committed to the fear of many gods as Josiah was committed to One dared not openly resist the revival. Josiah's influence served to silence the false prophets so that the people could hear Jehovah's voice and see His ways and, would God permit it, be given time both to learn godly living and to realize the blessings which godly living brings.

Josiah himself must have been ecstatic over Jeremiah's prophecy of hope that the nation might be forgiven its error and spared of God's wrath. If there was anything which could have made Josiah's efforts more impassioned, that wonderful hope could. And in the years following, every secret nook of idolatry which could be uncovered was destroyed:

Moreover, the workers with familiar spirits, and the wizards, and the images, and the idols, and all the abominations that were spied in the land of Judah and Jerusalem did

Josiah exterminate, that he might perform the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilkiyah the priest found in the house of the LORD. And like unto him was there no king before him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him. 2Kings 23:24-25

It was a time of hope, a time of justice, a time of inspired prophetic labor, when Judah's future swayed in the balance.

QUESTIONS

Josiah was thirty-nine years old when Pharaoh Necho, with his army, passed through the western borders of Judah, on the way north to combat the crumbling remnants of the once mighty Assyrian Empire. We don't know why Josiah decided to confront the Egyptian king. Neither do we know why Josiah failed to heed Pharaoh's timely warning, delivered to Josiah by the hand of Egyptian messengers:

“What have I to do with you, O king of Judah? I come not against you this day, but against the house wherewith I have war, for God commanded me to make haste. Forbear from meddling with God, who is with me, that He destroy you not.” 2Chronicles 35:21

There are so many questions left unanswered. Why did Josiah not heed the warning? Why was Josiah not cautioned by one of his own prophets not to do battle with Necho? Why didn't Josiah inquire of the LORD in His temple? Nevertheless, whatever the unknowns, it is known that there in the green, pleasant valley of Megiddo, the flame which had ignited fires of revival in Judah was abruptly extinguished, when a storm of Egyptian arrows rained upon the chariot of Judah's righteous king.

And the King said to his servants, “Have me away, for I am sore wounded.” His servants therefore took him out of that chariot and put him in the second chariot that he had. And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died, and was buried in one of the sepulchers of his fathers. And all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. 2Chronicles 35:23-24

If Josiah had lived a long life, Judah could have had time to become settled in the worship of Jehovah and satisfied without idolatry. Manasseh and Amon, combined with the first twelve years of the boy Josiah's reign, provided Judah with sixty-nine years to sink into the pits of debauchery, injustice, and idolatry. Josiah had tried for nineteen short years to pull Judah out, and only the last thirteen were with full assurance and authority. It hadn't been long enough. Josiah had cleared God's vineyard of clinging, evil plants, but he had not had enough time to dig up all the roots. And almost immediately upon his death, the deceptively lovely blossoms of sin began to reappear. The bitter, bitter fruit would shortly follow.

Among the most distressed of Josiah's mourners was, of course, the still young Jeremiah. He knew that more time was needed. He knew, better than Josiah had known, that as completely as Josiah had cleansed Judah's hills of idols, the cleansing of Judah's heart from idolatry was far from complete. But even though Jeremiah knew this, the swiftness of Judah's return to spiritual darkness must have stunned even him. It was almost as though Josiah had never lived. The

people, including Josiah's own sons, seemed to have understood nothing of what had just taken place.

In just twenty-three years, Judah would be a wasted, ravaged land, and nothing but crumbled walls and cold ashes would crown the hill upon which the holy city and her sacred temple now rested.

THE LAST FOUR KINGS

1. Jehoahaz

Passing over Eliakim, Josiah's oldest son, the people chose Eliakim's younger brother Jehoahaz to be their king (2Chron. 36:1). But three months later, the same Pharaoh that had killed Josiah took Jehoahaz in chains to Egypt, where he died (2Kgs. 23:34), as Jeremiah had prophesied (Jer. 22:10-12). For the remaining twenty-two years of Judah's life, the little nation would not again be free from foreign domination.

2. Jehoiakim (Eliakim)

Pharaoh Necho immediately imposed upon Judah a heavy tax (2Kgs. 23:33; 2Chron. 36:3) and set up Josiah's oldest but evil-hearted son, Eliakim, as a puppet king in Judah, whose principal responsibility seems to have been to oversee the collection of those taxes (2Kgs. 23:35). As a demonstration of his absolute authority over Eliakim's life, Necho then changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim.

In the early days of Jehoiakim's eleven-year reign, Jeremiah was sent by the LORD to the house of the King with this message for Jehoiakim:

“Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah who sits upon the throne of David, you, and your servants, and your people that enter in by these gates. Shall you reign because you surround yourself in cedar? Did not your father [Josiah] eat and drink, and do judgment and justice, and then it was well with him? He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him. Was not this to know me? says the LORD. But your eyes and your heart are not but for your covetousness, and for to shed innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence, to do it.

“Thus says the LORD: Execute judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, and do no wrong. Do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place. For if you do this thing indeed, then there shall enter in by the gates of this house kings sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, he, and his servants, and his people. But if you will not hear these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.”

excerpts from Jeremiah 22

Some of Judah's princes gave heed to Jeremiah's words, but others, and Jehoiakim himself, “did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD his God” (2Chron. 36:5). As for Jeremiah, he was sent to the temple, this time to plead with the religious leaders and all who worshipped there in the house of God at Jerusalem:

“Thus says the LORD: If you will not hearken to me, to walk in my law, which I have set before you, to hearken to the words of the prophets, whom I sent unto you, both rising up early and sending them (but you have not hearkened), then I will make this house like Shiloh [a God-forsaken, former holy place], and will make this city a curse to all the nations of the earth.”
Jeremiah 26:4-6

The reaction of the listeners to Jeremiah’s words has an eerie, evil quality, especially when it is considered that just months previously, those same listeners must have submissively followed the voice of Josiah as he led the congregation in prayer and praise to God:

Now it came to pass, when Jeremiah had made an end of speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, that the priests and the prophets and all the people took him, saying, “You shall surely die! Why have you prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate without an inhabitant?’” And all the people were gathered against Jeremiah in the house of the LORD.
Jeremiah 26:8-9

Upon hearing of these things, the princes in Jehoiakim’s house convened a special session of court to try Jeremiah for his life. And when they had all taken their places,

then spoke the priests and the prophets to the princes and to all the people, saying, “This man is worthy to die, for he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your ears.”

Then spoke Jeremiah to all the princes and to all the people, saying, “The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city all the words that you have heard. Therefore, now, amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the LORD your God, and the LORD will repent Him of the evil that He has pronounced against you. As for me, behold, I am in your hand. Do with me as seems good and meet unto you. But know for certain, that if you put me to death, you will surely bring innocent blood upon yourselves, upon this city, and upon its inhabitants. For, of a truth, the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears.”
Jeremiah 26:11-15

Jeremiah was defended by “certain of the elders of the land”, who reminded the court and the people that the prophet Micah had in his day prophesied that God would destroy Jerusalem, and yet, King Hezekiah let him live. The court of princes and the people were persuaded by these arguments to acquit Jeremiah of the charges against him, ruling against the priests and the prophets (Jer. 26:16).

But this story of Jeremiah’s escape from the death penalty is immediately followed by the story of another faithful prophet, Urijah, who was put to death for prophesying as Jeremiah did (Jer. 26:20-23). The mood in Judah was quickly, inexorably shifting away from the obedience to Moses’ law which Josiah was able to inspire, and there certainly was no lack of prophets willing to proclaim that Josiah’s premature death was a judgment of the gods, perhaps including Jehovah Himself, for his foolish attempt to revive outmoded beliefs.

The balance of world power was also shifting, as Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian kingdom vanquished the remains of the Assyrian Empire and then moved south toward the land of

Canaan. To Jehoiakim and the kings of other nearby nations and city-states, Jeremiah delivered what amounted to a demand for them to surrender to the mighty Babylonian king:

“Thus says the LORD: . . . I have made the earth, and the man and the beast that are upon the ground, by my great power and by my outstretched arm, and I have given it to whom it seems right in my eyes. And now, I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon, my servant, and the beasts of the field have I given him also to serve him.

“And it shall come to pass, that the nation and kingdom which will not serve the same Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, and that will not put their neck under the yoke of the King of Babylon, that nation will I punish, says the LORD, with the sword and with the pestilence until I have consumed them by his hand.

“Therefore do not hearken to your prophets, nor to your diviners, nor to your dreamers, nor to your enchanters, nor to your sorcerers, who speak to you saying, ‘You shall not serve the King of Babylon!’ for they prophesy a lie to you.”

excerpts from Jeremiah 27

But try as he may, Jeremiah was not able by prophetic utterance to evoke from his countrymen the fear of and allegiance to Jehovah, *as the law revealed Him to be*, which Josiah by kingly authority had been able to demand. With increasing loneliness, as his fellows either were slain or fell victim to the spirit of their times, Jeremiah suffered through the spiritual warfare of despair, frustration, humiliation, and an unrelenting dread for what certainly now lay ahead for Judah.

The more swiftly the nation plummeted back into the depths of spiritual corruption, the more earnestly Jeremiah strove to stop them. And the more earnestly he strove, the more dangerous to the nation he was made to appear by the polished, professional prophets and the confident, calculating clergy of his day. He lived with death threats, even from his own family and friends (Jer. 11:18-21; 12:6; 18:18). Those he knew best watched his every move, hoping for a mistake on his part for which he could be condemned (Jer. 20:10). Virtually every person in Jerusalem cursed him when they saw him (Jer. 15:10), and to be seen in public with Jeremiah would have been considered a great embarrassment.

There is a heroism that men do not value, indeed, do not even acknowledge. It is attained only by the noblest spirits. It is the heroism which makes a man no one's hero. The more that Jeremiah loved and gave himself for his fellows, the more he was despised by them. But from God's point of view, it was the people who were unworthy of Jeremiah's presence, not vice versa. Accordingly, He forbade Jeremiah to attend any social functions, such as funerals and weddings (Jer. 16:5-9). Moreover, Jeremiah was forbidden by God to marry and have children, thus to be spared the agony of the suffering and death which God had determined for all the families of Judah (Jer. 16:1-4). No prophet ever suffered, from childhood to the grave, more disgrace and loneliness than did faithful, tender-hearted Jeremiah, who, despite being so abused, dearly loved and wept for his people and never desired to see the harm that he knew would surely befall the nation.

The people did not understand that Jeremiah's refusal to attend their solemn assemblies and their religious celebrations was largely because his heart could not bear to see their delusions furthered by the messages of the other prophets. It all just seemed, to Jeremiah, a mockery of God rather than worship (Jer. 15:17). The pain of constant scorn was, in Jeremiah's words, "perpetual, and my wound incurable." Succumbing momentarily to the bitterness of seeing deceivers honored and admired, he spoke angrily to the LORD, "Will you be altogether to me as a liar, and as waters that fail?" It was the same bitterness felt by Jonah when his God-given prophecies of Nineveh's destruction did not, by the grace of God, come to pass. For this error, God demanded repentance on Jeremiah's part if Jeremiah wanted to continue as God's messenger of hope to the nation (Jer. 15:15-21). And it was love for both God and the nation which bowed Jeremiah's heart and enabled him to take again upon his weary shoulders the burden of the word of the LORD.

Emboldened by Josiah's death, men who had all along resented the revival easily persuaded the people to embrace, as one would embrace an old friend, the spiritual darkness with which they had once been so familiar. Jehoiakim surrounded himself with prophets who prophesied what he wanted to hear; namely, that Judah and Jerusalem were inviolable, that God would never let Jerusalem be destroyed for David's sake and because the temple was there. Hadn't God's destruction of Assyria at Jerusalem's very doorstep proved that? Even Jeremiah agreed that a heathen conquest of Jerusalem had once been unthinkable (Lam. 4:12).

Now, with his assertion that the unthinkable event was all but certain, Jeremiah did not fit in with the confident air of his time. Amid the growing number of prophets who promised the King and the princes prosperity and peace, Jeremiah's call for repentance and his warnings of God's wrath now seemed increasingly naive and outdated. The priests saw the temple redecorated with idols and repopulated with temple prostitutes, and were pleased. Jeremiah could see nothing but a vision of smoldering, crumbled ruins, and was heartbroken. The sound of disciplined, rhythmic chants to Baal and to the "queen of heaven", the sensuous body movements of temple prostitutes, and emotion-packed wails for Tammuz echoed once again down the streets of the holy city, and the prophets of success and victory hailed it as a long-awaited liberation from the fanatic, antiquated views of the dead King Josiah. But the sound which Jeremiah heard was quite of a different nature. That sound did not yet echo in Jerusalem's streets. For hundreds of miles northward, the wheels of Nebuchadnezzar's chariots, victorious over Pharaoh Necho's army, were rumbling along the highways to the South. How gladly Jeremiah would have torn away his flesh, that his fellows could have seen the grotesque scenes of destruction which by God's Spirit were being exposed to his soul, but he could not. He could not convince them of the reality of the things which he saw in spirit. Even when reports came to the city from the northern territories that Nebuchadnezzar's army was moving southward, the priests and prophets maintained their foolish confidence that they were sheltered from harm by the promises of God.

Only three years after Josiah's death, Jeremiah, with all Jerusalem, watched the disciplined Babylonian soldiers pitch their tents around Jerusalem. This time, there would be no divine intervention. Jehoiakim, possibly influenced by Jeremiah and the righteous elders of Judah, soon surrendered, and because he did surrender, God allowed Jerusalem to stand. Nevertheless, Jehoiakim had to pay a heavy ransom to Nebuchadnezzar, even surrendering some of the golden vessels of the house of God (Dan. 1:2). In addition to this, Nebuchadnezzar commanded young,

intelligent males to be taken from Judah to Babylon, there to be made eunuchs and trained for three years in “the learning and the language” of his people (Dan. 1:3-5). Among the captives at that time were

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, to whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names. For he gave to Daniel the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego. Daniel 1:7

While these young men were being trained in the wisdom of Babylon, Jeremiah was, at God’s direction, having all the prophecies which he had ever spoken to be written into a book. “It may be”, said the LORD to Jeremiah,

“that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do to them, that they may return every man from his evil way so that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.” Jeremiah 36:1-3

Jeremiah’s book did stir the hearts of some who heard it read (Jer. 36:9-20), but when it was read to stubborn Jehoiakim, he contemptuously cut it to pieces after he had heard only a small part “and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed” (Jer. 36:21-23). Moreover, Jehoiakim commanded both Baruch and Jeremiah to be arrested, “but the LORD hid them” (Jer. 36:26).

Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah saying, “Take again another roll, and write in it all the former words that were in the first roll which Jehoiakim the King of Judah has burned. And you shall say to Jehoiakim, King of Judah, Thus says the LORD: You have burned this roll, saying, Why has [Jeremiah] written therein, saying, ‘The King of Babylon shall certainly come and destroy this land and shall cause to cease from thence man and beast?’ Therefore, thus says the LORD concerning Jehoiakim, King of Judah: . . . I will punish him, and his seed, and his servants for their iniquity, and I will bring upon them, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the men of Judah all the evil that I have pronounced against them, but they hearkened not.”

Then took Jeremiah another roll and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah, who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim, King of Judah, had burned in the fire. And there were added to them many like words.

Jeremiah 36:27-32

While Jeremiah and Baruch were being hid by God from Jehoiakim’s soldiers so that another scroll could be made, in distant Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar was raging over the inability of his wise men to interpret for him an incredible dream, the details of which he could not remember:

For this cause, the King was angry and very furious, and he commanded to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. And the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain, and they sought Daniel and his fellows to be slain.

Then Daniel went in, and desired of the King that he would give him time, and that he would show the King the interpretation. Then Daniel went to his house, and he made the thing known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, that they would desire

mercies from the God of heaven concerning this secret, so that Daniel and his fellows should not perish with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. Then was the secret revealed to Daniel in a night vision. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven.

Daniel 2:12-13, 16-19

Daniel proceeded to the King's palace, where he not only described and interpreted the profound dream which Nebuchadnezzar had forgotten, but he also told Nebuchadnezzar what he had been thinking before he fell asleep and dreamed that dream (Dan. 2:29-45)!

Then the King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face and worshipped Daniel, and commanded that they should offer an oblation and sweet odors to him. The King answered Daniel and said, "Of a truth it is, that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a Revealer of secrets, seeing you could reveal this secret." Then the King made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon. Then Daniel requested of the King, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel sat in the gate of the King.

Daniel 2:46-49

Part of the dream which Daniel interpreted involved Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian kingdom, and it was in perfect consonance with what Jeremiah was trying to persuade Jehoiakim in Jerusalem to believe. Spoke Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar,

"You, O King, are a King of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. And wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven has He given into your hand, and He has made you ruler over them all."

Daniel 2:37-38

Nebuchadnezzar had not of his own power become ruler over the Jews; rather, he was Jehovah's unwitting servant, doing only what God had determined should be done. This is the understanding that saved Daniel and his friends from death. This is the understanding which prevented the restless spirits of bitterness and rebellion from finding harbor in their hearts. They understood that disrespect or rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar was tantamount to disrespect and rebellion against God. Certainly, they feared Nebuchadnezzar, but only because they feared God. Whenever Nebuchadnezzar's commandments contradicted God's commandments, they unhesitatingly refused to obey him, and bluntly told him so, as when Nebuchadnezzar commanded them to worship his ninety-foot-high golden image, and threatened to cast them into a furnace if they refused:

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the King, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not reticent to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King. But if not, be it known unto you, O King, that we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image that you have set up."

