

# **Let Me See Thy Glory: Study of the Attributes of God**

## **Preface**

No study is of more importance or value than a study of the nature and attributes of God. It is our hope that these messages will enhance your knowledge of God, resulting in a greater love for Him and for others.

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# Lesson 1: Exploring the Excellencies of God

## Introduction

The religion section of the Dallas Morning News recently contained an article entitled, “Letting God Grow Up.”<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Jack Bemporad, a leader in Jewish-Christian dialogue, has co-authored a new book, *Stupid Ways, Smart Ways to Think about God*. From reading only this article, Bemporad seems to be saying that we must forsake what we have learned about God as children and think of God in more adult terms. While I can agree with some of the author’s ideas, overall I must differ with him. For example, the article informs us,

To a large extent, atheists seldom reject a credible God but usually ‘reject some stupid way of thinking about God,’ the authors say, calling some ideas about God ‘so ridiculous they are not worth believing.’

Some “childish” ideas about God are wrong and should be rejected. Among these is the thought that God is a “cosmic bellhop . . . ready to serve you.” Disturbingly, however, Rabbi Bemporad also includes the concept of God’s wrath as a childish idea. I think he is basically saying: “Men believe in the kind of God they wish to believe in and reject the kind of God they dislike.” He seems to place little emphasis, if any, on the description of God found in the Holy Scriptures. Bemporad seems to believe our theology needs to adjust to our desires, rather than recognizing that we must adjust our theology to who God really is.

Although I am hardly surprised by them, I certainly do not agree with the views unbelievers hold of God. But even more distressing is the shallow, inaccurate view of God held by professing Christians. We desperately need in our time to radically revise our thinking about God. The purpose of this series is to explore the excellencies of God, to realign our thinking about God with those divine characteristics revealed in the Scriptures.

This lesson attempts to demonstrate the importance of studying the attributes of God. We shall first consider the testimony of some great men of God before looking at some of the practical benefits of such a study as taught in the Scriptures. Finally, we will see how the attributes of God impacted the lives of two great men of old, Job and Moses. My hope is that this lesson will stimulate you to begin your own personal study of the attributes of God. It is a study which could transform your life.

## The Testimony of Great Men of God

Throughout history, great men of God have devoted themselves to the study of God’s character and encouraged others to do likewise. Consider what some of those men of God have to say about studying the attributes of God.

Over 30 years ago, A. W. Tozer wrote concerning the desperate need for the church to revise its concept of God due to a very distorted conception of Him:

It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.<sup>2</sup>

Tozer goes on to say,

The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him--and of her.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Letting God grow up,” by George W. Cornell, *The Dallas Morning News*, Saturday, March 5, 1994, p. 44A.

<sup>2</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

### A. W. Pink is of the same opinion:

The god of this century no more resembles the Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The god who is talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday school, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most of the so-called Bible conferences, is a figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. The heathen outside the pale of Christendom form gods of wood and stone, while millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a god out of their carnal minds.<sup>4</sup>

In one of his letters to Erasmus, Martin Luther said, “Your thoughts of God are too human.”<sup>5</sup> Speaking for God, the psalmist of old penned the same thought in these words:

21 These things you have done, and I kept silence; You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you, and state [the case] in order before your eyes (Psalms 50:21).

It would be difficult to over-estimate the importance of the study of God. Charles Haddon Spurgeon’s words are often quoted by those who embark upon a study of the attributes of God:

Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued, investigation of the great subject of the Deity. The most excellent study for expanding the soul is the science of Christ and Him crucified and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity.<sup>6</sup>

The proper study of the Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the doings, and the existence of the great God which he calls his Father. There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can comprehend and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go on our way with the thought, “Behold I am wise.” But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumbline cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought “I am but of yesterday and know nothing.”<sup>7</sup>

The study of God’s nature and character is the high calling of the Christian and is of great importance and practical value:

What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the ‘eternal life’ that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. ‘This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent’ (John 17:3). What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God. ‘Thus saith 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 that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me’ (Jer. 9:23f.). What, of all the states God ever sees man in, gives Him most pleasure? Knowledge of Himself. ‘I desire . . . the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings,’ says God (Hos. 6:6) . . . Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life’s problems fall into place of their own accord . . . What makes life worth while is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has, in a way that no other man has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?<sup>8</sup>

## **The Practical Relevance of God’s Character to the Christian**

But is the study of God’s character not just a matter for preachers and theologians? Does such a study really have any practical value? J. I. Packer raises this very question and promptly answers it:

Why need anyone take time off today for the kind of study you propose? Surely a layman, at any rate, can get on without it? After all, this is 1972, not 1855. A fair question!--but there is, I think, a convincing answer to it. The

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in the Godhead*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in the Godhead*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, as cited by Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Sermon on Mal. 3:6, by C. H. Spurgeon, as cited in Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), pp. 29-30.

questioner clearly assumes that a study of the nature and character of God will be unpractical and irrelevant for life. In fact, however, it is the most practical project anyone can engage in. Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives . . . Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold[ed] as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.<sup>9</sup>

As we commence a study of the attributes of God, I would like to challenge you to embrace this endeavor as your own personal commitment. Consider the following ways the study of the attributes of God impacts the life of the Christian.

**(1) The way to “see” God is to come to know Him through a study of His character as revealed in the Scriptures.**

No man can see God and live (Exodus 33:20). No man has seen God at any time (John 1:18). Men have “seen” God partially at various times when He has appeared in various forms (see Exodus 24:9-11; 33:17-34:7; Isaiah 6:5). In every instance when God manifested Himself visibly to men, there is only a partial revelation of His glory, for man could no more look upon the full display of God’s splendor than one can look directly into the sun. Even in the coming of our Lord, who manifested the Father to men (see John 1:18; 14:8-9; Hebrews 1:1-3), the full revelation of His glory was “veiled” with only an occasional glimpse of that glory, such as at His transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1-8). It was not the physical appearance of our Lord which impressed men. Indeed, we know absolutely nothing about our Lord’s physical appearance, other than it was not particularly appealing or attractive so men might be drawn to him on the basis of His appearance alone (see Isaiah 53:2).

We are among those who have not “seen” our Lord (John 20:29; 1 Peter 1:8). Our grasp of the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ must be limited to what the Scriptures teach concerning His teaching, ministry, and character. In the final analysis, we can “see” and know God through the Scriptures as they reveal His character to us.

**(2) The character of God is the basis and standard for all human morality. The final verse of Judges reads:**

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25).

One might think the solution to this dilemma was a human king, but it was not. The kind of “king” Israel wanted was in effect an idol. They wanted a king whom they could see, a man who would go before them into battle. They wanted a king like all the other nations (see Deuteronomy 17:14-17). When the people approached Samuel and demanded to have a king, God indicated they really were rejecting Him as their king:

5 And they said to him, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.” 6 But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. 7 And the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them (1 Samuel 8:5-7).

Thus when the Israelites demanded a human king, they were rejecting God as their king. When the Book of Judges informs us the Israelites had no king, it means the nation did not acknowledge and serve God as their King (Exodus 15:18; Psalm 10:16; 29:10). And it is without God as King that men set the standard for their own conduct; every man “**does what is right in his own eyes.**”

God gave the Law to the nation Israel after He became their “King” at the exodus (Exodus 15:18). He demonstrated His power and sovereignty, even over Pharaoh. And as Israel’s “King,” God set down the constitution for the kingdom He was setting out to establish. The form of the Mosaic Covenant, as has

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

been observed by scholars, was the same as other treaties of that day between kings (or suzerains) over their subjects (or vassals). God was the standard of morality, and God therefore set the standard for the conduct of His people. The laws God set down at Mount Sinai were those which proceeded from His own character. God said to His people, “**Be ye holy, for I am Holy**” (Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7; see 1 Peter 1:16).