Daniel 3:16-18

They spoke this plainly to the great King Nebuchadnezzar for exactly the same reason that they bowed down at his feet; to wit, they wanted to please God. It wasn't to Nebuchadnezzar the heathen king that they bowed anyway; it was to Nebuchadnezzar the servant of their God. On

the other hand, back in Jerusalem, the prophets were courting the fickle favor of both Jehoiakim and the people with ever bolder promises of deliverance from Babylonian dominance. Tragically, Jehoiakim was persuaded to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar and to refuse to render the required tribute (2Kgs. 24:1).

3. Jehoiachin

As the Babylonian army approached Jerusalem to quell the rebellion, Jehoiakim died suddenly, thirty-six years old. His body was carted outside the city and, unmourned, was unceremoniously dumped, as Jeremiah had predicted (Jer. 22:18-19). Perhaps, the people blamed Jehoiakim for provoking Nebuchadnezzar's wrath and for Judah's troubles with neighboring kingdoms (2Kgs. 24:2-4). He certainly ended his eleven-year reign unloved.

Jehoiakim's young son, Jehoiachin, assumed the control of a nation in dire straits (2Kgs. 24:8-9; 2Chron. 36:9-10). He surrendered to the besieging Babylonian army in short order (2Kgs. 24:10-12), ending a reign of only three months and ten days (2Chron. 36:9). Once again, Jerusalem was left standing, but Nebuchadnezzar took the young King Jehoiachin to Babylon and imprisoned him, where he would spend the next thirty-seven years (2Kgs. 25:27-30). Also taken captive were Jehoiachin's mother, his wives, his servants, his officers, 1,000 craftsmen and smiths, all 7,000 of Judah's "men of might", and 10,000 more of Jerusalem's populace. Besides the human captives, Nebuchadnezzar's generals

carried out from there all the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold which Solomon, King of Israel, had made in the temple of the LORD. 2Kings 24:13

Included in the huge number of captives taken from Jerusalem this time were two who would play important roles for God's people in years to come: a young priest named Ezekiel and a poor man named Mordecai. As for Jeremiah, he was left behind in Jerusalem, a prophet to a nation of rapidly decreasing integrity.

4. Zedekiah (Mattaniah)

Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin on Judah's throne with Josiah's last son, Mattaniah. The Babylonian King changed Mattaniah's name to Zedekiah, and as an act of submission, Zedekiah swore an oath before God that he would not rebel (2Chron. 36:12-13; Ezek. 17:11-14).

Only nine years old at his father's death, Zedekiah was now twenty-one, a weak-willed, unstable young man, in need of guidance. There was no lack of prophets who were willing to give it to him. When Jeremiah approached the young King with a sincere plea for him to serve Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 27:12-13), the other prophets demanded, also in the name of the LORD, "You shall not serve the King of Babylon!" (Jer. 27:14).

When Jeremiah prophesied that the remaining vessels of the temple "shall be carried to Babylon" (Jer. 27:21-22), the other prophets cried, "Heresy!" and prophesied that, instead, the holy vessels which had recently been carried away would "shortly be brought again from Babylon" (Jer. 21:16).

Prophets of Success and Victory

Who was the young King to believe, Jeremiah or the prophets of success and victory? He was torn between the two. He hated the burden of being Babylon's vassal. And if the LORD was speaking by these prophets of success and victory over Babylon, wouldn't he do well to rebel and hope for divine deliverance? But if Jeremiah was telling the truth, then God would make things even worse for Judah if he rebelled. But, again, if he didn't rebel, he would have to face the priests and prophets and princes who remained with him in Jerusalem, and he was not a courageous young man. While he vacillated, the fierce spiritual warfare for his mind raged with ever greater intensity.

It is possible that news from Babylon also arrived at this time which made the prospects for a successful rebellion seem good, news that King Nebuchadnezzar had lost his mind and was now eating grass in the royal pastures, his fingernails grown long "like birds' claws" and his hair "grown like eagles' feathers" (Dan. 4). But with that news, was it also reported that Daniel, counselor to Nebuchadnezzar, had warned him that God was about to give him the mind of a beast for seven years, until he learned (as Jerusalem's prophets needed to learn) that any man's authority to rule on the earth was given to him by Jehovah, tiny Judah's God?

Jerusalem's prophets of success and victory no doubt denounced Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin's two previous surrenders to Babylonian sieges as acts of cowardice, ignorance, and lack of faith in God. They could point to the word of God spoken by Isaiah long ago concerning Jerusalem when Assyria besieged the holy city:

"I will defend this city to save it for my own sake, and for my servant David's sake."
Isaiah 37:35

"Read your Scriptures!" they would have demanded, in an air of righteous indignation. "Wasn't Israel destroyed because they forsook the LORD and refused to come any longer to this holy city to worship at His holy temple? And now, will He destroy the very place which He Himself inhabits? Blasphemy!"

What would the young King do? If the prophets of success were right, it was not God, as Jeremiah maintained, who had given to Nebuchadnezzar the captives and the holy vessels which were carried away from Jerusalem. Rather, Judah's own kings had in unbelief given them away by surrendering to the Babylonians instead of trusting God to defend His city against the foreign invaders. And if that were true, then the longer Zedekiah postponed rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar, the more likely it was that the gods, including Jehovah, would cause Judah to suffer even greater loss. We can be assured that this thought weighed with increasing heaviness upon Zedekiah's mind each time he set his seal on sacks of tribute money and watched them being loaded on pack animals for the long journey to Babylon.

Zedekiah must have felt the scornful gaze of the prophets with his every act of submission to Babylon's power. He knew that the people considered the imprisoned Jehoiachin to be the real King of Judah. He knew that he was perceived more as a puppet governor than as king of the nation. Timid and indecisive, young Zedekiah was in a fearfully difficult situation. Sensing Zedekiah's pusillanimity, Jerusalem's princes grew bolder with their demands. Zedekiah could hardly have failed to sense the very real threat of assassination, a threat which grew greater with every new collection of tax for Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem's leaders, priests, prophets, and

princes were determined that Judah would be free from heathen rule. But against the grain of Zedekiah's spinelessness, and standing strong before the rising tide of rebellion among Jerusalem's inhabitants, was the despised, determined Jeremiah.

“Bring your necks under the yoke of the King of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live! Why will you die? . . . Do not listen to the prophets who prophesy to you, saying, ‘You shall not serve the King of Babylon,’ for they prophesy a lie to you. I have not sent them, says the LORD, yet they prophesy a lie in my name. I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon, my servant . . . and all nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son's son . . . seventy years.”

Jeremiah 27:12-15a, 6

“Thus says the LORD: After seventy years be accomplished at Babylon, I will visit you and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall you call upon me, and you shall go and pray to me, and I will hear you. And you shall seek me, and find me, when you search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, says the LORD. And I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD. And I will bring you again to the place from which I caused you to be carried away captive.”

Jeremiah 29:10-14

Since shortly after Josiah's death, now fourteen years past, Jeremiah had, at God's command, worn about his neck a heavy wooden yoke (Jer. 27:1-2). It gave Jeremiah a distinctive appearance as he walked through the marketplaces, to be sure.

Everyone understood that it represented Jeremiah's message of Judah's subjection to Babylon. At gatherings in the temple, the prophets of success and victory could fervently prophesy of freedom for the nation, but it must have irritated them to no end and put a cold damper on their fervor to have standing in their midst a somber Jeremiah wearing his heavy wooden yoke. It was precisely such a scene which is described by Jeremiah in the 28th chapter of his book:

And it came to pass . . . in the reign of Zedekiah, King of Judah, in the fourth year, and in the fifth month, that Hananiah the son of Azur the prophet, who was of Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the LORD, in the presence of the priest and of all the people, saying, “Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, saying, ‘I have broken the yoke of the King of Babylon. Within two full years will I bring again into this place all the vessels of the LORD's house that Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, took away from this place and carried them to Babylon. And I will return [Jehoiachin] the son of Jehoiakim, King of Judah, with all the captives of Judah, that went into Babylon, says the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the King of Babylon.’”

Then Hananiah the prophet took the yoke from off the prophet Jeremiah's neck, and broke it. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, “Thus says the LORD: Even so, will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon from the neck

of all nations within the space of two full years.” And the prophet Jeremiah went his way.

It seems likely that there were rounds of applause and shouts of approval from most of the people, prophets, and priests who witnessed this foolish prophet’s bold rebuke of the aging Jeremiah. Hananiah, for the moment, had become a hero of the movement for national freedom. He was probably lauded as a man of great promise, a giant of the faith, perhaps to become Jerusalem’s next Isaiah in the resistance against another surrounding, heathen army. But how many of Hananiah’s admirers envied his acclaim when, a little while afterwards, back into the excited congregation strode Jeremiah, grim-faced and wearied with warning his wayward fellows:

“Thus says the LORD: You have broken the yokes of wood; but you shall make for them yokes of iron. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put a yoke of iron upon the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, and they shall serve him. And I have given him the beasts of the field also.”

Then said the prophet Jeremiah to Hananiah the prophet, “Hear now, Hananiah. The LORD has not sent you, but you are making this people to trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the LORD: Behold, I will cast you from off the face of the earth. This year, you shall die because you have taught rebellion against the LORD.” So, Hananiah the prophet died in the same year in the seventh month.

Jeremiah 28:13-17

Hananiah was teaching “rebellion against the LORD”, but that is not what the people thought he was doing; nor was it what Hananiah himself thought he was doing. He and they thought that he was speaking on behalf of the LORD when he exhorted the people to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar. But Nebuchadnezzar was God’s servant, fulfilling God’s purpose; therefore, no Israelite could rebel against King Nebuchadnezzar without rebelling against God.

Jeremiah understood this, but he could not persuade many others to see it. Even though his prophecies were confirmed in this and many other incidences, the lonely prophet found himself fighting a losing battle against sentiments for rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar. King Zedekiah, disregarding his oath before God not to rebel, decided to halt all shipments of tribute and to stand upon the promises of God, as delivered to him by the many prophets of success and victory. In desperation, Jeremiah cried in the streets because of the wrath of God which he knew now would certainly come:

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold I will bring evil upon this place!”
Jeremiah 19:3

But many other prophets prophesied just as loudly,

“No evil shall come upon you.”
Jeremiah 23:17

Jeremiah cried in distress,

“The sword of the LORD shall devour from one end of the land to the other end of the land. No flesh shall have peace.”
Jeremiah 12:12

But the other prophets, with equal zeal, proclaimed together,

“The LORD has said, You shall have peace.” Jeremiah 23:17

Pleaded Jeremiah,

“Hear! And give ear! Be not proud, for the LORD has spoken.” Jeremiah 13:15

But the other prophets cried more loudly,

“It is not He. Neither shall evil come upon us. Neither shall we see sword nor famine.” Jeremiah 5:12

Even among those who had been taken captive to Babylon, there was resistance to Nebuchadnezzar’s authority. To them, Jeremiah wrote letters, exhorting them to build houses, plant crops, and rear up families until the seventy years of captivity were completed, and then God would return them to their land (Jer. 29:1-14). Jeremiah’s letter also included this exhortation:

“Seek the peace of the city [Babylon] where I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the LORD for it. For in its peace shall you have peace.”

Jeremiah 29:7

Some of the prophets of success and victory were among the captives in Babylon, and they spurned Jeremiah’s letters and spurred the other captives to despise Nebuchadnezzar’s authority. To them, Jeremiah sent a terrifying warning: God would shortly hand them over to Nebuchadnezzar, who would “roast them in the fire” (29:20-23). And he did.

It seems as if God’s people should have been able to see that Jeremiah was indeed speaking for God. But false prophets have a mysterious gift for making what is right to seem wrong, and for making evil to seem good. They are masters of appearances, and all who are foolish enough to be persuaded by appearances become their lackeys.

Just as Jeremiah wrote letters of instruction and reproof to the captives, so the false prophets who had been taken captive wrote letters of instruction and reproof to the people still in Jerusalem. One such letter from Babylon rebuked a certain high-ranking priest for failing to punish Jeremiah for his “self-made” prophecies of a seventy-year captivity (Jer. 29:24-32). At every turn, Jeremiah was frustrated in his prophetic efforts. His soul was bruised with scorn. His mind was tormented with visions of the coming slaughter. Heart-broken, persecuted, and alone, Jeremiah wept and prayed,

“Ah, LORD God! Behold, the prophets say to them, ‘You shall not see the sword, neither shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place.’ . . . My heart within me is broken because of the prophets!” Jeremiah 14:13, 23:9

Ezekiel

It was at this time, by a river in Babylonia where a group of Jerusalem’s captives had been settled, that the heavens were opened and the young priest Ezekiel “saw visions of God” (Ezek. 1:1). This call of Ezekiel to be a prophet ranks among the most awesome visitations of God to

man in all of biblical history. Ezekiel was knocked to the ground by heaven's indescribable splendor and power.

“And He said to me, ‘Son of man, stand to your feet, and I will speak to you.’ And the Spirit entered into me when He spoke to me, and set me upon my feet, and I heard Him who spoke to me. And He said to me, ‘Son of man, I send you to the children of Israel,⁵ to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me, even to this very day. For they are impudent children and stiff-hearted.

“‘I do send you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD.” And they, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear (for they are a rebellious house), yet shall know that there has been a prophet among them. And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words . . . nor be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house. Behold, I have made your face strong against their faces, and your forehead strong against their foreheads. . . . Fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks. . . . Go! Get you to them of the captivity, to the children of your people, and speak to them, and tell them, “Thus says the Lord GOD,” whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear.’

“Then the Spirit took me up . . . and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit, but the hand of the LORD was strong upon me. Then I came to them of the captivity at Telabib who dwelt by the river Chebar, and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them seven days.”

excerpts, Ezekiel 2, 3

During those seven days, Ezekiel, in utter amazement at the glory of God, sat dumbfounded among his fellow captives. That is a long time to be unable to speak, but at the end of that week, God made Ezekiel incapable of uttering any word at all. His tongue was loosed only to speak the prophecies and revelations of God (Ezek. 3:26-27). This uncommon handicap would remain in effect for seven years, until after the annihilation of Jerusalem (Ezek. 24:25-27; 33:21-22). For Ezekiel, they would be seven years of some of the most spectacular visions and miraculous events recorded in the Bible, including a trip, via the Spirit of God, back to Ezekiel's beloved Jerusalem:

“As I sat in my house, and the elders of Judah [who had been taken captive] sat before me . . . the hand of the Lord GOD fell there upon me. Then I beheld, and, lo, a likeness as the appearance of fire; from the appearance of His loins downward, fire, and from His loins upward, as the appearance of brightness, as the color of amber. And He put forth the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head. And the Spirit lifted me up between the earth and heaven, and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem.”

Ezekiel 8:1-3

Ezekiel was taken by the Spirit on a tour of Jerusalem's idols. He was brought into a room where stood seventy elders, burning incense to “creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all

⁵ God calls the captives and those still in Judah, “the children of Israel”. With that title, God is not referring to the destroyed northern kingdom of Israel.

the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed upon the wall round about” (Ezek. 8:10). Ezekiel, invisible to the seventy idolatrous elders, recognized them and even called the name of one (Ezek. 8:11). Following that, Ezekiel was taken to one of the gates of the LORD’s house, where women sat weeping, not for Jerusalem’s sin, nor for those slain or taken captive, but mourning for the Sumerian god, Tammuz. Passing on from there, the captive prophet was led up to the temple, where he himself may have, in time past, performed some of the law’s holy rites:

“And, behold, at the door of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east. And they worshipped the sun toward the east. . . . Moreover, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the LORD’s house, which looks eastward. And, behold, at the door of the gate were twenty-five men. Among them, I saw Jaazaniah the son of Azur, and Pelatiah the son of Benaiah, princes of the people.

“Then said He to me, ‘Son of man, these are the men who devise mischief and give wicked counsel in this city, who say, “It [destruction] is not near. Let us build houses.” . . . Therefore, prophesy against them. Prophesy, O son of man!’ “And the Spirit of the LORD fell upon me, and said to me, ‘Speak!’ . . . And it came to pass, when I prophesied, that Pelatiah the son of Benaiah died. Then fell I down upon my face, and cried with a loud voice, and said, ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel?’”

Ezekiel 11:1-13

The LORD responded to Ezekiel’s question by promising His protection to those who trusted and obeyed Him (Ezek 11:14-20),

“but as for those whose heart walks after the heart of their detestable things and their abominations, I will recompense their way upon their own heads, says the Lord GOD.”

Ezekiel 11:21

Two more scenes of immense importance were witnessed by Ezekiel before the Spirit returned him to Babylonia. Both of them were part of God’s preparation of Jerusalem for destruction. First, Ezekiel beheld as God sent an angel, invisible to men, with a writer’s inkhorn through the midst of Jerusalem to set an invisible mark upon the forehead of those few who were grieved for the idolatry and lawlessness of Jerusalem. These were to be spared from death (Ezek. 9).

The second scene which awaited Ezekiel concerned his beloved temple. God had chosen this faithful man of priestly lineage to witness what may actually have been the moment when the glory of the LORD departed from the house that Solomon built (Ezek. 10; 11:22-23), and also to hear God’s promise that He would gather the survivors of the captivity together again, and would someday “put a new spirit” within them “so that they may walk in my statutes, and keep my ordinances, and do them, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezek. 11:17-20).

“Afterwards, the Spirit took me up and brought me in a vision by the Spirit of God into [Babylonia], to those of the captivity. So, the vision that I had seen went up from me.”