Is it any wonder “**every man does what is right in his own eyes**” today? Is it so difficult to explain why our culture rejects and abhors the thought of moral absolutes? Do we wonder why the church has become so wishy-washy about morality? The Bible tells us why. ***We have ceased to ponder and appreciate the moral perfection of God.*** And once our view of the holiness of God is diminished, our moral values decline proportionately. A study of the character of God will establish and undergird morality.

### **(3) Failure to think rightly about God is the sin of idolatry, and it leads to countless other sins.**

Tozer rightly identifies mistaken or distorted views of God as idolatry:

Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than He is . . . . Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.”<sup>10</sup>

Thinking wrongly of God is idolatry and is demeaning to Him because it always views God as being other (and less) than He is. But this idolatrous evil of thinking wrongly of God is also the root of many other evils. Thinking wrongly about God leads to sin. Tozer writes,

I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.<sup>11</sup>

Wrong thoughts about God were the root of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 3, the character of God is first demeaned by Satan. By Satan’s devious question and answer tactics, God is portrayed as a liar (“**Has God said . . . ?**” verse 1), (“**You surely shall not die!**” verse 4). Based upon the assumption that God was less than He first seemed to be (and was!), Eve acted independently of God, and she and her husband thus disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. An inadequate view of God is at the root of many sins.

### **(4) Knowing God intimately is our calling and destiny, our future hope, our great privilege and blessing, and thus it should be our great ambition.**

23 Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches” (Jeremiah 9:23).

12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known (1 Corinthians 13:12).

10 That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death (Philippians 3:10).

2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is (1 John 3:2).

14 For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; [and] that you, being rooted and

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<sup>10</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fulness of God (Ephesians 3:14-19).

### **(5) A study of the attributes of God is the basis for our enjoyment of God and our spiritual growth.**

A personal relationship with God requires that we know God personally, as a Person. The attributes of God are descriptions of the character of God, and it is through the knowledge of His characteristics that we come to intimately know and enjoy God as a Person.

By faith in Jesus Christ, we have been saved so “**we might become partakers of the divine nature**” (2 Peter 1:4). We have become a part of the church, the body of Christ, which is growing up “**to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ**” (Ephesians 4:13). By “**seeing Him as He is**” we become like Him (1 John 3:2); knowing God’s character is therefore the basis for our own transformation into His likeness.

### **(6) The attributes of God are foundational to our faith and hope.**

Knowing the character of God assures us that He can and will do all that He purposes and promises. Faith in God is trusting in God, and His attributes are the basis for that trust because He is able and willing to do all that He has promised.

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful (Hebrews 10:23).

6 And without faith it is impossible to please [Him], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and [that] He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

19 Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right (1 Peter 4:19).

9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

### **(7) A study of the attributes of God enhances our worship.**

We worship God for who He is. *The attributes of God are a description of who He is.* When God is worshipped in the Bible, He is worshipped in response to His attributes. He is worshipped as the eternal One:

8 And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, “HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, [is] THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME” (Revelation 4:8).

Especially in the Psalms we find the worship of God linked to an acknowledgment of His attributes:

17 I will give thanks to the LORD according to His righteousness, And will sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High (Psalms 7:17).

1 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; For His lovingkindness is everlasting (Psalms 107:1).

### **(8) A study of the attributes of God should enhance our prayer life.**

Knowing God’s character not only instructs us about what we should pray for--that which is in accord with His character--but it also assures us God is able and willing to answer our prayers. We do not pray to just anyone; we pray to Him who hears our prayers and is willing and able to answer them. Once again, in the Book of Psalms we see the petitions of men linked to the attributes of God.

1 (For the choir director; for flute accompaniment. A Psalm of David.) Give ear to my words, O LORD, Consider my groaning. 2 Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God, For to Thee do I pray. 3 In the morning, O

LORD, Thou wilt hear my voice; In the morning I will order [my prayer] to Thee and [eagerly] watch. 4 For Thou art not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; No evil dwells with Thee. 5 The boastful shall not stand before Thine eyes; Thou dost hate all who do iniquity (Psalms 5:1-5).

### **(9) A study of the attributes of God enhances our witness.**

Men can only be saved when they come to recognize they are lost, and *they will see their sin only when they begin to recognize God as the One who is holy and righteous and just*. Paul's conversion is a dramatic illustration of this recognition of human depravity in the light of God's glory (see Acts 9:1-22).

Our principle task is not the winning of souls, but the demonstration and promotion of God's glory:

31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR [God's] OWN POSSESSION, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY (1 Peter 2:9-10).

The attributes of God are both His characteristics and His "**excellencies.**" His nature and character are His excellence, His perfection, His glory. Knowing God's excellence is the starting point for practicing and proclaiming it among men. In so doing, some will be saved, but God will be glorified whether or not men are saved. The elect will be saved to the glory of God (Romans 9:23), and the lost will glorify God in the day of His visitation (1 Peter 2:11-12).

### **(10) Seeking to know the character of God enhances and enriches our study of the Scriptures.**

The Scriptures are the primary source for our instruction concerning God's attributes.<sup>12</sup> As we seek to learn the character of God, we will soon discover that we have a new outlook on the Scriptures. Even those texts we may have considered boring come to life as we begin to see God's character described therein. Imagine coming to the place where, like David, we could pray these words concerning the Old Testament law:

15 I will meditate on Thy precepts, And regard Thy ways. 16 I shall delight in Thy statutes; I shall not forget Thy word. 17 Deal bountifully with Thy servant, That I may live and keep Thy word. 18 Open my eyes, that I may behold Wonderful things from Thy law (Psalms 119:15-18).

97 O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day (Psalms 119:97).

Seemingly obscure and difficult to understand portions of the Bible come to life when we look to them for insight into the character of God. Prophetic texts (like the Book of Revelation) have much to tell us about God's character. Perhaps we spend too much time and effort trying to solve mysteries we were not intended to comprehend (see Deuteronomy 29:29) rather than focusing on the character of God, which is often quite clearly portrayed in highly symbolic or obscure texts. When we come to the Scriptures to learn what God is like, we shall not be disappointed.

### **(11) When we focus on the attributes of God, we begin to view life from a new perspective--from God's perspective.**

Nothing will more radically change the way we look at life and our circumstances. In Psalm 73, Asaph confesses that when he began to view his life from God's perspective he saw things in an entirely

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<sup>12</sup> We know there are three primary sources of revelation concerning the character of God: God's creation, nature (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-20), the Son of God (John 1:14-18; Hebrews 1:1-3), and the Word of God (Psalm 19:7-14; 119; 2 Peter 1:3-4). It is only in the Word of God that the Son of God is described (see John 20:30-31; 1 John 1:1-4).

different light. When our desire is to know God, to know His nature and character, then we welcome those circumstances which facilitate a more intimate acquaintance with God. And so the apostle Paul tells us that he welcomes suffering when it facilitates knowing God:

8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from [the] Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which [comes] from God on the basis of faith, 10 that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death (Philippians 3:8-10).

A desire to know God intimately by the knowledge of His character puts our service into perspective and protects us from what some call “burn out.” Think of the account of Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke:

38 Now as they were traveling along, He entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord’s word, seated at His feet. 40 But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up [to Him,] and said, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.” 41 But the Lord answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; 42 but [only] a few things are necessary, really [only] one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38-42).

Mary chose the “one thing,” the “better thing,” to worship and adore the Lord, sitting at His feet, delighting in all that He is. Martha chose a lesser thing and became embittered that Mary was not working with her. When knowing God becomes our priority, serving Him becomes an outworking of our devotion, not a hindrance to it.

### The Testimony of Men in the Scriptures

A study of the attributes of God--seeing God as He is--is a life-transforming experience. Seeing God in His greatness and glory has transformed lives. Knowing God as fully as possible was the goal of the great men and women of God in the Bible. The great men of the Bible were those who had a passion to know God; they were men who had come to “see” God. Let us now focus our attention on two men whose lives were transformed by gaining a greater grasp of the attributes of God.

Job, by God’s assessment, was “**a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil**” (Job 1:8). God allowed a series of disasters to afflict Job through the agency of Satan. Job was “counseled” by three friends, which only added further to his suffering. Job was weakening under the weight of his afflictions when God personally rebuked him. God did not explain to Job why He had allowed suffering to disrupt his life. He did not inform Job of Satan’s involvement or of His own purpose for all that had taken place. God simply reminded Job that He was God and of some of His attributes as God (Job 38-41). He reminded Job of his finite nature and his fallibility. Job repented. He no longer asked to know why God was working as He was in his life. He no longer needed to know. All He needed to know was that what was happening was God’s work, and that God, as God, would and could do what was best. The attributes of God put Job back on track, spiritually speaking, and assured him that if he knew God, he knew enough. His suffering was never explained, because it ultimately came from the hand of God.

Notice these words, at the end of the Book of Job:

7 And it came about after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has” (Job 42:7).

These words indicate something very important, for they reveal that God distinguished between Job and his response to his affliction and his three friends with their response to his affliction. Job’s friends were wrong! They needed to repent. Their error? They did not speak what was right about God.



Job had spoken rightly about God, but when? I think Job spoke rightly about God at the beginning of his troubles (Job 1:21-22) and then at the end of them when he repented:

1 Then Job answered the LORD, and said, 2 “I know that Thou canst do all things, And that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted. 3 ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ “Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.” 4 ‘Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask Thee, and do Thou instruct me.’ 5 “I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees Thee; 6 Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:1-6).

Job is saying: “Before my suffering, I knew *about* You. But, now, after my suffering and after your words of rebuke (reminding me about your attributes), I have now come to *know* You.” Job “heard of God” by the hearing of the ear, but now Job “has seen God.” Job came to know God more fully. Job’s suffering served the higher purposes of God of which Job was still ignorant. But they also served God’s purpose for Job, which was to cause him to more fully know and appreciate God’s attributes, and thus to more fully know God. The attributes of God caused Job to *think rightly* about God and to thus *respond rightly* to his suffering.

Moses was likewise radically changed as a result of his increasing knowledge of the attributes of God. Consider the sequence of events in Moses’ life which revealed to him the attributes of God and in turn brought about increasing intimacy with God.

Moses’ first encounter with God is described in Exodus 3:

1 Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. 3 So Moses said, “I must turn aside now, and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up.” 4 When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush, and said, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” 5 Then He said, “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” 6 He said also, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God . . . 11 But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” 12 And He said, “Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.” 13 Then Moses said to God, “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” 14 And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” 15 And God, furthermore, said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations” (Exodus 3:1-6, 11-15).

Moses’ first encounter with God revealed several important attributes of God, even if he failed to grasp or believe them. *First*, Moses was instructed that the God of Israel is an eternal God. The burning bush did not “burn up;” it simply “burned on.” The flaming bush was a symbolic manifestation of God, who is eternal. He, like the fire, does not end. And so, in this same encounter, God told Moses one of His names. God is the great and eternal “I AM” (verse 14). Moses would come to appreciate the eternity of God in the years to come. Is it any wonder the one psalm (90) Moses penned was a psalm reflecting on the eternity of God?

*Secondly*, Moses was assured of God’s continual presence with him as he went to Egypt to carry out his divinely given task (see verse 12). This never-ending presence is celebrated by David in Psalm 139 and is assured the disciples by our Lord in His giving of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; see also Hebrews 13:5). Moses would soon be appealing to God to do as He had promised (see Exodus 33:12-16; 34:8-9).

*Thirdly*, in Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush, he was instructed about the holiness of God. Moses was told not to come near to the bush and to take off his sandals for the ground around that bush was holy (Exodus 3:5-6). The holiness of God would become a prominent theme in Moses’ ministry.

If Moses was kept at a distance from God in Exodus 3, the remainder of the Book of Exodus describes Moses' intense desire to draw near to God to know Him more fully. When God delivered Israel from Egypt, He appeared in the form of a cloud, separating them from the Egyptians and leading them into the promised land (see Exodus 14:19-20). On Mount Sinai, where God gave the Law to the Israelites, He manifested Himself to the nation by fire, smoke, a cloud, thunder and lightning, and earth quaking (Exodus 19:16-19). The people and the priests were kept at a distance and not allowed to even gaze upon God (19:21-25).

A very unusual thing takes place in Exodus 24. Moses, along with Aaron and his two sons, Nadab and Abihu, accompanied by 70 of the elders of the people, are granted a special manifestation of the glory of God:

9 Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, 10 and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. 11 Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they beheld God, and they ate and drank (Exodus 24:9-11).

And yet after this amazing revelation of God to these leaders of the nation, in the absence of Moses they took part in the making of an idol against emphatic instructions of God to the contrary:

2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:2-6).

1 Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." 2 And Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring [them] to me." 3 Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears, and brought [them] to Aaron. 4 And he took [this] from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." 5 Now when Aaron saw [this,] he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow [shall be] a feast to the LORD." 6 So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play (Exodus 32:1-6).

How amazing! These Israelites had witnessed God's triumph over the "gods" of Egypt at the exodus. They sang praises to Him after they passed through the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1-18). They saw the spectacular manifestations of God's presence on the mountain. Aaron and his sons and 70 of the leaders of the nation were privileged to eat a meal in God's presence. And yet, after the absence of Moses for a short time, they were willing to make an idol in direct disobedience to what they had just been commanded.

God threatened to wipe out this rebellious people. He offered to make a new nation from the offspring of Moses (Exodus 32:9-10). Moses pled with God to have mercy on His people, and thus fulfill His promise to Abraham, and to bring glory to Himself among the nations (see Exodus 32:11-13). God withheld His wrath and promised to be with Moses as he led the people into the promised land. But He would keep His distance from this obstinate people:

1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Depart, go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.' 2 And I will send an angel before you and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. 3 [Go up] to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, lest I destroy you on the way" (Exodus 33:1-3).

While God kept His distance from the stiff-necked Israelites, He drew nearer to Moses so that he alone enjoyed an intimacy with God unmatched since the Garden of Eden:

7 Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, a good distance from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And it came about, that everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting which was outside the camp. 8 And it came about, whenever Moses went out to the tent, that all the people would arise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he entered the tent. 9 And it came about, whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the LORD would speak with Moses. 10 When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent. 11 Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent (Exodus 33:7-11).