Ezekiel 11:24; cp. 36:26-28

The Order To March

If it was at the beginning of Zedekiah's reign in Jerusalem that Nebuchadnezzar offended God and was given the mind of a beast, then when Ezekiel was returned by the Spirit to Babylonia from Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar was spending his last nights in the Babylonian fields. Nebuchadnezzar himself gives this account of the return of his sanity at the end of those seven years:

“At the end of the days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted up my eyes unto heaven, and my understanding returned to me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honored Him who lives forever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. At the same time, my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my honor and brightness returned to me, and my counselors and my lords sought after me, and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and His ways just. And those who walk in pride, He is able to abase.”
Daniel 4:34-37

The order to march on rebellious Jerusalem was given. What sadness must have filled the hearts of Daniel and his friends as King Nebuchadnezzar, in great pomp, departed from Babylon with his army. Far away in Jerusalem, Jeremiah could feel that departure every bit as much as Daniel might have watched it:

“The lion is come up from his thicket, and the destroyer of the Gentiles is on his way. He is gone forth from his place to make your land desolate, and your cities shall be laid waste, without an inhabitant. For this, gird yourselves with sackcloth. Lament and howl! For the fierce anger of the LORD is not turned away from us.

“O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be saved! How long shall your vain thoughts lodge within you? For a voice declares from Dan, and publishes affliction from Mount Ephraim: ‘Your way and your doings have procured these things unto you. This is your wickedness, because it is bitter, because it reaches to your heart!’

“My bowels, my bowels! I am pained at my very heart. My heart is making a noise in me. I cannot hold my peace because you have heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.”
Jeremiah 4:7-8, 14-15, 18-19

The Last Days

By the rivers of Babylon, word quickly spread among the Israelite captives that Nebuchadnezzar's army had departed. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! The joy of the whole earth! The reassuring words of the captive prophets of success and victory notwithstanding, how anxiously the other captives must have awaited word from Jerusalem. How very slowly must the days of waiting have passed.

Actually, however, the captives received information concerning the plight of Jerusalem before they could have expected it. Radios and television having not yet even been imagined, they could not have expected the same-day news report which Ezekiel received from the Supreme Commander of Nebuchadnezzar's army, the LORD God of Israel:

“Again in the ninth year, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, write the name of the day, even of this same day. The King of Babylon set himself against Jerusalem this same day.’” Ezekiel 24:1-2

The siege was on. Nevertheless, within Jerusalem’s besieged walls, the prophets of success persisted in their misguided hope that because God’s temple was in Jerusalem, He would not allow the heathen to destroy the city (cp. Jer. 7:1-15). They prophesied that “the Chaldeans [i.e. Babylonians] will surely depart from us.” The princes who trusted those prophecies persuaded Zedekiah to procure Egyptian military support, and then arrogantly boasted against the Babylonians, “Who shall come down against us? or who shall enter into our habitation?” (Jer. 21:13).

But the siege continued, and Jerusalem weakened. King Zedekiah emerges from these scenes as a frightened young man, whose confidence in Jeremiah was overruled by his fear of Jerusalem’s leaders. Though the prophets of success proclaimed that deliverance would come, and though ambassadors had been dispatched to Egypt, Zedekiah, facing the deteriorating conditions in the city, sent messengers to Jeremiah, his father’s fellow soldier, pleading with him to pray that God would break the Babylonian stranglehold on Jerusalem’s neck (Jer. 21:1-2, 37:3). But God had already strictly forbidden Jeremiah to pray any more for the people (Jer. 7:16), and to Zedekiah was returned this reply:

“Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands, with which you fight against the King of Babylon, and against the Chaldeans, who besiege you outside the walls, and I will assemble them into the midst of this city. And I, myself, will fight against you with an outstretched hand and with a strong arm, even in anger, and in fury, and in great wrath. And I will smite the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence. And afterward, says the LORD, I will deliver Zedekiah, King of Judah, and his servants, and the people, and such as are left in this city from the pestilence, from the sword, and from the famine, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, and into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of those that seek their life, and he shall smite them with the edge of the sword. He shall not spare them, neither have pity, nor have mercy.”
Jeremiah 21:4-7

In addition to this prophecy for the King, Jeremiah gave to Zedekiah’s emissaries a message for all the people of Jerusalem:

“Thus says the LORD: Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death. He who abides in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence, but he who goes out and surrenders to the Chaldeans who besiege you, he shall live.”
Jeremiah 21:8-9

Despite continued encouragement from the prophets of victory to stand fast, some believed Jeremiah and escaped to the Babylonian camp, leaving a hungry, doddering Jerusalem behind.

“I Was Deceived”

We are not told where Jeremiah was when he heard the news, but he must have had to climb the city’s walls to see it for himself. Even then, it must have been difficult to believe. The

Babylonians were gone! They had broken camp and deserted their fortifications around Jerusalem. The siege was over! The reason: the Egyptian army was marching up the coast toward Judah, and the Babylonian army, fearful of being caught between Jerusalem's besieged army and Pharaoh's forces, had hurriedly left Jerusalem (Jer. 37:5, 11).

The prophets of success and victory must have danced in the streets. Their perseverance in the faith had been rewarded! Their advice not to surrender had been confirmed! O glorious deliverance! The smoke from sacrifices to the gods must have dimmed the light of the sun that day. And, of course, sacrifices were made to Jehovah, too. After all, it was His magnificent temple which stood within Jerusalem's walls and provided shelter for so many of Jerusalem's idols. Exultant songs of praise to God blended with excited chants to Baal, Astarte, and other deities. Perhaps there was also an unusually large offering of infants that day upon the searing coals of Molech's altar. Celebration and the making of vows to various gods was the order of the day. Though lacking the resoluteness and power to enforce it, Zedekiah thought it appropriate to celebrate the city's liberation by ordering all Jerusalem's inhabitants to liberate any Israelite servant who had served them six years or more, just as Moses' law commanded (Jer. 34:6-22).

Jeremiah, because of his gloom-and-doom threats, became the joke of Jerusalem. We are not told when he spoke the following words, but they must have mirrored Jeremiah's feelings at the time:

“O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived. You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I am in derision daily; everyone mocks me. For when I spoke, I cried out, I cried, ‘Violence and spoil!’”
Jeremiah 20:7-8a

Hurt, embarrassed, ridiculed, fearful of reprisals, Jeremiah cursed his birth (20:14-18) and made a vow concerning his God which he would not be able to keep:

“Then I said, ‘I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name!’”
Jeremiah 20:9a

Jeremiah's love for God's people, a love he received from God and shared with God, burned too fiercely within his heart for Jeremiah to be silent when God told him to speak. God's word spoken to Jeremiah's heart was, in Jeremiah's own words, “as a fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay” (Jer. 20:9b). But what Jeremiah continued to say to the people seemed, under the circumstances, more outrageous than ever:

“Behold, Pharaoh's army, which is come forth to help you, shall return to Egypt into their own land. And the Chaldeans shall come again, and fight against this city, and take it, and burn it with fire.”
Jeremiah 37:7-8

The prophets of success and victory were proclaiming with renewed confidence the permanent departure of Babylonian forces from Canaan (Jer. 37:9), obviously implying an end to Nebuchadnezzar's empire. They were in no state of mind now to tolerate any more of Jeremiah's interference with their control over the people. God had proved them right, they believed, and it was senseless any longer to allow such disheartening prophecies as Jeremiah delivered.

Sensing danger, Jeremiah determined to flee from Jerusalem. But where could he go? Despite having been warned by God that his family and friends had turned against him, Jeremiah

decided that the safest place would be the nearby territory of Benjamin, where he was born. But Jeremiah never made it out of the city. Arriving at the gate of Benjamin, he was detained for questioning by a prison keeper who accused Jeremiah of running from Jerusalem to find and to join the Babylonians (Jer. 37:11-13). Despite Jeremiah's denials, he was arrested and returned as a prisoner to Jerusalem, where he was condemned, beaten, and cast into a prison (Jer. 37:14-15). Then, shortly after his imprisonment, news was brought to King Zedekiah that the Egyptian army had retreated into Egypt. The Babylonians were on their way back to Jerusalem.

Fearful that he would be assassinated if he were seen openly in Jeremiah's company, Zedekiah had the abused prophet secretly brought to the king's house. Alone there with the prophet whose voice he really trusted, yet lacked the courage to obey, the nervous, pathetic young King asked Jeremiah if there was any word from the LORD.

And Jeremiah said, "There is." Then he said, "You will be delivered into the hand of the King of Babylon." Jeremiah 37:17

It was a scene of challenge and pathos. The greying Jeremiah, bruised and despised, stared knowingly at the terrified youngest son of Josiah. The thirty-two-year-old King wrung his hands in fear of both God and man. If he could only have summoned the resoluteness of his father! It is easy to picture the tormented young man breaking down and weeping in the quiet, dull light of the inner room. Grasping the rare opportunity to reason uninterrupted with the King, Jeremiah, in compassionate but firm tone asked, perhaps himself even with tears,

"What have I done against you, or against your servants, or against this people, that you have put me in prison? Where are now your prophets who prophesied unto you, saying, 'The King of Babylon shall not come against you, nor against this land?'"

Jeremiah 37:18-19

Zedekiah had no answer. Jeremiah probably didn't expect one. They both, in their own way, were desperate. They both, in their own way, were unwilling prisoners. It wasn't really a conversation which either man could have expected to lead anywhere. The end of the road had been reached, and they both knew it. Before he left, Jeremiah asked the King for one favor; namely, not to return him to the prison cell, but to allow him to live in the court of the prison. Zedekiah granted his request, and the king's servants secretly led Jeremiah away.

The siege of Jerusalem soon began again. Again, food supplies ran low. Again, water was rationed. And again, Jeremiah, now in the court of the prison, prophesied that the only sure escape from death was to "fall to", or surrender to, the Babylonians. A considerable number did just that, slipping past Jerusalem's watchmen to give themselves up. The prophets of victory and success became absolutely furious. Jeremiah was again frustrating their efforts to encourage the hearts of God's people to trust in divine deliverance. A high-ranking delegation approached Zedekiah with a demand in the guise of request:

"We beseech you, let this man be put to death, for thus he weakens the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words to them. For this man seeks not the welfare of this people, but the hurt!" Jeremiah 38:1-4

It was not the sensibleness of their argument, but the sheer force of their menacing spirits that pressured Zedekiah to relent.

Then Zedekiah the King said, “Behold, he is in your hand, for the King is not he that can do any thing against you.”
Jeremiah 38:5

It is a testimony to the vicious and depraved nature of these men that they chose not to kill Jeremiah outright. They chose rather to cast him into a muddy pit in the dungeon of the prison (Jer. 38:6). Too deep for him to lie down or to sit, Jeremiah would have to stand, while he wasted away with hunger and exhaustion, finally, his enemies hoped, to collapse and suffocate in the mud. Fortunately for Jeremiah, there was one righteous man who had not yet deserted the city to surrender himself to the Babylonians. He was an Ethiopian convert to the religion of Moses and had devoted himself to the service of Jehovah and His king. That may explain why he had not left the city; he might well have made a vow to God to remain under any circumstance in the service of Judah’s king. His name, Ebed-melech, means “servant of the king” and that is what he apparently was determined to be, even to the end.

Having obtained permission from the vacillating King Zedekiah, Ebed-melech took thirty men, a sturdy rope, and plenty of rags to help cushion Jeremiah’s arm-pits, and pulled the prophet out of the smelly, sucking mud (Jer. 38:10-12). Jeremiah thus was freed from the pit but remained a prisoner in the court of the prison. For an unknown reason, the princes did not voice any opposition to his rescue, but one factor may have been the horrible conditions in Jerusalem. Concern for their own survival may have consumed their desire to rid themselves of Jeremiah.

Driven by fear and frustration beyond the borders of reason, Zedekiah once again sought secret counsel from Jehovah’s prophet, for whose execution he had so recently given permission (Jer. 38:14a). Making an heroic posture, the King insisted that Jeremiah tell him nothing but the truth (38:14b). To which the exasperated prophet retorted,

“If I declare it to you, will you not surely put me to death?” . . . So, Zedekiah the King swore secretly to Jeremiah, saying, “As the LORD lives who made us this soul, I will not put you to death, neither will I give you into the hand of these men who seek your life.”
Jeremiah 38:15-16

Then, for the last time, Jeremiah slowly, carefully explained to the King the will of God for him:

“Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: If you will assuredly go forth unto the King of Babylon’s princes, then your soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; and you shall live, and your house. But if you will not go forth to the King of Babylon’s princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape out of their hand.”

And Zedekiah the King said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Jews that are fallen to the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hand, and they mock me.”

But Jeremiah said, “They shall not turn you over. Obey, I beseech you, the voice of the LORD, which I speak unto you; so it shall be well with you, and your soul shall live. But if you refuse to go forth, this is the word that the LORD has shown me. . . . They shall bring out all your wives and your children to the Chaldeans, and you shall not escape out

of their hand, but you shall be taken by the hand of the King of Babylon, and you shall cause this city to be burned with fire.”
Jeremiah 38:17-23

Jeremiah perceived that his words had not awakened in Zedekiah sufficient fear of God to heed the warning when, in taking his leave of the prophet, Zedekiah insisted that Jeremiah not tell the princes of this secret conversation (Jer. 38:24-28). All that Jeremiah could do for the King had now been done. Now, he could only wait for the weakening city to succumb to the relentless pressure of the siege and to suffer the consequences of sin.

And suffer the consequences, Jerusalem did. Over eighteen miserable months, the Babylonian noose was increasingly tightened until, at length, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, starved to insensitivity, resorted to the diet of the insane: dogs and horses, then mice, roaches, animal dung, even the flesh of the dead or of their own arms and legs, and, as a last, ghastly measure, killing their own children for food. The filth and stench throughout the city must have been appalling. Diseases ravaged the hopelessly weak inhabitants, delivering Jerusalem's stubborn inhabitants from a tormented life to the torments of death, thus providing the desperate survivors the eerie blessing of another mouthful of flesh. And all the while, the encircling Babylonians watched and waited, feasting upon the bounty of the Promised Land.

Waiting. In the court of the prison was Jeremiah, waiting. Camped on the Mount of Olives and upon the surrounding hills and valleys were the Babylonian soldiers, waiting. In the city of Riblah to the north sat Nebuchadnezzar the King, waiting. By the distant river of Chebar, heavy with sorrow, were Ezekiel and the other captives, waiting. And in the royal houses of Babylon, praying toward Jerusalem three times a day, was faithful Daniel, waiting.

And the city was broken up, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between two walls, which is by the King's garden (now the Chaldees were against the city round about). And the King went the way toward the plain. And the army of the Chaldees pursued after the King, and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army were scattered from him. So they took the King, and brought him up to the King of Babylon to Riblah, and they gave judgment upon him. And they slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him with fetters of brass, and carried him to Babylon.

[Then] came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, a servant of the King of Babylon, unto Jerusalem. And he burnt the house of the LORD, and the King's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burnt he with fire. And all the army of the Chaldees that were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls of Jerusalem round about. Now the rest of the people that were left in the city, and the fugitives that had surrendered to the King

of Babylon, with the remnant of the multitude, did Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carry away.
2Kings 25:4-11

FOR EXAMPLES

“The LORD of hosts is with us,” sang David, “the God of Jacob is our refuge” (Ps. 46:7, 11). Nothing of all the tragedies which befell Israel or Judah made David's words less true. For every Israelite who had David's kind of faith, for every person who resisted the appealing promises of

the prophets of success and victory and believed the truth, God was a refuge from the terrible suffering which the Almighty inflicted upon the children of disobedience. God was a refuge for faithful Daniel and his three friends. He sent the army of Babylon to carry them away to the safety of Nebuchadnezzar's palace. He sent the army again to carry righteous Ezekiel, Mordecai, and Esther's parents away from Jerusalem before the final, crushing blow fell (Jer. 24). He was a refuge for Baruch, Jeremiah's personal scribe (Jer. 45), and for Ebed-melech, who pulled Jeremiah out of the muddy pit (Jer. 39:15-18) "because", said the LORD, "you have put your trust in me." He was a refuge for those who believed Jeremiah and surrendered to the Babylonians. And He was a refuge for Jeremiah himself, who by Nebuchadnezzar's personal directive was given a choice by a Babylonian general to go with the captives to Babylonia or to stay in the land of Canaan (Jer. 39:11-14; 40:1-6).

Did Daniel ask of Nebuchadnezzar this favor for the prophet whom he had heard as a boy? Did the Jews who surrendered to the Babylonians tell their captors that they were surrendering because of Jeremiah's prophecies? By whatever immediate impetus Nebuchadnezzar's favor was shown to Jeremiah, that prophet (and everyone else who loved the truth) received that favor as coming from God, the only refuge for the righteous. But for those who failed to acknowledge God's absolute dominion over the lives of His children and who thought that a less than holy and obedient life style was acceptable to Him, proximity to His presence proved to be the very most dangerous place on earth to be. And inasmuch as, in Christ Jesus, we have access by the Spirit into the holiest of the holy places in heaven, we should with great seriousness consider the smoldering ashes of the city wherein stood, with great acclaim, the temple which housed the mercy seat of God.

All these things happened unto them for examples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

Therefore, let him who thinks he is standing take heed, lest he fall.

1Corinthians 10:11-12



Part 3

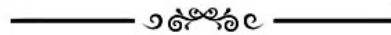
Suffering in the New Testament

It is better, if the will of God be so, that you suffer for well doing,
than for evil doing.

1Peter 3:17

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial
which is to try you,
as though some strange thing happened unto you.

1Peter 4:12



CHAPTER 9

THE NEW TESTAMENT

To us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things,
and we in Him, and one Lord Jesus Christ,
by whom are all things, and we by him.
Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8:6



ONE GOD

The New Testament brought about many changes, but it did not change the fact that God being Creator means it is impossible that He has lost control over any part of His Creation, including our suffering. We pay especially close attention to what the New Testament authors said about suffering and the saints, for even if someone were to argue that the Old Testament position on suffering is no longer valid, we know that this New Covenant is an eternal one; therefore, what the New Testament writers say about the subject is true forever.