One would think Moses would be satisfied with such an intimacy with God, but he was not. He wanted more, more of God. Wanting to know God more intimately, he made this petition:

12 Then Moses said to the LORD, "See, Thou dost say to me, 'Bring up this people!' But Thou Thyself hast not let me know whom Thou wilt send with me. Moreover, Thou hast said, 'I have known you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.' 13 "Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight. Consider too, that this nation is Thy people." 14 And He said, "My presence shall go [with you,] and I will give you rest." 15 Then he said to Him, "If Thy presence does not go [with us,] do not lead us up from here. 16 For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Thy sight, I and Thy people? Is it not by Thy going with us, so that we, I and Thy people, may be distinguished from all the [other] people who are upon the face of the earth?" 17 And the LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight, and I have known you by name." 18 Then Moses said, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!" (Exodus 33:12-18).

The answer to Moses' request is recorded in the following verses:

19 And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." 20 But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" 21 Then the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand [there] on the rock; 22 and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen."... 1 Now the LORD said to Moses, "Cut out for yourself two stone tablets like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered. 2 So be ready by morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to Me on the top of the mountain. 3 And no man is to come up with you, nor let any man be seen anywhere on the mountain; even the flocks and the herds may not graze in front of that mountain." 4 So he cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. 5 And the LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. 6 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave [the guilty] unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." 8 And Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship (Exodus 33:19--34:8).

This incident in the life of Moses should instruct us certainly, but it should also motivate us to follow in his footsteps. We can find a number of lessons in this text for us.

**(1) Living close to God is dangerous for those who harbor sin and unrighteousness.** God made it clear that sinful men must keep their distance (Exodus 19:21-24). If God were present among His people and they persisted in their sin, He would destroy them (Exodus 33:3). Sinful men cannot fellowship with a holy God as sinners.

**(2) God desires to fellowship with men, and He provides the means for fellowship.** God revealed Himself to the Israelites, to their leaders, and especially to Moses. God wanted to manifest His glory to men. He glorified Himself in Egypt by the defeat of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. He glorified Himself by delivering the nation Israel and by keeping His covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants.

God manifests His glory to His chosen ones so they may worship and serve Him. Men cannot fellowship with God because of their sin. Moses petitioned God to go with them into the promised land and also to forgive them of their sins (Exodus 34:9). Because of man's sin, God made provision for His people to fellowship with Him. First, God called His people apart so they could worship Him (see Exodus 4:22-23).

Then God gave His people the Law, which distinguished the holy from the unholy. The Law defined that which is displeasing and detestable in God's sight. He also provided barriers which kept certain boundaries between God and men. The tabernacle was one such barrier. Only one man went into the holy of holies once a year. And finally God provided blood sacrifices so that sinful men might be forgiven and thereby enter into fellowship with Him. *When the Lord Jesus was crucified on Calvary, He was the full and final sacrifice, having died for sin once for all, so that now there are no barriers between men and God for those who are forgiven and justified in Christ* (see Hebrews 9 and 10).

**(3) Knowing God was the incentive for Moses to know Him even more intimately.** When God first appeared to Moses, he was afraid to look at Him, and so he hid his face (Exodus 3:6). By Exodus 33, Moses pleads with God to behold Him in His glory. What could have prompted this change in Moses? I believe it was his growing knowledge of God. No man had ever been privileged to fellowship with God as had Moses. God met regularly with Moses and spoke with him **“face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend”** (32:11). And yet Moses wanted more of God. The more we come to know God, the more we wish to know Him. Knowing God produces both the motivation and the means for knowing Him further.

(4) Not knowing God intimately prompts us to keep our distance from God and finally results in idolatry—creating a “god” of our own making. This we learn from the nation Israel. They were instructed to keep their distance from God, and they wanted it this way. Let Moses intercede with God. Let Him live dangerously by coming into close contact with Him. They would keep their distance. And yet they soon were busily fashioning and worshipping a “god” of their own making, a “god” who could be near them. But this was not the same God who gave them His Law, who forbade idolatry and immorality. This was a “god” whom they could worship and serve while sinning. And so they did, to their own destruction. When we do not seek to know God, we find ourselves drawing back from Him and eventually fashioning a “god” of our own making.

(5) Moses' motivation was that God knew him fully, and thus, he wished to know God more fully.

12b Moreover, Thou hast said, ‘I have known you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.’ 13 “Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight. Consider too, that this nation is Thy people” (Exodus 33:12b-13).

There is a very close relationship between being known by God and seeking to know God (see 1 Corinthians 8:3; 13:12; Galatians 4:9).

**(6) Moses wished to know God more fully in order to serve Him better.** Moses' desire to know God more fully was not self-serving. He sought to know God more intimately in order to be able to fulfill his calling of leading the nation Israel:

12 Then Moses said to the LORD, “See, Thou dost say to me, ‘Bring up this people!’ But Thou Thyself hast not let me know whom Thou wilt send with me. Moreover, Thou hast said, ‘I have known you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.’ 13 “Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight. Consider too, that this nation is Thy people” (Exodus 33:12-13).

Moses was commanded to bring the people of Israel up into the land of promise. How could He do so if He did not know Him who was to go with him. To see God more fully was to be better prepared to serve Him.

**(7) Moses wished to know God more fully, not just for his own sake but for the sake of others.** Moses had already been assured of God's presence with him (Exodus 3:12; 33:14). Moses seeks both a greater revelation of God's glory and for His presence with His people, Israel (33:15-16; 34:9). All through this text in Exodus 33 and 34, Moses is interceding for the nation Israel. His personal request to see God's glory is linked to his petition that God be present with His people.

**(8) Knowing God is to know His “ways,” to know His character.** Moses pled with God,

13 “Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight” (Exodus 33:13).

We cannot know God intimately and personally without knowing God's character, His "**ways**." This is why Moses pled with God to know His ways, that he might know Him.

**(9) The grace of God is both the basis and the goal of knowing God.** Look at these words of Moses one more time:

13 "Now therefore, I pray Thee, *if I have found favor in Thy sight*, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, *so that I may find favor in Thy sight*" (Exodus 33:14, emphasis mine).

Do you see it? The expression, "**I have found favor (or grace) in Thy sight**" is repeated in this one verse. Having found favor in God's sight, Moses can appeal to God to know Him more fully. And coming to know God more fully is sought in order to find God's favor. Grace is both the basis and the outcome of knowing God--and it is all of God's grace.

**(10) God's character is His glory.** Finally, notice the revelation of God's glory is the revelation of God's character:

5 And the LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. 6 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave [the guilty] unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:5-7).

What constitutes God's glory? God's full glory cannot be seen by men, even by a man like Moses. It would be something like trying to look directly into the full radiance of the sun. But God did reveal to Moses some of His attributes. The splendor and blaze of the physical manifestation of God on that mount was but a visual symbol of the glory of His person, His character. God's grace and compassion are His glory. His lovingkindness is His glory. His faithfulness is His glory. His holiness and justice are His glory.

### Conclusion

My sincere hope is that each of us could join with Moses and say with him, "**Let me see Thy glory.**" *There is no greater joy and privilege in life than to behold the glory of God.* Heaven will be enjoying the glory of God for all eternity--and we can start now. *But if we would see God's glory, we must study His attributes.* And we dare not study them as mere academic qualities. These are the characteristics of God as a Person. And the outcome of our study should be that of Moses. We should respond in worship and the service which is its expression (see Exodus 34:8-9). Let us not only seek to see the glory of God personally but also seek to bring others into His presence as well, to His glory.