From before the ancient story of Job to the last prophetic voices of the Old Testament, in various cultures and nations, in both tragic and blessed circumstances, the one battle of faith which the righteous fought was the battle to believe that God was the only Governor of their lives, and of all life. Whether it was Joseph languishing in an Egyptian prison, David fleeing from Absalom, or Jeremiah listening to Babylonian carpenters building ramps with which to scale Jerusalem's walls, the real spiritual battle was always the battle to believe that God had not lost control of the circumstances of life. It is remarkable that spiritual warfare should have had such a consistent focal point throughout biblical history, but that such is the case bears strong witness to the importance of the issue. And its importance lies chiefly in the fact that *only those who knew that God was responsible for their sufferings remained faithful to Him*. They continued to do what was good in His sight because they trusted God to be the only God of their lives. On the other hand, those who were persuaded to believe that other gods were determining the circumstances of their lives were compelled by that belief to seek to please those other gods and to look outside the law of Moses for direction concerning acceptable ways of living and worship. And while they confidently pursued that vanity, the righteous humbly continued to fear the one true God and to cling diligently to His commandments because, knowing the truth, they could do nothing else. Their lives were testimonies to an unalterable truth; namely, it is upon the hinge of the knowledge of God as Creator that the moral character of men hangs.

Consider all you have read concerning the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Consider the many afflictions of God's people, and consider the many words which God's prophets spoke concerning those afflictions. How many times did God's prophets lay the responsibility for those afflictions at the feet of anyone but God? With which disease did Baal afflict Israel? Which famine did Molech send? What army did Astarte bring from afar to destroy Israelite cities and to take God's people captive?

God's messengers strove with all their strength to persuade God's people to believe that responsibility for determining the earth's every pleasant or distressful circumstance belonged to the only God there is – Jehovah. Other gods were denounced, not as being evil but as being nothing, incapable of determining either good or evil for anyone!

“They are upright as the palm tree, but they speak not. They need to be borne, for they cannot go. Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil; neither is it in them to do good. . . . There is none like you, O LORD. You are great, and your name is great in might.”
Jeremiah 10:5-6

The evil of idolatry was not the idol; the idol was nothing (1Cor. 8:4). The idol was only a symptom of the disease. The thousands of carved and decorated blocks of wood or stone which God's people erected in the Promised Land were only indications that their hearts were infected with the spirit of idolatry. The abomination was their faith in the gods which those idols represented. The prophet Isaiah taunted those man-made gods and challenged them to prove themselves real:

“Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods! Yea, do good or do evil, that we may look around at one another in amazement. Behold, you are of nothing, and your work of nought. An abomination is he that chooses you!”
Isaiah 41:23-24

As a result of believing in the power of other gods, Israel's fear, faith, and worship were divided; some to Jehovah, some to Baal, some to Tammuz, etc. David's was a prayer for his heart to be kept from such division when he pleaded with God, “Unite my heart to fear your name!” (Ps. 86:11). Throughout Old Testament history, the majority of God's people lived in the confusion of idolatry, seeking to assure themselves of peace and prosperity by appeasing as many gods as seemed necessary to them. What the true prophets could not persuade them to believe was that it was necessary to please but One. Jesus was sent by God to confirm that faith, which sustained those righteous saints of old through extremely difficult circumstances (see Mt. 5:17; Rom. 15:8).

“THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT!”

If we fail to understand that the construction of idols and the composing of worship rituals in honor of the gods were only ancient symptoms of idolatry, then we run the risk of assuming that we are innocent of idolatry simply because we haven't been carving on tree trunks lately. Social customs change, but man cannot evolve his way out of spiritual darkness and into the knowledge of his Creator. Being free of ancient symptoms of idolatry does not mean that we are free from the disease which produced those ancient symptoms. The tornadic winds of spiritual warfare

which so violently raged throughout biblical history are still blowing, but men are made aware of those “winds of doctrine” only when someone such as Jeremiah or Josiah is raised up by God to stand against the gale. Only when someone is sent to resist the raging, ungodly spirits at work in the world do people acknowledge the dizzying swirl in which they spend their lives.

It is a basic, biblical truth concerning the fallen human race that mankind is estranged from God in spiritual “darkness”; that is, mankind, by nature, is blind to the truth. Jeremiah noted the spiritual condition of the human race when he said, “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9).

No one can know it unless God opens his eyes to see it. There is nothing, including demonic powers, more deceived than the human heart when that heart is not rescued from sinfulness by God’s sanctifying power. Without God’s Spirit, the human heart is the most untrustworthy element of God’s Creation. Not one unconverted person is excluded from John’s inspired observation, “the whole world lies in wickedness” (1Jn. 5:19).

This is the natural state of man. He does not know that he is what he is. He does not perceive the howling tempests of evil that daily bend his will and pervert his judgment. He does not know the truth, does not understand eternal life, and cannot discern between good and evil. Man, of himself, does not know his Creator, and to compound the problem, man does not know that he does not know. He is bound by his own darkened intellect, his self-esteem, lust, and a wily, perverse heart. His spirit is restless, his works are temporal, and his desires are animalistic.

Verily, every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah. Surely every man walks in
a vain show. Psalm 39:5b-6a

Jesus said that sin proceeds from the heart of man (Mt. 15:19; Mk. 7:21-22). Yet, man is always looking for someone else to blame for his sin. A comedian once entertained audiences with his impersonation of a lady caught stealing, who then squealed innocently, “The Devil made me do it!” In reality, this scene, intended as a joke, is an accurate reflection of the condition of the human heart. Adam blamed his sin on Eve. Eve blamed her sin on the serpent. And in a very limited sense, they were correct. But nothing can change the fact that Adam sinned for himself, and Eve sinned for herself. Their sins were their own. They had not been forced to disobey God, and they were the first to demonstrate the tendency of the condemned human heart to hide its guilt by blaming others.

BY MAN

Paul wrote, in Romans 5:12, “By one man, sin entered into the world, and death by sin.” Part of the truth, then, which Jesus said would make us free, is that sin did not enter into the world through Satan, but through man. There is not one pain, disappointment, or disaster that afflicts the human race that is the result of Satan’s sin. Man is reaping only what *he* sowed. Man is not reaping what Satan sowed. That would be unjust. The Devil could have sinned from the moment of his creation until now, and this earth would still be a paradise, had man believed and obeyed God. It may mollify the shame of a condemned heart to accuse Satan of responsibility for its sin and misery, but only the truth will heal us. And the first step to God’s freely-offered forgiveness is confession of our own sin, not Satan’s (Prov. 28:13). The sorrows which all

humans suffer in this world are God's righteous response to *man's sin*; it is not the punishment which God has determined for Satan.

A student of mine once lamented the "fact" that God had created the world so beautifully and that Satan then came along and "ruined God's beautiful world." What an idolatrous notion! Satan didn't make this world the miserable place it is. God did! And God will determine to what extent Satan is to be held accountable for his part in man's willful disobedience. That is none of our business. What is our business is the revelation that the miseries men suffer on earth are the result of God holding us accountable for our own disobedience, not Satan's.

The pride that is in our fleshly nature would have us to deny that the sufferings of mankind is punishment for sin at all. It is appealing to the flesh to maintain that disasters, disease, and death afflict mankind either as an evolutionary development of nature or as an unwarranted intrusion by evil forces into the affairs of God's Creation. Both of those alternatives implicitly deny that *man's* failure to keep God's commandments is the root cause of human suffering, and they appeal to the flesh (1) by removing God from responsibility for the suffering of man (thus offering to man a god he can worship, yet need not fear, a god of blessing and no wrath) and (2) by implicitly denying man's sinfulness and need to repent. But in this covenant, God commands every man everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30) because now, through His Son, His righteousness has been fully revealed (Jn. 16:7-11).

As long as we tell ourselves that someone other than God has determined our sufferings, we can pity ourselves as victims, for to blame someone other than God for our suffering implies that we are suffering unjustly, that we are not deserving of such treatment. Worse than that, though, besides hiding our guilt behind doctrines that deny God's role in our suffering, we deny with such doctrines the inviolable sovereignty of God over His own Creation. Figuratively, in that case, we barricade ourselves within the besieged walls of our own doomed Jerusalem, trust our own false prophets as they declare our sufferings to be the work of evil invaders, rejoice in the false hope they offer, and join them in persecuting those who plead with us to surrender to the chastening hand of God. Don't misunderstand the apostle's exhortation:

Be sober; be vigilant because your adversary the Devil, as a roaring lion, is walking about, seeking whom he may devour. 1Peter 5:8

Any grammar student knows the difference between "may" and "can". One "may" do something only with permission, and "can" implies that one already has the power to do it. We need never fear what Satan *can* do because, like the idols which God's Old Covenant people trusted, he has no power to determine anything in our lives. Peter did not write this verse in order to put the fear of Satan into our hearts, but the fear of God! For if our heavenly Father determines that there exists a need for it, then Satan *may* be granted the open door to try our faith in order to burn the dross from our spirits. But apart from our heavenly Father's will, Satan can do nothing to us. We can and should rejoice in that. How else would we want it to be? What could be better than to know that it is our God who is directing every experience of our lives toward eternal glory and that when He chastens us, He chastens us not for His benefit but "for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness" (Heb. 12:10). Our joy and confidence reach the greatest heights only as we learn that before any suffering arises, Jesus knows that it is

coming and that he has already prayed for us, as he did for Peter, that our faith will not fail (Lk. 22:31-32).

WAR IN HEAVEN

The God that is revealed in the New Testament is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, in the New Testament, He is revealed to be far greater than He was revealed to be in the Old Testament because in the New Testament, He is revealed to be the Father of the Son. The Son's glory is such that when he came, he made the glorious law of Moses as nothing (2Cor. 3:7-11), and his superior greatness to all that came before magnified the Father's greatness beyond all description. The revelation of the Father which the Son brought to the world was a greater revelation of God's power and glory than the revelation of Creation had been, for it brought man the knowledge that the Son was the one who created all things, by the will of his even greater Father!

As I have said, the idolatry of believing in the power of other gods is no less idolatrous just because men hate those other gods. Whether human beings love him or hate him is a matter of utter indifference to Satan. It is man's faith and fear which he covets, not his love. Status appeals to him; friendship means nothing. In the end, however, God will make it clear to all that Satan is far from a fearful being:

“They who see you will narrowly look upon you, saying, ‘Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that shook kingdoms, that made the world like a wilderness and destroyed its cities?’”
Isaiah 14:16-17a

When men at last see Satan for what he really is, they will squint with amazed disbelief that such a pathetic creature as he could have for so long influenced so many to do so much wrong. But at the present, ensnared in a tangled web of myths about spiritual things, the whole world is deceived (Rev. 12:9). Most common among the Christian myths about Satan is probably the myth of his attempted coup d'état in heaven. This myth serves as the foundation for many others, and so, we need to see how flimsy a foundation it is.

In Revelation 12:7, we are told that “there was war in heaven.” But do we imagine that it was war as we know it, with a sword-waving Devil leading a cavalry charge against God's throne, angels shooting lightning arrows at one another, and Christ, with furrowed brow, leaning over a table of maps of heaven's geography, trying to determine where Satan's next move will come? That is the picture, not much exaggerated, which most people hold of Satan's sin before he was cast out of heaven. But that concept of Satan's sin implies that (1) God's authority can be challenged and (2) Satan is the only creature in eternity courageous enough to have challenged it. But to overthrow the Creator is impossible, and Satan certainly knew that. God's power can to no extent be challenged; nor is Satan a brave character when it comes to personally confronting God. Nobody is. It is unthinkable that Satan, being “full of wisdom” (Ezek. 28:12), would ever have believed that the Almighty could be dethroned. The fact that so many of us humans think that Satan's goal was the overthrow of God is only more evidence of our ignorance – ignorance of God's power and of Satan's wisdom.

The details of the warfare in heaven about which the apostle John spoke are not given to us, but if the warfare which the serpent waged against Eve in the garden of Eden is any indication, it

was a smoothly crafted warfare of slander. In Genesis 3, when the serpent persuaded Eve to doubt God's love, she began to think that God's commandments might be intended only to keep her and Adam under God's thumb. So, she decided, *on her own*, to disobey God's command and eat the fruit. The serpent never asked Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit; that would have been too obvious. He only intimated that it was for selfish reasons that God had told them not to eat it. Eve's sin, and then Adam's, was their own. The serpent was persuasive, but he did not force them to disobey God.

The "war" that was in heaven was not a warfare of strength against strength, for there is no strength against God, it would have been a crafty warfare for the hearts of angels, the weapons of slander and pride being pitted against the weapons of truth and humility before God.

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, who did weaken the nations! For you have said in your heart, 'I will ascend into heaven [like God], I will exalt my throne above the stars of God [not above God Himself]. I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most high.'"

Isaiah 14:12-14

The prize the Devil desired was not to replace God but to share in the reverence for God which God's other creatures felt. His goal was to be like God in their minds, to receive from angels the fear which rightly belongs only to the Creator. Has he fulfilled his desire in your heart? That is the real warfare. The "war" that was in heaven was a warfare for the hearts of angels. After losing that war, Satan and the angels who were like him were cast out of heaven, down to the earth (Rev. 12:7-17), and the warfare is now for the hearts of men. In reality, it is as impossible for Satan to be like God as it is for him to replace God, but if Satan can persuade us to think and act as though it were true, he has succeeded to that extent in his purpose. If he can persuade us to believe that he, like God, makes decisions concerning the circumstances of our lives, then contrary to the counsel of Paul (Eph. 4:27), we have made room for him in our hearts and are offering him praise that is sacred to our Creator.

Satan does have a kingdom (Mt. 12:26), but it is a kingdom of lies. There is no truth in either him or his kingdom (Jn. 8:44). The very throne that he sits upon is a stolen one, granted to him by misinformed saints who offer him the seat of authority over the unpleasant experiences of their lives. He has a capacity for great power, but he was created with it. And the same One who created Lucifer with such wisdom, beauty, and power also determines, every moment, the places and the extent to which those attributes may be used.

"THE SACRIFICE OF PRAISE"

Attributing responsibility for determining the circumstances of life is a form of praise, for it exalts the power of the one held responsible. Though ancient people did not know it, the "gods" to whom they attributed power over their lives, and to whom they sacrificed, were, in fact, demons:

"They sacrificed to demons, not to God, to gods whom they knew not, to new gods that came newly up, whom your fathers feared not."

Deuteronomy 32:17

In this New Testament, we worship God, not by offering animals in sacrifice but by offering “the sacrifice of praise to God continually; that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name” (Heb. 13:15). Ancient forms of sacrifice are gone; still, “the sacrifice of praise” is offered to demons instead of God whenever men attribute to them the responsibility for determining the circumstances of life.

The warfare for the human heart has never changed. Satan and the spirits that are like him still covet the reverence and faith that belong only to God. They still covet the honor of being held responsible for our sufferings, and those who are walking in darkness give them that praise and honor.

A DEBT OF GRATITUDE

“In the day of adversity, consider”, counseled Solomon, (Eccl. 7:14). But to accuse others, including Satan, of the troubles which God brings into our lives is the ever-attractive alternative to submissive, honest soul-searching. Moreover, it is an alternative which, when taken, only makes matters worse. It is not a remedy; it is just another problem. The Jews at Jerusalem did not believe that God was in command of the Babylonian army. And while, with that doctrinal position, the prophets of success and victory maintained an appearance of righteousness, it only made their destruction at the hands of God more certain. The Corinthian believers, too, could only have worsened their situation by failing to see the hand of God in their afflictions. It was, and still is, an act of righteous faith to acknowledge the chastisement of the LORD when it comes, rather than to deny our guilt by denouncing God’s chastisement as being an attack of the Enemy.

What divine discipline ever serves its good and healing purpose if it is rejected as being an attack of the Devil? Confession of the truth has always been essential for those who would be forgiven and delivered – confession of sin AND confession that the resulting suffering was God’s righteous response to that sin:

If they shall confess their iniquity, . . . with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary to me and that I also have walked contrary to them, . . . and if they then accept the punishment of their iniquity, . . . I will not cast them away. Neither will I abhor them, . . . for I am the LORD their God.

Leviticus 26:40-44

Many think that to say the suffering of the saints is in God’s hands is a discouraging message. Just the opposite is true. For if God has commanded no suffering for us, has determined that we shall not suffer, and yet we do suffer, the inescapable conclusions are (1) somebody (Satan) has power to overrule God’s will for His children and (2) the events of our lives are under the control of someone other than God. What a discouraging message that would be! I can think of no doctrinal position more contrary to joy, peace, and righteousness than to teach that Satan, of himself, has the power to afflict God’s children.

Consider the implications of such a doctrine. If Satan has power to afflict you whenever he desires to do so, then every day in which you are not afflicted, you would owe *him* a debt of gratitude. For if he can decide when to afflict you, then he can decide when *not* to afflict you. It is, in that case, his favor you should seek as well as God’s. He is, in that case, like God *to you*. To attribute to the Devil the power to determine our suffering is to imply that our blessings are

ours because *he* has mercifully determined not to take them away from us. To honor Satan with such graciousness toward us is to rob God of honor which belongs to Him alone (Ps. 62:12; Isa. 42:8). It is, in effect, to worship another god. It does, if only in our hearts, serve to accomplish Lucifer's original, evil desire to "be like the most High" (Isa. 14:14).

It is high irony that so many saints living now should shake their heads at Israel's fear and respect of idols and, at the same time, believe that Satan or his demons have power to do exactly what Israel thought those other gods could do. Many Israelites became violently indignant when the true prophets of God declared the worship of idols to be vain and foolish. But then, I have witnessed believing men and women become angry at the suggestion that Jesus is the only Lord of life, both its sufferings and its comforts. But if that isn't the case, then what does it mean that Jesus is "Lord of all"?

I should point out that even though I have given much attention to Satan as a tool of divine trial of faith or for discipline, the scriptural picture as a whole suggests that he rarely plays a personal part in God's dealings with His children. God is so loving and patient that His use of so unloving and powerful a creature as Satan is reserved for the trial of those of greatest faith, or the punishment of those who are most stubborn in disobedience (e.g. Mt. 4:1; 1Cor. 5:1-5; 1Tim. 1:19-20 with 2Tim. 2:17-18). It is true that "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world" (Eph. 6:12), but God never matches us against an opponent too strong for our faith. Despite the testimonies of many precious brothers and sisters in Christ concerning their "battles with the Devil", very few of God's children have ever known, or ever will know, what it means to be pitted against him personally in spiritual battle. Christ Jesus knew, and it is his victory over Satan and the world which we celebrate and enjoy.

"NOT FAR FROM EVERY ONE OF US"

It is a clever, though self-serving move of the human heart to denounce suffering as a satanic intrusion into human affairs. How cunningly may sin, when it is exposed, disguise itself as righteous indignation, acting outraged at the suggestion that God is responsible for the suffering of the saints! How shrewd it was for the prophets of success and victory to denounce Jeremiah as "seeking the hurt" of Jerusalem for associating the name of Jehovah with Nebuchadnezzar's army, when actually, it was idolatrous and self-serving on their part to *dissociate* Him from it!

In the darkness of such an idolatrous mentality, we fail to see our Lord even when he is near. It often happens that after suffering for a while in difficult circumstances, and seeking the Lord, we say that we "found" Jesus. But is it that we "found" him because he had been somewhere else? Surely not. It is only that he opened our eyes to let us know he was there. I am persuaded to believe that Christ wants us to know that he is never anywhere else, that he is always, as David declared, "a very present help in trouble."

How very often in our difficulties, even when we look for Christ, we fail to recognize him when we see him. Like Mary Magdalene, weeping outside his tomb, we are sometimes so caught up in our fears and worry that we mistake the Savior to be only "a gardener", a stranger to our lives, and unmindful of our hurt. Only when he speaks to us, as he did to Mary, with his inimitably comforting voice, do we begin to perceive either the greatness of his love or the littleness of our faith. How slowly do we take it in! It is always true, as Jesus told us, that

“every one that seeks finds,” but it is also true that we do not always recognize God’s answer when we find it.

How often we have resisted what we later realized was a gift sent from the Father. How often we have refused counsel which we later learned was the right course to take. How often we have denounced what later proved to be divine! We are strugglers in this life, and it is an indisputable fact that until we come to know the Spirit of God, we often struggle against what we should with humility and gratitude receive.

How mournfully did the besieged inhabitants of Jeremiah’s Jerusalem long for God to show Himself, when in a very real way, they were seeing Him in the form of Babylonian soldiers. They prayed for someone to be anointed and sent by God to perform an inspired, mighty act, but they failed to understand that in breaching the walls of the holy city, the heathen invaders, God’s servants, were doing just that. They cried for a message from God even as they cursed and persecuted His messengers. They longed for “the day of the LORD”, unaware that His day had already come. They miserably failed in the real warfare of this life; namely, to reach out in faith, beyond the circumstances of life, to believe that every circumstance in life is purposed and designed by God for men, “that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us” (Acts 17:27).

Even after many months of trying in vain to communicate with God, tormented Job stubbornly maintained his belief that, although he could not see God, God could see him, and Job did not flinch in his determination that “when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). God was not far from Job. He is not far from anyone, especially those who trust in Him. Most men see only what their eyes can see, but men such as Job, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul “look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2Cor. 4:18).

It is not incorrect to say that the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, but it is spiritually near-sighted to see no further than that. It is not incorrect to say that evil men crucified the Lord Jesus – Peter said that to the multitude in Jerusalem on Pentecost morning (Acts 2:22-23). But it is spiritually near-sighted to fail to understand that those wicked men did only what God “determined before to be done” (Acts 4:28).

GOD’S OTHER PROMISES

Having healed an afflicted woman, Jesus rebuked with these words the man who condemned him for healing her on the Sabbath day:

“You hypocrite! Don’t each of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall and lead him away for watering? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound – lo, these eighteen years! – be loosed from this bondage on the Sabbath day?”
Luke 13:15-16

Had the Israelites faithfully kept their covenant with the LORD, the LORD would just as faithfully have kept His promises of health, prosperity, and peace for the nation (Dt. 28:1-14). When the nation drifted into the darkness of idolatry, God was still faithful, and kept His other promises of sickness, destitution, and war for the nation (Dt. 28:15-68). Ironically, Israel’s miseries are a testimony to God’s faithfulness, for God *promised* horrible suffering to Israel if

she disobeyed His commandments, just as He promised her peace and prosperity if she obeyed. Therefore, the confession that Israel's sufferings were from the hand of God is nothing more than a confession of God's faithfulness to His word (cp. Dan. 9:1-19).

When Jesus came, Israel had been in large measure turned over by God to the power of delusive spirits (Jn. 12:37-41). God had stripped them of their civil authority, giving the government of Palestine into the hand of the Romans. The Jews were, at Jesus' time, a despised and downtrodden people, plagued with all manner of sickness and disease, insanity and demon possession – all from the hand of God. Israel had drunk deeply from the cup of God's wrath, but in the voice of Jesus, she was hearing the call of her God to a new start:

“Speak comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. For she has received FROM THE LORD'S HAND double for all her sins.”
Isaiah 40:2

It was from the LORD's hand that Israel was under foreign domination by the Romans. It was from the LORD's hand that sickness, oppression, and demon-possession afflicted Israel. As a part of all that, it was from the LORD's hand that some were “bound by Satan”. Satan did not have the authority to afflict God's people whenever he willed to do so; nor was he the one punishing them for their sins. Israel's wretched condition was evidence of God's wrath against sin, not Satan's. It is essential to our growth in faith to understand that. Jesus said that Satan is the one who had afflicted the woman he healed, but when that statement is rightly understood, it provides us with only more reason to serve *God* with “fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12; 1Peter 1:17), for it demonstrates what God, if pushed to it, will do to His own children who will not remain faithful to Him (see 1Cor. 10:1-12). Nothing in Jesus' words suggests that Satan is anything more than one of the many tools that God may use to chastise His unruly children.

When Israel had received “double for all her sins,” the Son of God was sent from heaven with power to cast Satan out and to demonstrate the absolute authority of God over the conditions of His people. Gloriously, Jesus demonstrated that truth in perfection as he went about “doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the Devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). God had sent the suffering, and God had sent the healing.

GOODNESS AND SEVERITY

Teachers of righteousness have always maintained a proper balance between trust in God's mercy and fear of His wrath and have seen no contradiction in declaring the reality of both, almost with the same breath:

“Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps covenant and mercy with those who love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations, and repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack to him who hates Him. He will repay him to his face.”

Deuteronomy 7:9-10

Paul would later proclaim the same truth to the New Testament people of God:

“Be not high-minded, but fear. For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not you. Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God. On those

who fell, severity, but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.” Romans 11:20-22

Faith in God will never mature so long as one believes that “God is love” and nothing else or that “God is a consuming fire” and nothing else. We must, as Paul said, behold both the goodness and the severity of God. To deny either of them is heresy.

Many would quickly decry the blasphemy of declaring the blessings of God to be from the hand of Satan, but few decry the blasphemy of declaring God’s discipline, especially when it is severe, to be of Satan. Yet, where is the difference? Why would one be any less idolatrous than the other? God chastens, indeed scourges, His children whom He loves (Prov. 3:12; Heb. 12:6). Throughout the history of salvation, men of God have declared, with equal boldness and joy, both the wrath and the compassion of God:

“Come, and let us return to the LORD! For He has torn, and He will heal us. He has smitten, and He will bind us up.” Hosea 6:1

The tearing and the smiting were as much of God’s work as were the healing and the binding up. God’s children, however, are often taught that God will indeed heal, but that He will never tear, that He will indeed bind up, but never smite. The resultant picture of the Almighty that many saints hold is one of God constantly running behind Satan, trying to undo the damage Satan does to the saints, yet never quite able to catch up. The goodness of our Creator, great as it is, is imprudently emphasized when His power to discipline or to destroy is downplayed or denied outright.

We are God’s people, “the sheep of His pasture”, and Jesus is, in his own words, “the good shepherd” (Jn. 10:11), not a bad one. David’s thrilling Psalm of God’s perfect care for His people still speaks to us who are “the Israel of God”:

He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper. . . . The LORD will preserve you from all evil. He will preserve your soul. The LORD will preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore. excerpts, Psalm 121

THE SAINTS IN CORINTH

The subject of chastisement of the saints should never be treated as a subject that is apart from the goodness and wisdom and power of the Creator. His goodness, because God corrects us for *our* benefit, not His own (Heb. 12:10). His wisdom, because God knows “the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12) and makes righteous judgments. His power, because it is He alone who determines how and when and by whom our correction will come, whether by revelation (Phil. 3:15), or by the exhortation of an elder (Gal. 3:1), or, as in the case of the stubborn Corinthian congregation, by sickness, weakness, and even premature death.

The body of believers who lived in the prosperous city of Corinth was a body without effective government. Lacking spiritual leadership, these raucous saints drifted into the quagmire of strife, envy, and sectarianism. It was largely “for this cause”, Paul told them, “many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged [by the Lord]” (1Cor. 11:30-31).

It is of first importance that we, with Paul, should acknowledge that the sickness, weakness, and premature deaths in the Corinthian congregation were not chance occurrences or “attacks of the Devil” against the household of faith. The power of God over His kingdom and the love of God for His children exclude those two options. Their sufferings were from God, in wisdom measured by Him specifically for individual members of that assembly. Their sufferings were judgments of the LORD. The value and purpose for their suffering would have been missed, had the saints in Corinth failed to acknowledge that fact. The Corinthians could have hope and comfort, even in their sufferings, as long as they understood that the Lord’s discipline is a sure indication of His love, and secondly, that the purpose for His discipline is not to condemn but to save, as Paul explained to them:

But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord so that we should not be
condemned with the world. 1Corinthians 11:32

Those among us who have erred and are now suffering for that error can rest in hope, though men and, yes, even fellow believers, stand aloof, knowing that when God chastens, He chastens with a good, healing purpose. If in times of suffering we can but gather to our hearts the faith to persevere in doing good in His sight, God, in due season, will command that we reap in full what we in faithfulness to Him have sown. When leaving the “ninety and nine” sheep within the fold, there was no animosity in the heart of the shepherd as he stepped out into the dark to find the one lamb who had gone astray. That story of the lost lamb, told by Jesus (Mt. 18:10-14; Lk. 15:1-7), indicates that there is not an obedient saint alive who stands any closer to God’s heart than the saint who has sinned and is now suffering the bitter consequence.

Our loving heavenly Father “does not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men” (Lam. 3:33). However, when by ignorant resistance to His will, we push Him to unpleasant, even severe measures, it is a matter for great thankfulness that it is still He who holds the chastening rod, “for the LORD will not cast off forever. And though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies” (Lam. 3:31-32). Paul knew that. The Corinthians knew that. The matter of suffering and the saints is a matter between Father and children. At Corinth, the children had erred. The Father, for the children’s benefit, had chastened them. In difficult times, it is comforting to remember that the disciplining of the saints is a family affair, and Satan is not in the family.

Obviously, the Corinthians had serious spiritual problems, resulting in situations which could rightly be called tragic. Infinitely more tragic than God’s afflicting these unruly saints, however, would have been God’s refusal to afflict them. The worst that could have happened is for the Corinthians to be given free rein in their sin, to have been abandoned to wander in the darkness of their own stubborn way, as the author of Hebrews explained:

If you are without chastisement . . . then are you bastards, and not sons. Hebrews 12:8

All of God’s sons are promised His guiding hand. Many times, it is the gentle, comforting touch that shows us the higher way. Sometimes, for our sakes, He must be more forceful. Nevertheless, when those harsher times come, we may still be confident that it is our Father, not another, at work, answering in His wise way our prayers to be made more pleasing in His sight.

“THE DEVIL IS NOT MY FATHER”

In September of 1981, throughout the seemingly endless afternoon and evening, into the early morning hours, a dear brother in Christ named Earl suffered excruciating, unrelenting pain, as the saints prayed and the medical personnel labored in the emergency room to save his life. He had been suddenly stricken with severe pains in his head during a meeting of the saints, and now, in the hospital, Earl was undergoing emergency procedures to discover the source of the problem.

The head pains were gradually brought under control, as Earl weathered some tests which caused new pains of their own. A spinal tap revealed blood in his spinal column. From where was it coming? More tests were run, but they failed to determine the exact origin of the bleeding. However, the grim certainty that the blood had drained into the spinal column from somewhere near the base of his brain could not be doubted. The prospect of more difficult tests, and possibly surgery, faced this weary and hurting saint.

It was during the most trying moments, the moments of tests and retests, pain and uncertainty, that God added to Earl’s burden of pain, as He did to Job, the piercing heat of persecution. He sent to the hospital room beloved fellow believers who, although sincerely concerned for Earl, unintentionally burdened his wounded spirit with unwise words:

“What do you say about God determining the suffering of the saints now, Earl?”

“I tell you, it’s easy to talk that stuff when you’re well. But when you’re sick, it’s a different story.”

“Why, you know it can’t be God doing this to His own children. That would make Him our enemy. I just don’t see it.”

“That preacher might say the Devil doesn’t have such authority, but if he’d come face to face with something like this, it might make him change his mind, wouldn’t it, Earl?”

“What do you think now, Earl? If this isn’t the Devil’s work, then what is?”

Through it all, Earl remained humbly resolute, for Earl’s mind was intent on finding God’s purpose for his suffering and on searching himself to see if a cause could be found. He reflected on the afternoon prayer meeting where he was stricken. He remembered the visitor there, a brother in Christ who, in a misguided spirit, attempted to disrupt the meeting. Earl remembered how God had warned him to leave it to the elders in the meeting to handle the visitor, and he remembered how he had spoken up anyway. He remembered how the love of God among the saints had been demonstrated to that wayward brother, had held the meeting together, and had overlooked his foolishness – a love for that brother which Earl had failed to demonstrate.

Now, not resisting the conviction of God’s holy Spirit, Earl acknowledged his error, his impatience with the foolish brother and his disobedience to God’s clear command. He saw himself now as he had not seen himself then. He heard his own unwise remarks now, as the LORD had heard them then. And now, chastened and penitent, he resisted the temptation to blame Satan for his suffering. Rather, he glorified God, and looked to Him to be both the Author and Finisher of his sufferings. If his soul was to be relieved of its burden of guilt, Earl was determined that it would be relieved by his heavenly Father’s forgiveness, not by falsely accusing Satan in order to cover up his own guilt. The stain of Earl’s sin would not be whitewashed with self-justification but would be washed white by the cleansing blood of Christ.

The child had erred. The Father had punished. And to his sincere but misguided hospital “comforters”, who would have had Earl to deny his guilt by honoring Satan with responsibility for his pain, Earl’s simple response contained a world of hidden truth: “The Devil is not my Father.”

During this time, I went to visit “Sister Atkinson”, an elderly “mother in Christ” who was full of the Spirit. In our conversation, this godly woman told me that in a recent dream, she had seen Jesus and herself operating on the back of Brother Earl’s neck and that the surgery had been successful. After that, I returned to Duke Medical Center to visit Earl, and there I learned that another spinal tap revealed that Earl’s bleeding had stopped, apparently by itself. The original source of the bleeding was never found. Eventually, Earl was sent home, and after a time of recuperation, he resumed his factory job and began to enjoy life, a wiser, more patient, more compassionate man. Earl would later tell me that he believed that knowing the truth actually saved his life, for if he had thought that Satan was attacking him, he certainly would not have searched himself to find a cause for his suffering. And if he had not found and repented for the cause of his suffering, he may well have died, as some of the Corinthian believers “fell asleep” because of their failure to acknowledge and repent of their errors.

In essence, the message that Jeremiah so desperately tried to communicate to his generation was that the Devil was not their father. He spoke of Baal, Molech, and other gods because at that time, God’s people were honoring them with responsibility over their sufferings. In our time, God’s people honor the Devil that way. Jeremiah understood that if God was God of the Jews, then God was God of the lives of the Jews. And if God was God of the lives of the Jews, then God was God of what happened to the lives of the Jews. This is what God’s being God means, but that seems to be a difficult lesson for God’s people to learn.

GOD’S BEING GOD

It takes time to grow in knowledge and to appreciate what God’s being God means. Satan is a master craftsman with lies, but he is not God. Satan is an “anointed cherub”, “full of wisdom and perfect in beauty” (Ezek. 28:12), but he is not God. Satan is a “prince” (Jn. 12:31), but he is not God, nor is he even like God. Satan is the “god of this world” (2Cor. 4:4), but being “god of this world” gives Satan no authority over any saint’s life – except to the extent that our heavenly Father may choose to use him to accomplish some wise purpose. Satan’s being “god of this world” is not to be compared to God’s being God, nor is it a cause for alarm. Rather, it is cause for confidence and joy, for his being “god of this world” means he is not god of anything that concerns those who are *not* of this world. Oh, if we could fully grasp the glory of that! But in the main, men just don’t know what God’s being God means. Demons know, and they tremble (Jas. 2:19), but men do not know.