A study of the attributes of God allows no casual bystanders. We either respond in worship and service, or we turn from God, creating in His place a "lesser god" of our own making, a "god" in whose presence we feel comfortable, even while we sin. As we commence this study, may we do so with great zeal, with our eyes open wide to what this study requires of us.

## **Lesson 2: The Power of God**

### **Introduction**

Centuries ago, God promised Abraham and Sarah they would have a son through whose offspring the world would be blessed. But there were problems. Abraham and Sarah were getting on in years, and Sarah was barren. When told she would be the mother of Abraham's child, the child of promise, Sarah laughed. In response to her laughter, God spoke these words to Abraham:

13 And the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear [a child,] when I am [so] old?' 14 *Is anything too difficult for the LORD?* At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son" (Genesis 18:13-14, emphasis mine).

When God rescued the nation Israel from their bondage in Egypt, He led them into the wilderness, where the "menu" was a miraculous provision of manna. But the Israelites began to grumble because they could not enjoy the variety of foods they had eaten in Egypt. In response to their grumbling, God promised to give this great company a diet of meat for an entire month. If the feeding of the 5,000 seems difficult, imagine feeding this huge congregation. Moses had the same thoughts and expressed his concerns to God:

21 But Moses said, "The people, among whom I am, are 600,000 on foot; yet Thou hast said, 'I will give them meat in order that they may eat for a whole month.' 22 Should flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be sufficient for them? Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be sufficient for them?" (Numbers 11:21-22).

But God asked another question in response to Moses, a question vitally important to every Christian today:

23 And the LORD said to Moses, "Is the LORD'S power limited? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not" (Numbers 11:23, emphasis mine).

The answer to this question is crucial, and the answer of the Bible is clear and unequivocal:

3 But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3).

17 "Ah Lord GOD! Behold, Thou hast made the heavens and the earth by Thy great power and by Thine outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for Thee" (Jeremiah 32:17).

26 And looking upon [them] Jesus said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

24 The LORD of hosts has sworn saying, "Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand, 25 to break Assyria in My land, and I will trample him on My mountains. Then his yoke will be removed from them, and his burden removed from their shoulder. 26 This is the plan devised against the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. 27 For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate [it]? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?" (Isaiah 14:21-26).

### **God's Power in Creation**

The earliest manifestation of God's power is seen in the creation of the world in which we live:

20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

Throughout Scripture, the creation of the world is cited as a compelling testimony of the power of God.

(For the choir director. A Psalm of David.) 1 The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. 2 Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge. 3 There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard. 4 Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun, 5 Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; It rejoices as a strong man to run his course. 6 Its rising is from one end of the heavens, And its circuit to the other end of them; And there is nothing hidden from its heat (Psalms 19:1-6).

6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, And by the breath of His mouth all their host. 7 He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap; He lays up the deeps in storehouses. 8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. 9 For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast. 10 The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever, The plans of His heart from generation to generation. 12 Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, The people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance (Psalms 33:6-12).

In Psalm 33, the heavens testify to the existence of God and His attributes and thus proclaim His glory (Psalm 19:1-6). David continues the theme of creation's proclamation of God's character in Psalm 33 where the power of God is highlighted. Verse 6 states the power of God in creating the world, emphasizing that all this took place by the mere speaking of a word (see Genesis 1:3ff.; Hebrews 11:3; 2 Peter 3:5). In verse 7, David indicates God not only created the heavens, He controls them. And in verses 10 and following, David goes on to tell us God likewise controls the affairs of men; God is in control of history.

(For the choir director. A Psalm of David the servant of the LORD, who spoke to the LORD the words of this song in the day that the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul.) And he said, 1 "I love Thee, O LORD, my strength." 2 The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. 3 I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, And I am saved from my enemies. 4 The cords of death encompassed me, And the torrents of ungodliness terrified me. 5 The cords of Sheol surrounded me; The snares of death confronted me. 6 In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before Him came into His ears. 7 Then the earth shook and quaked; and the foundations of the mountains were trembling And were shaken, because He was angry. 8 Smoke went up out of His nostrils, And fire from His mouth devoured; coals were kindled by it. 9 He bowed the heavens also, and came down with thick darkness under His feet. 10 And He rode upon a cherub and flew; and He sped upon the wings of the wind. 11 He made darkness His hiding place, His canopy around Him, Darkness of waters, thick clouds of the skies. 12 From the brightness before Him passed His thick clouds, hailstones and coals of fire. 13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens, And the Most High uttered His voice, hailstones and coals of fire. 14 And He sent out His arrows, and scattered them, And lightning flashes in abundance, and routed them. 15 Then the channels of water appeared, and the foundations of the world were laid bare At Thy rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of Thy nostrils. 16 He sent from on high, He took me; He drew me out of many waters. 17 He delivered me from my strong enemy, And from those who hated me, for they were too mighty for me. 18 They confronted me in the day of my calamity, but the LORD was my stay. 19 He brought me forth also into a broad place; He rescued me, because He delighted in me (Psalms 18:1-19).

Psalm 18 praises God for His strength, strength in which he can take refuge (see verses 1-2). Verses 3-7 praise God for the deliverance He gave David from the hand of his enemy, Saul (see also verse 1). David was in great distress, and God rescued him. David poetically depicts in verses 7-15 God's response to His cry for help, as though God called upon all the forces of nature to come to his aid. In a word, David tells his readers God will, so to speak, move heaven and earth to deliver one of His children in distress. We can trust in God and find in Him a place of refuge, because He is the one true God whose power includes the control of all the forces of nature.<sup>1</sup>

### **God's Power Demonstrated at the Exodus**

After having first displayed His power at creation, God's second great demonstration of power is seen at the Exodus,

1 And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.'" 2 But Pharaoh said, "*Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?* I do not know the LORD, and besides, I will not let Israel go" (Exodus 5:1-2, emphasis mine).

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<sup>1</sup> While David seems to be speaking poetically and figuratively here, we can find a number of instances in the Scriptures where God did summon the forces of nature to deliver His people. See, for example, Exodus 9:18-33; Deuteronomy 7:20; Joshua 10:12-15; 24:12; 2 Kings 1:9-14.

Pharaoh's obstinance was by divine design. While Pharaoh hardened his own heart, at the same time God hardened his heart so that he would resist God, providing the occasion for God's power to be demonstrated to the Egyptians, the Israelites, and the surrounding nations:

3 "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. 4 When Pharaoh will not listen to you, then I will lay My hand on Egypt, and bring out My hosts, My people the sons of Israel, from the land of Egypt by great judgments. 5 And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from their midst" (Exodus 7:3-5).

30 Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 31 And when Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses (Exodus 14:30-31).

6 "Thy right hand, O LORD, is majestic in power, Thy right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy" (Exodus 15:6). 11 "Who is like Thee among the gods, O LORD? Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders? 12 Thou didst stretch out Thy right hand, the earth swallowed them. 13 In Thy lovingkindness Thou hast led the people whom Thou hast redeemed; In Thy strength Thou hast guided [them] to Thy holy habitation. 14 The peoples have heard, they tremble; Anguish has gripped the inhabitants of Philistia. 15 Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; the leaders of Moab, trembling grips them; All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. 16 Terror and dread fall upon them; by the greatness of Thine arm they are motionless as stone; Until Thy people pass over, O LORD, until the people pass over whom Thou hast purchased" (Exodus 15:11-16).