Satan and his fellow evil spirits know, much better than men know, that they have no power whatsoever to govern in God’s kingdom. They have no absolute dominion over any part of God’s Creation. Whenever and wherever their wicked wisdom and their power is exercised, it is exercised with God-given limitations and for God-given purposes. Satan is servant, not master. He is the father of lies, according to Jesus (Jn. 8:44), and the lie with which he has most often robbed from men’s hearts the faith and fear which belongs to God is the lie that he has the authority to determine either good or evil for men, that he will “get you” if you don’t watch out.

The truth is much more dreadful than that, for it is a much more “fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

BEST FRIEND

One sister in the Lord told me, tongue in cheek, after I had delivered this message in her city, that I had caused her to lose her best friend. She then explained that the “best friend” she had lost was Satan. For in the past, when trouble arose in her life, she would disgustedly cast all the responsibility on the Devil, and thus relieving herself of the burden to seek God’s purpose for the trial, she would continue in her stubborn and stumbling way. But now, she explained, whenever trouble arose, she had nowhere to look but to God, in humility and supplication seeking His purpose and His merciful, delivering hand. Her previous “attacks of the Devil” had been transformed by the truth into what they had really been all the time: God-given discipline to lead her toward spiritual maturity. And what a difference that realization made in her life!

Satan offers himself as the “best friend” of every guilty conscience. He is willing, even eager, to be blamed for the trouble we cause ourselves because as long as we are holding him responsible for our sufferings, we are giving him a place in our hearts and minds that he can by no other means occupy. And as long as we hold him responsible, we are failing to look for God’s purpose in our suffering. As long as we hold him responsible, we are idolaters, for Satan has become like God in our hearts. That is the reason, as Jesus said to me in 1981, “It tickles the Devil for God’s people to blame their troubles on him.” By no other means can Satan occupy a seat in the temple of God (the fleshly bodies of believers – 1Cor. 3:16) than for God’s people to give it to him, and the principal way God’s people “give place to the Devil” is by holding him responsible for the unpleasant circumstances of their lives.

“DO YOU BELIEVE THE SCRIPTURES?”

Not many are as receptive to this message as was the woman who lost her “best friend.” When the Spirit of the Lord opened my mind to these truths and I delivered my first sermon on the subject, some who were present that night left the prayer meeting in tears. They loved me and were grieved that my spiritual condition had, as they saw it, deteriorated to the point that I could say that God, not Satan, is responsible for the suffering of the saints. For those who do not know me or love me as did those saints, the reaction is frequently anger and contempt. But no reaction to what the Bible says about suffering and the saints is more inexplicable than the reaction of Lisa, one of my students at our local community college.

Lisa was a young mother, a community leader, and had been active in her church from her youth. Near the end of the objective Bible Study course which I taught at the local community college, Lisa announced to the class her conclusion: the Bible itself was wrong. This happened several years before I, myself, understood the truth you are reading in this book; so, she was not reacting to what I taught. She was reacting solely to the information found in the Bible, which she had obviously never read. It stunned me that instead of letting the Bible instruct her and change her thinking about the Creator, this intelligent young woman chose to condemn the Bible and cling to her own misguided ideas about God.

Lisa was neither an exception nor a villain. She was a victim of ignorance about our Creator. Lisa had grown up, spiritually speaking, on a diet of Sunday school lessons and sweet sermons

which emphasized the goodness and wisdom of God, but denied His power and His wrath against sin.⁶ The results of her life-long diet of error were tragic, though she did not believe so. For her entire life, she had been instructed in spiritual matters, and yet, she was not only ignorant of God, but she also had developed an irreverence for the holy Scriptures which permitted her to condemn them because they declared God to be something other than what she thought. What foolishness, to condemn the revelation of God in order to maintain one's own ideas! When the apostle Paul made his confession of faith before King Agrippa, he concluded by asking the question, "Do you believe the prophets?" (Acts 26:27). We should all search our hearts with such blunt questions.

Do we believe the Scriptures? Do we believe in the Creator as the righteous men and women of faith believed in Him? Do we believe what Joseph said about God and about his suffering? Or what Job said? And what about Jesus? Do the things they said about God and their sufferings enlighten us, or do they make us wonder whether they really understood the truth about their situations? Should we alter our thoughts about the Almighty if our thoughts are different from theirs? Do we, or can we, believe the prophets? Was David right in saying that his terrible afflictions were from God? Would we be right to make the same confession? The warfare for your heart is raging.

THE "ETERNAL SECURITY" NETWORK

Whatever the styles or symptoms of idolatry, and wherever and whenever they appear, those styles and symptoms are sustained by what people think. What people think, in turn, is determined by what they are taught. It should come as no surprise that certain doctrines, under the umbrella of what I call "the Eternal Security Network" are taught to New Testament believers which sustain the same idolatrous notions that ruined God's Old Testament people. The apostle Peter gave us ample warning:

There were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies. . . . And many shall follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of.

2Peter 2:1-2

Ample warnings notwithstanding, the body of Christ has lowered its guard against the same doctrines, couched in New Testament language, that the prophets of success and victory once taught. Those prophets drove the fear of God out of the hearts of most of God's people by encouraging an idolatrous view of suffering, thus diminishing the fear of God. The modern counterparts of those professional prophets, Christian ministers, have succeeded at least as well as those prophets did, and as a result, few if any today would dare claim to feel, as did the apostle Paul, "the terror of the Lord" (2Cor. 5:11).

Let us examine some of the most popular of these poisonous doctrines.

⁶ It was also during my class that Lisa, having grown up in an upper-class Church, first heard that Jesus was coming again. She had never heard that precious promise taught in all her years as an active Church member.

No. 1: *Because of Who We Are*

When the prophets of success and victory cast Jeremiah into the pit of mud for counseling the Jews to surrender to the Babylonians, the reason for their hatred was not simply that Jeremiah held a different opinion of the Babylonians (although his opinion of the invaders did differ from theirs). The principal reason for their great hatred was the more fundamental difference of Jeremiah's perception of the Creator. Jeremiah feared Him alone, while they feared Him along with other gods. It was what Jeremiah knew about God that enabled him to see the hand of God in the Babylonian siege and inspired him to call for Jerusalem to surrender. And it was what the professional prophets *thought they knew* about God that blinded them to God's chastening hand and inspired them to resist both Jeremiah and the Babylonians.

The prophets of success and victory were forerunners of Churchmen who teach the same old errors. Those ancient prophets did not believe that God would destroy His temple or His people. They believed that God's people were assured of deliverance simply because of who they were – God's people – irrespective of their adherence to His law. Jeremiah, on the other hand, knew that God would save only those among His people who kept His commandments.

To Jeremiah's message, all the writers of the New Testament books agree. For example, the author of Hebrews wrote that Jesus "became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Heb. 5:9). And as for whether or not God will destroy His temple, Paul was very clear. First, he explained that in this covenant, the temple of God is not an earthly building but the fleshly bodies in which He dwells:

You are the temple of God, and . . . the Spirit of God dwells in you! 1Corinthians 3:16

Then, in perfect consonance with Jeremiah's fearsome warnings to Jerusalem, Paul added this somber admonition:

If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy! For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. 1Corinthians 3:17

Proponents of any of this element of the "Eternal Security Network" hold that those who are the temple of God can never be destroyed. They teach, as the Old Testament false teachers taught, that those who belong to God are assured of salvation because of who they are, not on the basis of how they live their lives. They believe that, because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, God will not consider the personal conduct of believers in the Final Judgment.

The Calvinistic strain of this doctrine admits that only obedient saints will be saved in the end, but the catch is that, according to this doctrine, every person who is ever truly converted will be obedient to God. As with all forms of the Eternal Security Network, this one ignores the simple realities of life, the warnings of the New Testament writers, and the tragic history of Israel and Judah, which "happened to them for examples, and they are written for our admonition" (1Cor. 10:11). The prophets of success and victory were Israelites as much as Jeremiah was an Israelite, and their miserable end was conclusive proof that their doctrine was false, for it proved that those who belong to God can refuse the truth and do evil and that if they do, God will destroy them. Those who are born again may successfully "run the race" to eternal life, or they may go astray and "make shipwreck of their faith" (1Tim. 1:19). That message has

been proclaimed by every true man of God from the beginning of the world, and it has been denied by every false prophet.

No. 2: *By Faith Alone*

So popular is the phrase “salvation by faith alone” that it surprises people to discover that there is no verse in the New Testament which says that. In fact, the notion that salvation is “by faith alone” contradicts the apostles’ consistent teaching concerning salvation, as we will show. If salvation is “by faith alone”, then salvation has nothing to do with how we live. And if it has nothing to do with how we live, then there is no need to fear God because there is no wrath of God to fear, no suffering for sin that He would bring upon us.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers that their salvation was “not of works” (Eph. 2:8-9), he was referring to the *ceremonial works* of the Mosaic law, not a person’s deeds. Almost always, Paul was explicit about what kind of works he was talking about:

Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

Romans 3:28; also Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16

Paul would have agreed whole-heartedly with James’ words:

What does it profit, my brethren, though a man say he has faith, and he have not works? Can faith save him? . . . You see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith alone.

James 2:14, 24

There is no contradiction between what Paul and James taught, for *they were speaking of different kinds of works!* Paul was talking about ceremonial rites, and James was talking about keeping God’s commandments. Certainly, in Christ, the saints are freed from the ceremonial works of the law, but they are not freed from the obligation to work. Christ has made us free from the ordinances of the law of Moses, but that does not mean that we are “without law to God” (1Cor. 9:21). True prophets and apostles all warned God’s people that their Final Judgment would be based on their *works*. David (Ps. 62:12), Solomon (Eccl. 12:14), our Lord Jesus (Mt. 16:27), John (Rev. 20:12-13), and every other man sent from God taught that men’s *deeds* will determine their eternal destiny (cp. Rom. 2:5-10).

The Bible is clear in its declaration that we are “saved by grace through faith” (Eph. 2:8). But it is also clear in its declaration that we are saved by hope (Rom. 8:24-25), by believing (Acts 16:31), by being baptized (Mk. 16:16; 1Pet. 3:21), by keeping God’s commandments (Rev. 22:12-14), by confession (Rom. 10:10), by sanctification (2Thess. 2:13), by perseverance in the faith (1Tim. 2:15; 4:16), by the constant renewing of the inward man by the holy Spirit (Tit. 3:5), by calling on the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:13), by giving heed to the gospel (1Cor. 15:2; Heb. 2:3), by looking for the Lord’s return (Heb. 9:28), by enduring persecutions in the love of God (Mt. 10:22; 24:12-13), by righteousness (1Pet. 4:18), by the fear of God (Phil. 2:12), by doing good (Jn. 5:28-29; Rom. 2:5-10), by the life of Christ Jesus (Rom. 5:10), and by whatever else God’s will may be for us, individually, in this life.

Peter strictly warned us to “be diligent that you may be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless” (2Pet. 3:14). He knew our salvation depended on it! But it seems to be one of the highest priorities of the professional prophets of this covenant to convince the saints that the

way Peter told the saints to live is not necessary. But if they convince God's people that salvation will be given to them because of who they are, whether or not they obey God's commandments, their fear of God will be diminished, and their hope of receiving the crown of eternal life will be diminished along with it.

No. 3: *Still Bound to Sin*

The apostle Paul wrote, "In me (that is, in my flesh), dwells no good thing" (Rom. 7:18). However, when a man teaches that our sinfulness is so great that even in Christ we are bound to sin, he runs afoul of the gospel. Some proponents of this error teach that when a person is born again, God no longer sees him sinning even though that person continues to sin. They teach that disobedient children of God will be saved in the end in spite of their continuing in sin because God, for Jesus' sake, will not hold them accountable for their sinful deeds. This form of Eternal Security doctrine has an appearance of humility even as it provides rebellious souls an excuse to continue in sin instead of obeying God and repenting of it! How highly this doctrine appears to exalt Christ, even as it denies his power to set free from sin! It is an Old Testament heresy in New Testament garb, condemned by every righteous voice in history, whether old or new:

"You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you say, 'Wherein have we wearied you?' When you say, 'Every one who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them.'"

Malachi 2:17

Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived! Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

1Corinthians 6:9-10

Be holy in all manner of conduct, as He who calls you is holy. For it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." And if you call on the Father who, without respect of persons, judges according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.

1Peter 1:15-17

God's ancient demand for holiness among His people is not lowered or removed in this New Testament; instead, it is raised to new heights, even to the point of a demand for perfection (Mt. 5:48; Col. 1:28; etc.) The certainty of death without mercy for those Jews who disobeyed Moses' law is less than the certainty of death for New Testament saints who disobey Jesus (Heb. 10:26-31). We have so much more with which we can overcome unrighteousness than God's Old Testament people had! How can we fail to be worthy of greater damnation if our deeds are evil?

The Old Testament prophets of success and victory erred in their assumption that salvation was guaranteed to God's people simply because of who they were. It was actually the fact that they were God's people which imposed upon them a greater responsibility to do good – and made them more worthy of damnation for sin than were the heathen, who didn't know God! "For to whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required" (Lk. 12:48). New Testament prophets of success and victory do not understand, any more than their Old Testament counterparts did, that the people who are most assured of damnation are not such wretched

people as Nero, Stalin, or Hitler, but believers who do not obey their heavenly Father. Who is more worthy of death than the one who has been delivered from the power of sin and then willfully returns to it? Who can more justly be condemned to eternal death than the one who has been cleansed from sin by the blood of Christ, but then returns to it, like a dog “returning to his own vomit,” or like a pig that is washed, returning “to her wallowing in the mire” (2Pet. 2:22)?

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. 2Peter 2:20-21

This is not to say that saints who err are without hope, for we are told that if we sin, “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” However, disobedient saints are in danger of losing their souls if they do not repent and avail themselves of the Advocate they have been given. Disobedience is still “as the sin of witchcraft”, and all the more is it so when those doing the sinning are those who have received God’s holy Spirit. It is not true that in Christ, our disobedience is excused. The truth is that, in Christ, all excuse for disobedience has been taken away.

For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, worked in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. . . . But you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. . . . For if you [people who belong to God] live after the flesh, you shall die. But if you through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, you shall live. Romans 7:5; 8:9, 13

God’s consistent demand for holiness and His ministers’ clear warning of eternal damnation for lack of holiness do not diminish the beauty of God’s love or the depth of His goodness. Indeed, those demands and warnings come from God’s love and goodness, for when we receive them, we turn from our own ways to God, our refuge.

No. 4: God Is Love (and nothing else)

The idolatrous doctrines of Old Testament false prophets and the Eternal Security doctrines of New Testament false teachers produce the same evil fruit; the fear of God is diminished by them all. But fear of God has always been a quality of righteous men. It is to the wicked that both David and Paul were referring when they wrote, “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Ps. 36:1; Rom. 3:18). John did say, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.” However, the fear that is “cast out” by love is not the fear of God; it is the fear of everything *except God*.

The fear of God is sweet. It is clean and holy and good. It is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of what men and demons can do to us, or any fear other than the fear of God, is the kind of fear which “has torment”, and the saint who fears such things “is not made perfect in love” (1Jn. 4:18). On the other hand, the saint who knows God well enough to fear Him knows the great relief of fearing none but Him, and he loves God all the more on that account.

It is true that “God is love” (1Jn. 4:8). Yet, can we not as certainly say that God has always been love? And does that not mean that God was love when He cursed Adam and Eve and their offspring with death? When He sent His dear Son to the Roman scourging post and then to the horrible death of crucifixion, was not God still love? When Ananias’ and Sapphira’s breath was wrenched from their bodies (Acts 5:1-11), and when Stephen was being stoned (Acts 7:54-60), was not God still love? And at the Final Judgment, when the Lake of Fire is being filled with anguished souls begging for mercy and finding none, will not God still be love?

Yes, God *is* love, but Christian prophets of success and victory have redefined “love”, so that a God who loves cannot also be a God of great and fearful wrath, or cause His own people to suffer. John said “God is love” because John was in love with God. All who love God as John did have come to know how true those words are. But John did not tell the whole truth about God in those three words. It takes the whole Bible to teach us the whole truth, and is it any less an inspired scriptural truth that God is “greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints” (Ps. 89:7) than that “God is love”?

The “Eternal Security” doctrines we have just considered form a network of support for idolatrousness by denying, implicitly or explicitly, the need for unadulterated fear of the Almighty. And when people are instructed against the fear of God, they begin to think of God as never doing anything to cause people to fear Him. And in that case, whom do you think those people are going to honor with responsibility for the sufferings of the saints and the world? And who do you think might be waiting with open arms to receive that praise?

A GENERATION LIKE JOSIAH’S

The denial of the requirement of holiness and good works and the denial of the reality of divine punishment for sin are both expressions of the corrupt nature of man. In our time, the roots of this corruption have grown deep. Like King Josiah’s generation, many believers today are without any real knowledge of God or the Bible, and when they come face to face with what the Bible actually says, they are sometimes unwilling to forsake the comfortable errors of their particular tradition. Because of this lack of real biblical and spiritual knowledge, many saints are becoming increasingly easy targets for spirits such as the ones that so disastrously led Jeremiah’s generation astray and hardened their hearts to the fear of God. Already, the stage is being set for the fiercest spiritual battles ever witnessed, for the saints are now being moved by some of the strongest deceitful winds ever to blow through the vineyards of God’s kingdom. Already, the truth has been discarded, cast into a closet of God’s house with other “junk”, to make room for idols of men’s own vain imaginations. And not many are mourning the loss.

But we *would* mourn, if we knew the goodness of what has been discarded. And we can know, for all Creation is declaring it. We have allowed ungodly doctrines to grow to heights of staggering influence only because we were ignorant of the knowledge of God. We just didn’t know what God’s being God means. And, in large measure, we didn’t know what God’s being God means because the revelation of Creation has been neglected and, so, the message of Creation, lost. Salvation is not by faith alone because God is God. Saints are eternally secure from Satan’s rule over them because God is God, but they are not, merely by being saints,

exempt from the wages of sin, if they sin – because God is God. If Satan were God, sin could be acceptable. But God is God; therefore, sin is still sin.

PAUL'S THORN

I can think of no truth which does not *seem to be* contradicted somewhere in Scripture. For example, against the truth that it is a sin for saints to be “joined to a harlot” (1Cor. 6:15-17), one could point out that the prophet Hosea was righteous, though he lived with a harlot for several years (Hos. 1:2-3). And against the truth that there is one Lord and one God (Eph. 4:5, 6), someone could take out of context the words of Paul, “There are many gods, and many lords” (1Cor. 8:5) or even the last part of Psalm 14:1, which states, “There is no God.”

It is only to be expected, then, that we should find a few scriptures which seem to contradict the truth concerning God determining all things for us, even our sufferings. One such scripture concerns Paul's “thorn in the flesh”:

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. 2Corinthians 12:7

The fact that Paul called his thorn “the messenger of Satan” has caused some to jump to the conclusion that Paul's thorn was determined for him by Satan. Paul neither said that nor intended for that to be taken from his words. Didn't Paul acknowledge that his thorn was given to him in order to accomplish a good purpose in his life; namely, to make certain Paul did not become proud? Without any doubt, his confession of a holy purpose for the thorn was an implicit confession of God's control over it. And God's having a holy purpose for Paul's thorn presupposes that God intended for Paul to have it, that it was neither a chance occurrence nor merely a wanton attack of the enemy, and that from the beginning of Paul's suffering, to use Joseph's words, “God meant it for good.”

It was God who discerned Paul's need for a thorn in the flesh, and it was God who determined the degree to which that thorn would press Paul's spirit. If Satan had been in control of Paul's suffering, he certainly would not have measured that suffering to exactly fit Paul's spiritual need. It simply makes no sense to think that the Devil, “the father of lies”, is the one who determines for us the suffering which brings us back to, or keeps us walking in the will of our heavenly Father. To do that is the work of our Shepherd, not the enemy of our souls.

The fact that Paul's thorn was “the messenger of Satan” makes God's care for Paul no less complete. We could, for example, say that the marauding Sabians who stole Job's oxen and asses were messengers of Satan. We could also say that the mob that arrested Jesus was a messenger of Satan (see Jn. 14:30). Nevertheless, both Job and Jesus maintained the integrity of their faith and acknowledged none but God as the God of their lives. Paul felt no differently. Having declared, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31), Paul would hardly think that Satan had sneaked past God's protecting Spirit to stick a tormenting thorn into his flesh. In fact, when Paul asked God to take away the thorn which the “messenger of Satan” had brought, God refused because He had designed that thorn to meet Paul's need:

For this thing, I besought the LORD thrice, that it might depart from me. But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”
2Corinthians 12:8-9a

We must not allow Paul’s mention of Satan to overshadow all else that Paul said and taught. Paul’s thorn was given to him by God as certainly as “the abundance of revelations” was given to him by God, and as a spiritual balance to them.

HE MOVED DAVID

I should add here an explanation of one more portion of scripture that, at first, seems to contradict the truth. Though it is found in the Old Testament, it could easily be taken to mean that someone other than God exercises authority in His kingdom. This example will clearly demonstrate the necessity of employing the whole of Scripture, rather than isolated passages, in our quest for the true knowledge of God.

In 1Chronicles 21:1, we are told that “Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel.” This verse, taken alone, would seem to indicate that Satan has power of himself to determine trouble for the saints. However, we are blessed by the fact that another account of the same story is given in 2Samuel 24. There, the story is introduced with these words:

And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and HE moved David against them to say, “Go, and number Israel and Judah.”

So, taking both verses together, we see that what David did was not determined by Satan’s will but by God, because Israel had provoked Him to wrath. Again, Satan is found to have been merely a tool used by God to accomplish His purpose. It is also noteworthy that in neither 1Chronicles nor 2Samuel’s account of this story is Satan mentioned again. In both accounts, the plague that followed David’s foolish deed is said to have been sent from God (2Sam. 24:15; 1Chron. 21:7, 14), and God’s angel (not Satan) was God’s agent of destruction (cp. 2Sam. 24:16; 1Chron. 21:15). Israel’s deliverance was, likewise, solely determined by God (2Sam. 24:25; 1Chron. 21:27).

The only part, then, which Satan is said to have played in that story is that of God’s tool for the temptation of David. Satan had no more control over what happened to David and to Israel than did the plague God sent. It was not Satan, but God who determined *if* Israel would suffer, *when* Israel would suffer, *how* Israel would suffer (2Sam. 24:11-13), or *how long* Israel’s suffering should last (2Sam. 24:16). That is a power Satan has always coveted, but never obtained, even if undiscerning saints often attribute that power to him.

NOT ONE INCH

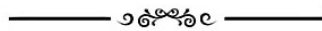
We are engaged every day in spiritual warfare, and it is real. The powers of darkness are real. Demonic spirits are real and, unfortunately, often hold sway in the kingdoms of men. But there has never been a spiritual battle lost by anyone who persisted in doing what is right and who trusted God to be faithful in His promise to work all things together for those whom He has called and who love Him (Rom. 8:28). Demons determine neither our choices nor the results of our choices. Our choices are ours alone to make, and the results of those choices are God’s alone to determine.

The stories of the righteous are stories of men and women who believed that there is no other like the Creator. Their fear and devotion were not divided. Their attention was riveted on the only worthy goal; to wit, accomplishing the will of God for their lives. There is a peace and confidence that comes with that kind of faith, which a lifetime of denouncing the Devil will never bring.

There is not one inch of God's Creation over which Satan exercises absolute dominion, not one circumstance in our lives over which he reigns. Even the popularly held idea that Satan rules in hell is only more of his own self-glorifying propaganda, for in John's Revelation (1:18), Jesus says that he, himself, holds "the keys of hell and of death." Let us rise, then, above the darkness and confusion of a deceived, idolatrous world! Let us rejoice that there is none even remotely like our Creator,

"who in His times will show who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach, whom no man has seen, nor can see, to whom be honor and power everlasting. Amen."

1Timothy 6:15-16



CHAPTER 10

SUFFERING AND PLEASURE

I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.
I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound.

Everywhere and in all things,
I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry,
both to abound and to suffer need.

I can do all things through
Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:11-13



THE THOUGHTS OF MANY HEARTS

When considering the “why” of suffering, it is easily overlooked that the saint who is suffering is never the only one being tried by that suffering. By the suffering of one, the thoughts of many hearts are usually revealed; the greater the suffering, the greater the revelation of hearts.

When King David was fleeing from Absalom, those who loved him were revealed by their contribution, if only in prayer and hope, to his return to the throne. Others, like Shimei, who secretly harbored envy and ill-will toward David were revealed, too, in their being gratified by David’s hurt. Job’s three friends were being tried by Job’s suffering as well as was Job. Their self-righteous pride and ignorance of God were exposed in the form of false accusations against him. Jesus’ disciples were tried by his arrest. Their fear of disgrace and death (which fear they later lost) was exposed in the form of their abandoning him to the evil mob.

It is simple spiritual truth, that our reaction to the sufferings of another reveals the hidden thoughts of *our* hearts, and I suspect that God sometimes causes suffering for no other reason than to bring to light thoughts that would otherwise remain hidden.

In my adversity, they rejoiced . . . but when they were sick, I humbled my soul with fasting. . . . I bowed down heavily, as one who mourns for his mother. But in my adversity, they rejoiced, . . . they opened their mouth wide against me, and said, “Aha! Aha!”
excerpts, Psalm 35

Even for the most backslidden of saints, suffering is bad enough an experience without the added indignity of others being happy about it. What anyone needs who is suffering is deliverance, and whatever we can do to help them obtain deliverance, let us do it “in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1), for “He that is glad at

calamities shall not be unpunished” (Prov. 17:5). In all our dealings with the children of God, let us be mindful of our Savior, who said, “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me” (Mt. 25:40). But bear in mind that when Jesus said “the least of these my brothers”, he did not leave it to us to decide who “the least” are. He defined “the least” for us:

“Whosoever shall break one of these commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven.”
Matthew 5:19

In other words, believers who are walking contrary to holiness and teaching others that same error – these are “the least” in God’s kingdom. This would include the modern “prophets of success and victory”. It is our reaction to their needs and their sufferings which most thoroughly manifests the quality of our hearts.

“For if you love those who love you, what thanks have you? For sinners also love those that love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what thanks have you? For sinners even do the same.”
Luke 6:32-33

It is our reaction to the suffering of those who deserve to suffer which gives to those around us the clearest picture of our innermost thoughts. David certainly earned his suffering by his adultery with Bathsheba and his cruel murder of her righteous husband. But those whose hearts were pure stuck by David, encouraged his breaking heart, leaving the punishment to God. It was this kind of love and faithfulness which David twice showed to King Saul, when opportunities were given to David to slay the backslidden king. “I will not put forth my hand against my lord,” said David, “for he is the LORD’s anointed” (1Sam. 24:10). David knew that he should not add to the mad King’s distress because God alone had the authority to bring judgment upon him (1Sam. 24:9-13).

SUFFERING AND SIN

All suffering testifies of God’s righteous judgment upon man’s sin and is best seen as divine warning of the wrath to come against all sin unforgiven. This general statement, however, does not imply that every instance of suffering has been “earned” by the sufferer. The very fact that so many innocent and righteous biblical characters suffered unjustly should caution us not to assume that whenever a saint suffers, he or she has sinned and is being chastened for it. Job’s “miserable comforters” based all their condemnation of Job on that one wrong assumption:

“If you were pure and upright, surely now He would awake for you and make the habitation of your righteousness prosperous.”
Bildad, in Job 8:6

Health and prosperity are many times declared to be a result of obedience to the divine will (Dt. 28:1-14; Isa. 58:6-14; 1Thess. 5:12-23), but health and prosperity are also experienced by the wicked (Job 21:1-13; Ps. 73:1-14; Jer. 12:1-2). Sickness and poverty, too, are experienced by both the disobedient (Dt. 28:15-68) and the upright (Job, for example). Further yet, suffering is *promised* to every person who walks uprightly (2Tim. 3:10-12), and eternal glory with Christ is repeatedly said to await only those who suffer for his sake in this life (Mt. 5:10-12; Acts 14:22; Rom. 8:17; 2Cor. 1:7; Phil. 1:29; 2Tim. 2:12). Therefore, while it is true that suffering often

follows disobedience, we may not hold that suffering *only* follows disobedience. Individual suffering is not proof of individual sin.

I have heard it claimed that physical illness is never the kind of suffering that befalls righteous saints, and while the availability of God's healing power, which that teaching implies, is true and inspiring, there is sufficient biblical evidence to restrain us from taking such an extreme position. Surely, Job's sore, running boils (Job 2:7), constant, vicious diarrhea (30:27) and searing, relentless pains in his bones and muscles (30:17) may be classified as sickness and disease. And could we say that the sores which covered poor, begging Lazarus (Lk. 16:20) were proofs of unrighteousness in him, even though we are told that when he died, he "was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom" (Lk. 16:20)? Even the mighty prophet Elisha died of an unnamed illness (2Kgs. 13:14).

Paul mentioned several of his fellow laborers who suffered with sickness. There was Trophimus, a Gentile who risked his life in accompanying Paul on his last journey to Jerusalem (Acts 21:29), knowing, as Paul knew, the certainty of the persecutions which awaited Paul there (Acts 20:22-23; 21:10-15). Paul mentions Trophimus' sickness to Timothy in 2Timothy 4:20. Then there was Epaphroditus of Philippi, who both dearly loved and was dearly loved by Paul (Phil. 4:18). Paul called him "my brother, and companion in labor, and fellow soldier . . . and he who ministered to my needs" (Phil. 2:25). Of his sickness, Paul wrote, "he was sick nigh unto death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow" (Phil. 2:27). Even during his sickness, Epaphroditus demonstrated a genuine, holy concern for the saints (Phil. 2:26), which does not at all suggest that Epaphroditus had erred from the truth and was being punished for it. As far as we are told, he was always a devoted servant of Christ and of the saints.

Paul also spoke of the frequent illnesses of Timothy (1Tim. 5:23), whom Paul considered to be his spiritual son (1Tim. 1:2; 2Tim. 1:2). Although young, Timothy was of such ability, faithfulness, and understanding that he was trusted by Paul with the immense task of rescuing the degenerating condition of the congregation in Ephesus (1Tim. 1:3-4). Paul's two extant letters to Timothy are filled with exhortations for Timothy to study (2Tim. 2:15), to preach (2Tim. 4:2), to honor his elders (1Tim. 5:1, 17), and to flee "youthful lusts" (2Tim. 2:22). At no point is it suggested that Timothy had failed to measure up to Paul's exhortations and, therefore, had become sick. Rather, with those exhortations, Paul is merely rendering fatherly encouragement for Timothy to continue to do what he was already faithfully doing (cp. 2Tim. 3:14-15).

These are not the only instances of righteous saints becoming sick. The righteous King Hezekiah would have died of his sickness if God had not healed him (2Kgs. 20:1-7; Isa. 38). The very power of one angelic visitation to Daniel made him sick for days (Dan. 8:27). Jesus' dear friend Lazarus (not the begging pauper mentioned before) grew sick and died, setting the stage for one of Jesus' greatest miracles (Jn. 11). When Jesus was told, "He whom you love is sick," Jesus' response was not, "Let us go and tell Lazarus to repent." Rather, he said, "This sickness is for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified by it."

In the light of all this, it is incumbent upon us not to exclude sickness from those types of suffering which innocent and godly people may suffer. Otherwise, we ourselves may become some hurting saint's "miserable comforters", heaping condemnation on an innocent, suffering soul.

REAL SPIRITUAL LIFE

It is essential to our spiritual well-being that we confront the reality of our ignorance of God's purposes in His dealings with His children. This means that when anyone among us suffers, we cannot know why that person is suffering unless God allows us to know. Many times, by His Spirit or by one of His messengers, He does give us that understanding. Until He does do so, however, it is wise to refrain from making our own judgments. Not only is this true of the suffering of others, but it is also true of our own suffering. Unless the Lord reveals it, we can no more know why we are suffering than we can know why any one else is suffering. "Man's goings are of the LORD," said Solomon. "How can a man, then, understand his own way?" (Prov. 20:24).

Every instance of suffering stands alone, as a unique event, with its very own divinely ordained purpose. That purpose is always unknown until it is, by some means, revealed from heaven. But God does not want us just to sit back and wait for Him to tell us His purposes. The men of greatest faith demonstrate for us that "seek and you shall find" applies to this part of spiritual life as well as to any other. They struggled through their suffering to find and to accomplish the purpose of God. And they grew, as we may grow, in the knowledge of God by their search. They partook, as we may partake, more fully of true spiritual life as they strove to understand what God was doing with their lives. They knew that God wanted them to learn through their sufferings, not loaf through them. They understood that in order to do well, they needed to be spiritually alive to what God was accomplishing in their lives at any given moment.

The Bible shows us that if we would avoid the many pitfalls of darkness, we must live, with determination, in constant and close spiritual communion with God. This is what Paul called, "walking in the Spirit" (Rom. 8:1, 4; Gal. 5:16), being "led by the Spirit" (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18), and "having the mind of Christ" (1Cor. 2:16). What these Pauline phrases were intended to describe is real spiritual life; that is, moment by moment, situation by situation, relying upon the Spirit of God for our understanding of what is really happening.

This spiritual life may be short-circuited and lost if instead of relying upon God's Spirit, we resort to empty theological cliches such as "If you are sick, you have missed God somewhere," or "God's mysterious ways will never be known down here," or "Trouble is an attack of the Devil," etc. The challenge of faith is to rise above such spiritual placebos and come to know God. Let us confess our ignorance of His inscrutable purposes and our need of His wisdom! Let us confess faith in His goodness to reveal His truth to those who seek it! Let us pray! Let us study! Let us commune with our heavenly Father while we live on this earth! Let us participate in real spiritual life, and not skirt around it with easy, empty doctrine!

Whatever Jesus said about any person or event, he said because it had been revealed to him by the Spirit of truth, not because "it just had to be true" according to a doctrine he had learned. Speaking of the suffering "daughter of Abraham" (Lk. 13:15-16), Jesus said that Satan had bound her. Speaking of other cases of suffering, he warned that an individual's sin had brought about the affliction (e.g., Jn. 5:10-14). In still other cases, he taught that the suffering was not brought on by sin but came about so that God might be glorified by the manifestation of His healing power (Jn. 9:1-3; 11:1-4). When he spoke of the eighteen people upon whom the tower of Siloam collapsed, Jesus declared their deaths to be divine warnings to those who were still

alive (Lk. 13:4-5). And finally, he taught that his own suffering was for none of these reasons but was for the redemption of a world enslaved by sin. All this evidence points us to the fact that Jesus was spiritually alive – in each circumstance reliant not upon appearances or easy theology, but reliant upon the Spirit of the living God. He carried in his sacred heart no pattern, no stereotype, no labels to which to resort as an alternative to dependence upon the holy Spirit (see Isa. 11:1-4). He humbly confessed his complete dependence on his heavenly Father:

“I do nothing of myself, but as my Father has taught me, I speak these things. . . . And the word that you hear is not mine, but the Father’s who sent me.” John 8:28; 14:24

“If any man speak,” wrote the apostle Peter, “let him speak as the oracles of God” (1Pet. 4:11). Said Paul, “Let us not judge one another any longer” (Rom. 14:13). These men of God were echoing the Spirit of wisdom which spoke through David to his young son, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not to your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5). One who fully trusts in God reaches no conclusion and makes no judgment apart from the Spirit of God, and when such a person speaks, it truly is as if what he says is an “oracle of God”.