The nation Israel praised God for the power He displayed in delivering them from their bondage in Egypt. They confessed that their deliverance proved God to be God alone, and the word of their deliverance would strike terror in the hearts of the other nations. They saw this deliverance as proof of God's power and assurance of their entrance into the land as God had promised. The exodus was indeed a demonstration of God's omnipotence.

Later, Moses would remind the second generation of Israelites of this great event and of the power of God to which it bore witness:

32 "Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and [inquire] from one end of the heavens to the other. Has [anything] been done like this great thing, or has [anything] been heard like it? 33 Has [any] people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard [it], and survived? 34 Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within [another] nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? 35 To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him. 36 Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire. 37 Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power" (Deuteronomy 4:32-37).

And so in the later books of the Old Testament, the creation of the world and the creation of the nation Israel (by means of the exodus) becomes a major theme. In the Book of Psalms, these events and the power of God to which they bear witness, become the basis for Israel's hope and for her worship and praise:

5 For I know that the LORD is great, And that our Lord is above all gods. 6 Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps. 7 He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; Who makes lightnings for the rain; Who brings forth the wind from His treasures. 8 He smote the first-born of Egypt, both of man and beast. 9 He sent signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, Upon Pharaoh and all his servants. 10 He smote many nations, and slew mighty kings, 11 Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, And all the kingdoms of Canaan; 12 And He gave their land as a heritage, A heritage to Israel His people (Psalms 135:5-12).

The prophets make much of these events and of the power of God to which they point. They do so because they are calling Israel to trust in God and place their hope in Him. They do so because they speak of even greater events God is going to bring to pass, events which involve a "new creation," and therefore require the power which only God, the Creator, has:

5 Thus says God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it, And spirit to those who walk in it, 6 I am the LORD, I have called you



in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, 7 To open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, And those who dwell in darkness from the prison. 8 I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images” (Isaiah 42:5-8).

24 Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, “I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, Stretching out the heavens by Myself, and spreading out the earth all alone” (Isaiah 44:24). 12 “It is I who made the earth, and created man upon it. I stretched out the heavens with My hands, And I ordained all their host” (Isaiah 45:12).

2 “Why was there no man when I came? When I called, [why] was there none to answer? Is My hand so short that it cannot ransom? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, I dry up the sea with My rebuke, I make the rivers a wilderness; Their fish stink for lack of water, and die of thirst. 3 I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering” (Isaiah 50:2-3).

While imprisoned in Jerusalem, Jeremiah was instructed by God to redeem a field in Judah from a relative, even though the period of the nation’s captivity in Babylon had already commenced. Jeremiah’s prayer in response to this action reveals his grasp of God’s power demonstrated in creation and in the exodus:

17 ‘Ah Lord GOD! Behold, Thou hast made the heavens and the earth by Thy great power and by Thine outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for Thee, 18 who showest lovingkindness to thousands, but repayest the iniquity of fathers into the bosom of their children after them, O great and mighty God. The LORD of hosts is His name; 19 great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, giving to everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds; 20 who hast set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, [and] even to this day both in Israel and among mankind; and Thou hast made a name for Thyself, as at this day. 21 And Thou didst bring Thy people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs and with wonders, and with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, and with great terror; 22 and gavest them this land, which Thou didst swear to their forefathers to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey. 23 And they came in and took possession of it, but they did not obey Thy voice or walk in Thy law; they have done nothing of all that Thou commandedst them to do; therefore Thou hast made all this calamity come upon them. 24 Behold, the siege mounds have reached the city to take it; and the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans who fight against it, because of the sword, the famine, and the pestilence; and what Thou hast spoken has come to pass; and, behold, Thou seest [it.]” (Jeremiah 32:17-24).

### **The Power of God in the New Testament**

Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah included the fact of His power. He was called the “**Mighty God**” (Isaiah 9:6). At the time Messiah’s birth was announced to Mary, she was told this miraculous virgin birth would take place by the power of God:

34 And Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 35 And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God. 36 And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:34-37).

Our Lord’s power was evident through the many miracles He performed (see Acts 2:32; John 3:2). The people were awe-struck by the evidences of His power:

43a And they were all amazed at the greatness of God (Luke 9:43a).

When John the Baptist began to have second thoughts concerning Jesus, our Lord sent this word back to him:

4 And Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 [the] BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and [the] lame walk, [the] lepers are cleansed and [the] deaf hear, and [the] dead are raised up, and [the] POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. 6 And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me” (Matthew 11:4-6).

Jesus made it clear His power extended beyond the merely physical realm. He employed His power to heal in order to show that His power extended to the forgiving of sins (Luke 5:17-26; see also Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12). The greatest demonstration of our Lord’s power was His resurrection from the dead:

17 “For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. 18 No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father” (John 10:17-18).

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” 39 But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and [yet] no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; 40 for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:38-40).

4 Who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 1:4).

In His first coming, a few men were given an occasional glimpse of the full power of our Lord (see Mark 9:1-8; 2 Peter 1:16-19). But He makes it clear that in His second coming, all will see Him coming with power:

30 “And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30).

64 Jesus said to him, “You have said it [yourself]; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN” (Matthew 26:64).

The last book of the Bible emphasizes the power of the Lord Jesus Christ:

11 And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (Revelation 5:11-12).

### **God’s Power in the Lives of His Saints**

God is omnipotent whether we believe it or not. But it is vitally important that we do believe He is omnipotent. An individual’s grasp of the power of God will transform his thinking and his actions. Consider these illustrations of the way God’s power transformed the lives of several men in the Bible.

First, let us turn our attention to Abraham. Here is a man who, at the beginning of his life, had grave doubts about the power of God. But in the end, his firm belief in God’s power enabled him to act in a way that makes him a model of faith for all Christians.

In the early days of his life, Abraham lacked confidence in the power of God. He made his way to the land of Canaan in obedience to the revelation He received from God (see Genesis 12:1-3). But when a famine came in the land, Abram made his way to Egypt, a decision which does not seem prompted by faith in God’s power or His promises. When he and Sarai arrived there, they conducted themselves as they habitually did throughout much of their marriage (see Genesis 20:30)--they deceived others about their relationship. It is apparent from Abram’s words in Genesis 12:11-13 and Genesis 20:11-13 that Abram was afraid when he took his wife to a foreign land. Because there was no “fear of God in that place” (Genesis 20:11), he thought God’s power was somehow nullified. It seems Abram thought God’s power was sufficient to protect him only when he was in the right place and when the people of that place feared God.

How foolish we now consider Abram’s thinking. God not only protected Abram, He also protected Sarai, Abram’s wife. Abram lived, and Sarai did not become another man’s wife. Abram also prospered in these foreign places, coming out not only alive but richer (see Genesis 12:20--13:2; 20:14-16). In fact, God was powerful enough to close the wombs of every woman living in Abimelech’s kingdom of Gerar (20:17-18).

Abram did not believe God’s power was sufficient to enable he and his wife Sarai to bear a son because they were getting old, and Sarai was barren. So Abram sought to produce a son some easier way, first by

adopting a servant as a son (Genesis 15:2), and then by producing a son by taking his wife's handmaid, Hagar, as a concubine (Genesis 16). God purposed to produce a son in a way that would demonstrate His power, by miraculously producing a son in their old age through a woman who had been barren all her life.

The great test of Abraham's life came when God called him to take this son, the son in whom all Abraham's hopes rested, and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:1-19). Here, Abraham was set to obey God, and the New Testament tells us clearly how he could do so--he was convinced of the power of God to resurrect his son from the dead:

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten [son]; 18 [it was he] to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." 19 He considered that *God is able* to raise [men] even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type (Hebrews 11:17-19, emphasis mine).