To hold that Satan is the binding force in every instance of suffering is as short-sighted as it would be to teach that every saint who is sick has caused that sickness to come upon him by committing sin, or that all suffering is for the redemption of sinners. To cling to any one agent or purpose as *the* agent or purpose for all cases of suffering may be easier, in the short run, than to study and pray for understanding of this world’s ever-changing circumstances, but, oh, what real spiritual life is missed by doing so!

Today is today. It has no mold into which it may fit. Moment by moment, this day is making its own mold, which at the set of sun is forever broken, never to be seen or used again. Yesterday’s experiences are best built upon when we learn by them to prepare for the unknown realities of the days which will come. And there is no other real preparation than an abandonment of reliance upon our own strengths and perceptions and an utter trust in the Spirit of God.

THE MORE DIFFICULT TRIAL

Although in this book, the focus has been on suffering, it should not from that be concluded that faith is tried *only* by suffering. The greatest trials of faith have always been those wherein pleasure, not pain, tested men’s hearts.

Throughout human history, mankind has distinguished itself by a tragic inadequacy for knowing what to do with freedom, peace, and prosperity. Many kingdoms and nations which through decades of desperate struggle have climbed to world-dominating heights have subsequently plummeted to ruin through neglect and abuse of the peace and prosperity which, through suffering, they had achieved. But nations and kingdoms fell upon the rocks of pleasure and fortune only because their citizens fell. And individual citizens fall victim to the deceitful pleasures of this world because it is the carnal mind’s tendency to view only suffering as an enemy and, so, pursue earthly pleasure, rather than to view both earthly suffering and earthly pleasure as conditions to overcome in our quest to accomplish the will of God.

The degree to which God’s children experience pleasure is as much determined by God as is the degree to which they suffer. Both our comforts and our discomforts are tailored by His

loving hand to match our faith and to perfect it. Our faith is, certainly, being tried when we are seemingly swamped with work, but our faith is being tried even more profoundly when we find ourselves with “free time” on our hands. And an abundance of food tries man’s faith more than a lack of food does. Our spirits are by all means, at all times, being tried by the Father (Job 7:17-18).

In every human situation, whether pleasant or unpleasant, there is something right for us to do and something evil for us to resist and to overcome. And unlikely as it first seems, evil is more difficult to resist when we are in *pleasant* circumstances, when we know that by doing what is right, our pleasant circumstances may come to an end. There is, for example, Queen Esther, living in lush palaces, contemplating the dire risk of entering uninvited into the King’s inner court (Esth. 4). There is Moses in the opulent Egyptian palace, considering the misery of his enslaved kinsmen. And Daniel, a chief among the wise men of Persia, lay his wealth and his position – not to say his life – on the line by continuing to pray to God after the king foolishly forbade it. These were people of rare faith, who were able to deny themselves and to overcome the temptations of earthly pleasure and wealth. They were not like the rich young ruler who could not bring himself to surrender his earthly status and wealth (Mt. 19:16-22; Mk. 10:17-22; Lk. 18:18-23). Since childhood, he had kept God’s commandments, and he was confident that he would do whatever Jesus said he must do to inherit eternal life, but at Jesus’ command to “sell whatever you have, and give to the poor,” the young man “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”

And when Jesus saw that he was very sorrowful, he said, “How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter into God’s kingdom.” Luke 18:24-25

If Job was right in saying that God tries us every moment, then for most of us, God tries our faith with pleasure and peace much more often than with suffering, for most of us spend a greater part of our earthly lives without pain, without hunger, but with shelter, clothing, family, and friends. This must mean that our heavenly Father, as concerned as He is that we learn to love our enemies, is even more concerned that we learn how to love our friends, for eternity will be spent with friends, while all enemies of righteousness will be forever taken away. It must be that our heavenly Father is more concerned that we learn to maintain a holy lifestyle while experiencing pleasure than while hurting, for pain will be done away with, but “at His right hand are pleasures forevermore.” God must be more concerned that we know how to be holy and faithful in conditions similar to what our glorious eternal circumstance will be than that we know how to be holy and faithful in circumstances such as persecution and pain, which are not eternal. That pleasure is a more difficult trial than suffering is plainly taught in Jesus’ Parable of the Sower, wherein he teaches us that saints whose faith is sufficient to overcome suffering may later fall victim to the “deceitfulness of riches” and “pleasures of this life” (Mt. 13:1-23; Mk. 4:1-20; Lk. 8:4-15).

GAIN IS GODLINESS

There exists a very great danger in failing to understand that both discomforts *and* comforts are used by God to perfect our faith. This failure was especially pronounced among saints in the

Charismatic movement of the 1960's and 70's, and that failure played a large part in that Movement coming to nothing. Perceiving only their sufferings to be trials of their faith, many of those believers fell into the trap of thinking that lack of suffering was proof of righteousness. Especially was this true among those who believed that the Devil was attacking them when they suffered, for in their case, pleasurable living was seen to be proof of victory over the Devil. Wherever such a mindset holds sway, pleasurable living is seen as godly living, and luxury then becomes the equivalent of godliness. By implication, then, those who are poor or who are suffering are made to appear, at best, weak in faith, and at worst, rebels against the will of God. "Success", defined in worldly terms such as an abundance of goods and advantages then becomes one's goal. And those without worldly success are implicitly condemned for not having the faith to obtain it. This is an alluring, spiritually debilitating heresy, contrary to all that the New Testament teaches.

Hearken, my beloved brothers. Has not God chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He has promised to those who love him? James 2:5

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they separate you from their company, and reproach you, and cast out your name as evil for the Son of man's sake. But woe to you that are rich! For you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full! For you shall hunger. Woe to you that laugh now! For you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all men speak well of you! For so did their fathers to the false prophets."

Luke 6:20-26

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing . . . destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness; from such, withdraw yourself. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment, let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in perdition. For the love of money is a root of all evil, which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. 1 Timothy 6:3-10

To those among the saints who hold that earthly gain is a mark of righteousness and true faith, I would ask of the faith of the widow and her two mites (Mk. 12:41-44), and of the righteousness of lonely Elijah, being fed by the ravens (1Kgs. 17:1-7). I would ask of the faith of John, living in the wilderness on a diet of locusts and wild honey (Mt. 3:1-4; Mk. 1:1-6), and of the righteousness of Christ Jesus, who had no place so much as to lay his head (Lk. 9:58), and of the faith of those who

had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings; yea, moreover, of bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were tempted; they were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted,

tormented (of whom the world was not worthy). They wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. Hebrews 11:36-38

“These all”, continued the man of God, “obtained a good report through faith” (11:39). But many a poor, suffering, and faithful saint has stood unjustly condemned by those who preach what amounts to “gain is godliness” and who maintain that victory and success in this world is the fruit of godliness, God’s reward for true righteousness.

The wicked in his pride persecutes the poor . . . for the wicked boasts of his heart’s desire, and blesses the covetous, whom the LORD abhors. . . . He has said in his heart, “I shall not be moved, for I will never be in adversity.” Psalm 10:2-3, 6

NEITHER POVERTY NOR RICHES

Having said all that, we must not now fall overboard in the opposite direction. We must “rightly divide” the Scriptures so that we do not condemn an innocent believer simply because he is blessed with an abundance of this world’s goods. Included in the biblical list of those who “obtained a good report through faith” are such wealthy men as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; saints of high position such as Moses, Deborah, David, and Josiah; men and women of great physical beauty such as Sarah, Rebekah, and Joseph; and men of immense talent, such as Bezaleel, Asaph, and Luke. What a blessing these people were to others by virtue of their faithfulness to God. What great earthly treasures were put to divine service in their devotion to the Lord!

There are some who are able to bear the pleasant things of this life and remain faithful to holiness, but not many (1Cor. 1:26-29). Those who are able to do so are of very great faith indeed. It is a tremendous accomplishment of faith for one to remain “unspotted from the world” while possessing an abundance of this world’s goods. And how blessed we all are that there are some believers able to do that. However, the benefits of wealth, great talent, physical beauty, and prestigious positions in the world, are such that only a few who have them manage to escape the temptation to “set their hearts upon them” (Ps. 62:10).

Only a few who are being tried with the burden of wealth are able to resist doctrines which equate wealth with righteousness and overcome the temptation to use such doctrines to disguise a spirit of covetousness (1Thess. 2:5). And not many who are now poor would be able to overcome that temptation, should God try them with it. This is why wise saints thank God both for what He has given them and for what He has not. They trust Him to always be doing the right thing with their lives, and they understand that great wealth, as well as great pain, can be a fierce trial of one’s faith, reserved for those to whom it is given to be tried “so as by fire.” Therefore, anyone who prays for an earthly blessing would be wise to pray at the same time for the faith to be faithful to the Lord if that earthly blessing is granted.

Whether we are being tried by poverty or by plenty, we are brothers and sisters together, being perfected by one hand for the good of all. Whether in distress or at ease, the saints’ lives are inextricably intertwined. Let us, then, freely love one another, support one another, and pray for one another. There shall come a time when both this world’s poverty and its riches, both its troubles and its pleasures, will be forever ended, and all who here have overcome the world, both its ease and its discomforts, will celebrate together the “glorious liberty of the children of God.”

But until then, let us understand that we are all being tried, each one in the manner and to the degree determined by our heavenly Father, and we need one another's support.

There is nothing holy about being poor, and there is nothing holy about being rich. The particular advantage of poverty is that those who suffer it are usually more aware of their need of God. The particular advantage of wealth is the availability of the means for sowing great seeds of blessing by helping those in need. But both poverty and wealth must be overcome in order to make the most of those advantages.

The particular temptation of the poor is the great pressure of their need. They may the more easily justify such things as falsifying their tax forms, or keeping goods they know are not theirs, or simply coveting the rich brother's trial. I heard one poor brother testify to a generally low-income congregation that on his way to the worship service that morning, he had put two dollars into a self-service gas pump. He then went on to say that in addition to returning his money, the malfunctioning pump issued to him more gas than he even had paid for. The whole congregation went up in a shout of victory. But as I sat there watching, I wondered what the owner of those gas pumps, had he been in the congregation that morning, would have thought about the God that those people were praising. On the other hand, the particular trial of rich saints is the strong temptation to deny, at least in their attitudes, their absolute dependence upon God and their spiritual equality with "the poor of the flock."

Knowing these things, wise Agur knelt in supplication for just two things: First, that his life might be filled with truth, and free from deceit. Secondly, that God would give him, "neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me, lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, 'Who is the LORD?' or lest I be poor, and steal, and so, take the name of my God in vain" (Prov. 30:8-9).

It remains, then, for those of us who are wealthy not to despise those of us who are poor, and for those of us who are poor not to envy or resent those of us who are rich. For faith in God tells us that "the LORD makes poor, and makes rich. He brings low, and lifts up" (1Sam. 2:7). Or as David said it, "Promotion comes neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south, but God is the Judge. He puts down one, and sets up another" (Ps. 75:5-7). So, let those in the body of Christ who are rich bless those who are poor and have compassion for their needs. For "whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother have need, and shuts up his bowels of compassion from him, how does the love of God dwell in him?" (1Jn. 3:17). And let those in the body of Christ who are poor resist covetousness, and encourage the faith of those who are rich, that their zeal for godliness will not be diminished by the dazzling benefits of their earthly possessions. We are all "members one of another" (Rom. 12:5; Eph. 4:25), and "God has set the members, every one of them, in the body, as it has pleased Him" (1Cor. 12:18).

GOD IS GOD

There is no biblical example of a godly man or woman who had difficulty in believing that God is the one who determines both the sufferings and blessings of the saints. Only the idolaters in Israel feared that other gods were responsible. The righteous knew God far too well to believe that some other power was making decisions concerning their life. But they trusted God to be the God of their whole lives because they learned that He *was* the God of their whole lives, whether they believed it or not. Their believing it did not make it true. Rather, they found out

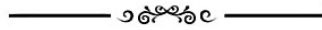
that it was true, and then believed it. They discovered that, completely apart from the faith of all men, God is God, the only God, and that He alone reigns over His Creation. That is the rock upon which rose the towering faith of those who knew God best. That is “the shield of faith” that quenched every “fiery dart” launched against them. We are called by Jesus to take up that same shield of faith and be followers of those who through such faith obtained the promises of God (Heb. 6:11-12).

God is the God of sinful men, whether they acknowledge Him or not (cp. Jer. 32:27). God is Satan’s God, and he and his horde of demons tremble at the very thought (Jas. 2:19). God is the God of His people, both the faithful and the unfaithful (Dt. 32:36). There has never been a moment in eternity when God wasn’t God, or when His position as God was the least bit threatened. God is the only God of all things because He is the Creator of all things. This is an eternal and unalterable truth, and the foundation of the greatest faith and joy. The revelation of Creation is the overarching spiritual truth upon which all others hang. It is the soul of every righteous word and deed. It demands perfect faith even as it inspires it. It is the substance of the revealed knowledge of God which Jesus described as “life eternal” (Jn. 17:1-3). All other reality springs from, and is continued by the Creator, our wonderful, holy, almighty Creator.

As a result of the saints’ neglect of the revelation of Creation, and the resulting ignorance of the God who by Creation is revealed, many dear saints spend their lives in confusion. They do not know how much God loves them. They do not know, in practical terms, that God’s power is the only power they need to fear or can trust. Nor do they know that their heavenly Father has concealed good purposes within the manifold circumstances of their lives. Consequently, these precious saints of God are often trapped in the bitterness “by which many are defiled” (Heb. 12:15). They cannot love their enemies because they cannot see beyond them. They cannot overcome evil with good because their faith is divided between the Evil and the Good. In their trials, they often rebel rather than submit, denouncing as satanic those trials of faith and those corrections which their heavenly Father has so lovingly and patiently designed to match and to perfect their spiritual strength. In short, they have not trusted God to be God of every moment of their lives because they have been taught that He is *not* the God of every moment of their lives. The knowledge of God as Creator being lacking in their hearts, the family of God on earth has become as idolatrous as Old Testament Israel ever was, and they are as certain as were the ancient Israelites that their idolatrous faith and doctrines are true.

The saints of greatest faith, perceiving Creation’s witness to God’s goodness, power, and wisdom, joyfully responded to that revelation by completely yielding their lives to His care. Their faith to do so was not strained, for their faith sprang from that revelation, which demanded that they trust God in that manner. There was but one object of their faith because there was but one source of their faith. Joseph did not force himself to believe that it was God who sent him into Egypt or that it was God who later placed him on Egypt’s throne. Because he truly knew God, that was all that Joseph *could* believe. David had no difficulty in seeing God’s hand in either the punishment for his sin or his forgiveness and restoration as King of Israel. It did not strain Jesus’ faith to believe that God was sending him to the cross or to believe that God would raise him from the dead. The apostle Paul did not force himself to tell the Corinthians that their afflictions were from God and that there was a healing purpose in them.

The revelation of God as Creator excluded for these godly men any other possibility. Believing that God was responsible was not the difficult part. Indeed, that was their hope. The difficult part was to overcome in a meek and godly spirit the trials which God had determined for them. But this they did. And this, by God's grace, we may do, confident throughout our lives, as the righteous men and women of faith have always been, that every experience we face is but a necessary part of God's plan for presenting us "faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy."



Conclusion

WHAT TO DO WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN

1. Remember that God is intimately involved and completely in control of your life and of all that happens to you. He planned this a long time ago and has been preparing you for some time to be able to face it and overcome it. Healing is in your future because God is in your “now”.
2. Continue doing what you know is right. Be aggressive with doing good. Your “way of escape” is to “fight the GOOD fight” of faith.
3. Don’t feel bad because you feel bad. No one enjoys suffering. Frustration is not sin. Irritation is not sin. Complaining is not sin. None of the righteous ever jumped with glee when God laid an affliction upon them. They cried; they grieved; they complained to God; and they kept doing what was right. If you don’t like it when bad things happen to you, then welcome to a club to which even Jesus belongs. Our Father belongs in that club, too, for in all His children’s affliction, he is afflicted with them. As the prophet said, “In all their affliction, He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them. In His love and in His pity, He redeemed them, and He lifted them up, and carried them all the days of old” (Isa. 63:9).
4. Don’t feel bad because you feel good. When you trust God, even as you hurt, you may also feel an undergirding peace in your spirit. I have known precious children of God who condemned themselves for experiencing this mysterious, sweet strength of Jesus when circumstances didn’t seem to call for it. Let Jesus comfort you when he wants to.
5. Pray and read your Bible. Nothing can take the place of either. There is comfort and encouragement to be received from the stories and teachings of God’s servants, and that comfort often comes as we approach the Bible with an humble, prayerful attitude.
6. Ask God why. Have you ever heard someone say that he never questions God? That is so contrary to faith! God wants us to know Him and His ways, and He invites us to ask Him for knowledge and understanding. All the righteous men and women in the Bible accepted God’s invitation to seek Him for answers and zealously sought God for them. The question, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” came from the lips of the Son of God. He knew that God loved him and would not be angry with him for asking.
7. Know that in the heart of God, you are of more value than many sparrows. I pray that you will *feel* loved, even in the bad times, because you *are* loved. Trust your life to that pure love emanating right now from the heart of your Creator. I pray that you do feel the depth and power of it.