The key words here are "**God is able.**" Abraham's belief that "**God is able**" was his belief in the power of God to raise the dead. Abraham had a resurrection faith, just as we are to have (see Romans 10:9). Abraham's growth in faith is paralleled by his increasing belief in the power of God--whether the power to give two people "**as good as dead**" with respect to child-bearing a son (Romans 4:18-21)--or the power to raise a son from the dead.

Abraham, who began with little faith in God's power, grew to have great faith in the power of God. In some ways, David's faith in the power of God diminished over time. When we are first introduced to David, he is ready to do battle with Goliath, the giant who arrogantly spoke blasphemously against God. David was confident, not in his own abilities, but in God's ability to silence this heathen by putting him to death through David and his sling:

33 Then Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are [but] a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth . . . 36 Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted the armies of the living God." 37 And David said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine. And Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you" (1 Samuel 17:33, 36-37).

David's problem was that he, like the nation Israel, began to take credit for what God did through His power. God had warned the Israelites about this false pride:

11 "Beware lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; 12 lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived [in them], 13 and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, 14 then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 17 Otherwise, you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.' 18 But you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as [it is] this day" (Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 17-18).

I believe this is just what happened to David. Taking too much credit for what God had accomplished seems to have been the cause of two of David's most serious and devastating sins. Twice in the biographical account of David's life we read of David failing to go to war at the time when kings customarily went to battle:

1 Then it happened in the spring, *at the time when kings go out [to battle,]* that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. *But David stayed at Jerusalem.* 2 Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. 3 So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" 4 And David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house (2 Samuel 11:1-4, emphasis mine).

1 Then it happened in the spring, *at the time when kings go out [to battle,]* that Joab led out the army and ravaged the land of the sons of Ammon, and came and besieged Rabbah. *But David stayed at Jerusalem.* And Joab struck Rabbah

and overthrew it . . . 1 Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel. 2 So David said to Joab and to the princes of the people, "Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan, and bring me [word] that I may know their number." 3 And Joab said, "May the LORD add to His people a hundred times as many as they are! But, my lord the king, are they not all my lord's servants? Why does my lord seek this thing? Why should he be a cause of guilt to Israel?" 4 Nevertheless, the king's word prevailed against Joab. Therefore, Joab departed and went throughout all Israel, and came to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 20:1; 2 Chronicles 21:1-4, emphasis mine).

It may well be these two events, whose descriptions are separated from each other in the Scriptures, are the result of the same failure on David's part to go to war with his troops. In both cases, Israel was at war with Rabbah. In both cases, in the spring when kings normally went to war, David did not. He stayed home. And the result was he ended up in bed with a loyal soldier's wife and eventually became a secret ally of the enemy army he used to kill the soldier Uriah to "hide" his sin. In the second instance, David numbered his troops, resulting in an outbreak of divine wrath upon the nation Israel.

The results of David's sin are glaringly apparent in these Old Testament texts. My purpose here is to consider why David stayed home rather than go to war as kings normally did and as David should have done. I would suggest David began to take credit for the victories God accomplished through His power. David seemed to be so confident of defeating his enemies that he need not even go out to war with his troops. He could serve as commander and chief while between the sheets, and it is just here, between the sheets, that David lost the biggest battle of his life. So too David instructed Joab and the princes of Israel to number the troops of Israel. Even though Joab strongly urged him not to do this, David insisted, at great cost to the Israelites.

But why number the Israelites? For the same reason many of us keep track of "decisions for Christ" or "attendance this week" (not that this is wrong in and of itself). Many of us want to have numbers because we believe there is strength in numbers. David seems to have numbered the Israelites so he could feel confident about winning the battles he waged against the enemies of the nation Israel. Gideon's 300 men would not have given David great confidence at this moment in his life. David seems to have looked upon Israel's victories as his victories and Israel's strength in numbers as his strength. He was wrong. David was never stronger than in his weakness as a youth, when he stood up against Goliath in the power of God and not in his own strength.

The life of Daniel and his three friends, recorded in the Book of Daniel, provides yet another example of the way faith in the power of God made men of faith heroes of the faith. When Daniel refused to cease praying to his "**God,**" king Darius was reluctantly forced to cast him into a den of lions. The last words of Darius before he left Daniel in the den of lions overnight expressed his hope that Daniel's God might deliver him:

16 Then the king gave orders, and Daniel was brought in and cast into the lions' den. The king spoke and said to Daniel, "Your God whom you constantly serve will Himself deliver you" (Daniel 6:16).

The king was right, and the words he spoke in response to Daniel's divine deliverance give credit where credit is due, to God, by whose power Daniel was delivered from the "**power of the lions:**"

26 "I make a decree that in all the dominion of my kingdom men are to fear and tremble before the God of Daniel; for He is the living God and enduring forever, and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed, and His dominion [will be] forever. 27 He delivers and rescues and performs signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, who has [also] delivered Daniel from the power of the lions" (Daniel 6:26-27).

Likewise, it was through the faith of Daniel's three friends in the power of God that Nebuchadnezzar came to make a similar confession. Nebuchadnezzar had a great golden statue set up before which all men were to bow in worship when prompted by the king's musicians. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego refused to bow down to this image, infuriating the king who made this threat:

14 Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? 15 Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I

have made, [very well.] But if you will not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; *and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?*” (Daniel 3:14-15, emphasis mine).

What a challenge to the power of God! Notice the response of Daniel’s three friends. Their response is first of all an expression of faith in God’s power to do anything He chooses. It is secondly an expression of submission on the part of these men to the will of God, which may be to deliver them *from* the fire or to deliver them *through* a fiery death (compare Philippians 1:19-24):

16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. 17 If it be [so,] our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But [even] if [He does] not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Daniel 3:16-18).

In fact, God delivered these three men in a way they could never have imagined. Rather than keeping them from the fire, He brought them through the fire, alive, and without as much as the smell of smoke on their clothing (see 3:27). Nebuchadnezzar was soon to learn yet another lesson concerning the power of God compared to his own “power.” He discovered that his “power” had been given to him by the God of all power. After God humbled him and took away his power, he came to his senses and issued these words for us to hear and heed:

1 Nebuchadnezzar the king to all the peoples, nations, and [men of every] language that live in all the earth: “May your peace abound! 2 It has seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me. 3 How great are His signs, and how mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And His dominion is from generation to generation . . . 34 But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom [endures] from generation to generation. 35 And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and [among] the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’ 36 At that time my reason returned to me. And my majesty and splendor were restored to me for the glory of my kingdom, and my counselors and my nobles began seeking me out; so I was reestablished in my sovereignty, and surpassing greatness was added to me. 37 Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride” (Daniel 4:1-33, 34-37).

### Conclusion

No one who takes the Bible seriously can deny the power of God. God is omnipotent; He is all-powerful. This truth transformed the lives of men in the past, and it can transform our lives today. Allow me to suggest several ways the power of God intersects our lives today.

### **The first thing we should do, in light of the power of God, is to fear, honor, and serve God and God alone.**

1 Then God spoke all these words, saying, 2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. 7 You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Exodus 20:1-7; see also Joshua 4:23-24; Psalm 115:1-15).

### **Recognizing the Bible teaches God is infinitely powerful should remove the word “impossible” from our vocabulary.**

How often we excuse our sin by appealing to our human inability. “But I’m only human,” we say. So we are. But God has not only saved us by His power, He also works in us to sanctify us by His power:

8 And those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the

Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you (Romans 8:8-11).

18 [I pray that] the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. [These are] in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly [places], 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1:18-21).

14 For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; [and] that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fulness of God. 20 Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us (Ephesians 3:14-20).

9 For this reason also, since the day we heard [of it], we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please [Him] in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; 11 strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light (Colossians 1:9-12).

29 And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me (Colossians 1:29).

### **Our weakness is not a barrier to the power of God.**

Rather, recognizing our weakness is the basis for our turning to God, depending upon His power to work in us. In this way, God receives all the glory.

7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves (2 Corinthians 4:7).

7 And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me--to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

When we minister in the power of God, we need not trust in our own strength and in human methods. Indeed, we dare not do so. Through the "weakness" of a cross, God brought salvation to men. Through the "foolishness" of the message of the cross, men are saved. Through weak and foolish men, God has chosen to proclaim His gospel. Through weak and unimpressive methods, the gospel is proclaimed, trusting in the power of God to convince and convert sinners. In this way, men must give God the glory, and they must trust in Him and in His power, not in men:

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not [come to] know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:20-24).

26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, 29 that no man should boast before God (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4 And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:2-5).

This is not the way the church operates today. When we preach, we employ the marketing methods of our day, proven to be successful in producing results. We use persuasive techniques which sell soap and breakfast cereals. When we seek to train and develop leaders, we train men to be leaders following the model and methods of our secular culture rather than teaching them to be servants. The church is more often run on the basis of “good business” principles than on biblical principles. And we offer “therapy” in a thinly disguised version of (poor) secular psychology and psychiatry, rather than challenging men and women to think biblically and to obey the Word of God. Is evangelicalism not like the state of the church Paul sadly describes as the church of the last days?

5 Holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these (2 Timothy 3:5).

### **If We Really Believed in the Power of God**

#### **We would come to Him in prayer first**

If we really believed God is omnipotent, we would come to Him in prayer first, not as a last resort after having tried every other means and failed. We would forsake trusting in the idols of our day and trust in Him. We would humbly acknowledge that all the blessings we have are a gift of His grace and the result of the working of His power. Our prayers would be filled with praise and thanksgiving, seeing God as the Source of every blessing.

We would be filled with faith and hope, knowing that no purpose of God can be thwarted (2 Chronicles 20:6) and that every promise God has made will be fulfilled, in His time, and exactly as He has promised.

#### **We would not give so much credit to Satan**

If we really understood the power of God, we would not give so much credit to Satan. We would not look at Satan as though he and God were closely matched rivals who have battled for centuries. We would not dare suppose that in the end God will barely defeat this one who is our deadly foe. We would realize that God is the Creator, and Satan is but a creature. We would know that God’s power is infinite, while Satan’s is finite. We would not minimize Satan’s power, but neither would we overstate his power. God is not battling with Satan with the hope of defeating him; Satan is already a defeated foe, whose final demise is certain (John 12:31; 16:11; Luke 10:18). In the meantime, God is using Satan and his rebellion to achieve His purposes (see 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

#### **We would not believe the lies of the “good-life gospeleers”**

If we really understood and believed in the power of God, we would not believe the lies of the “good-life gospeleers,” those hucksters who line their own pockets by assuring donors that God is standing by with all His power, eager to do their bidding. They lay claim on God’s power by “faith,” by claiming certain possessions like money and healing. “God doesn’t want us to suffer,” they say, “but to prosper.” If they really believed in God’s power, they would know God’s power can just as well sustain us through suffering and affliction as it can deliver us from suffering and affliction. They refuse to accept that God often works through suffering to sustain and purify the saint and to demonstrate His grace and power to a lost and dying world (again, see 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

### **We would not be so reluctant to obey**

If we really believed in the power of God, we would not be so reluctant to obey those commands of God which seem to leave us vulnerable (like, “sell your possessions and give to the poor,” or see 1 Corinthians 7:29-30 for a more general version). And we would not excuse ourselves from obeying the “impossible” commands like, “love your enemy.” We would live our lives much more dangerously if we really believed God is omnipotent.

18 [I pray that] the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. [These are] in accordance with the working of the strength of His might . . . 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; [and] that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fulness of God (Ephesians 1:18-19; 3:16-19).

### **Additional Thoughts on the Power of God**

#### **What the New Testament Teaches About the Power of God**

- (1) Creation is a witness to God’s power (Romans 1:20).
- (2) The gospel is powerful; the power of God can save and radically change men (Romans 1:16).
- (3) Saints are saved, kept, and constantly empowered for life and ministry by the power of God (Romans 15:13, 18-19; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 6:4; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:11, 29).
- (4) The resurrection of Christ, and subsequently of every Christian, is through the power of God (Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:43).
- (5) Even the unbelief and rebellion of men is used by God to demonstrate His power (Romans 9:17).
- (6) God’s delay in punishing evil-doers is not an indication of His inability to handle the situation, but an indication of His intention to demonstrate His power (Exodus 9:13-18; Romans 9:22).
- (7) God’s choice and use of Christians, as foolish, weak and earthy vessels of clay is to demonstrate His power (1 Corinthians 1:18--2:5).
- (8) God’s power is ministered to and through man’s human weaknesses, rather than through man’s natural human strengths.

8 Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

4 For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we shall live with Him because of the power of God [directed] toward you (2 Corinthians 13:4).

#### **What God’s Power Enables Him To Do**

- (1) All power belongs to God--”**Thine is the power. . .**” (Matthew 6:13).
- (2) He can therefore do all things (Matthew 19:26; Mark 14:36).
- (3) Nothing is impossible for God (Luke 1:34-37).
- (4) He is able to do what He has purposed (Job 42:1-2; Isaiah 14:27).
- (5) He is able to do what He has promised (Romans 4:21).
- (6) He is able to judge because He can save and destroy (James 4:12).



- (7) He is able to destroy the body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28).
- (8) He is able to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6).
- (9) He is able to save us (Isaiah 63:1; Psalm 54:1; Romans 1:16), forever (Hebrews 7:25).
- (10) He is able to defend us, to overcome our enemies (Psalm 59:9-11).
- (11) He is able to deliver us (Daniel 3-4).
- (12) He is able to protect (Psalm 79:1; 91:1) or rescue us (Psalm 79:11).
- (13) He is able to make us stand (Romans 14:4).
- (14) He is able to come to our aid when tempted (Hebrews 2:18).
- (15) He is able to establish us as His saints (Romans 16:25).
- (16) He is able to keep Christians (John 10:29--Romans 8:31-39), to keep us from falling (Jude 1:24-25).
- (17) He is able to keep that which we have committed to Him to the day of His coming (2 Timothy 1:12).
- (18) He is able to raise the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).
- (19) He is able to provide everything for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).
- (20) He is able to empower us to carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

### **How Is The Power of God Exercised or Demonstrated?**

- (1) In weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10; 13:4).
- (2) In simplicity and clarity, rather than human sophistication and persuasion (1 Corinthians 1 and 2 Corinthians 2:14-17; 4:1-6).
- (3) In a simple proclamation of the gospel (Romans 1:16).
- (4) By the exercise of spiritual gifts (Ephesians 3:7).
- (5) By prayer (Ephesians 3:14-21).
- (6) By dying daily and thus being conformed to Christ's death (Philippians 3:10).

22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? (Romans 9:22 NAS)

13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13 NAS).

18 For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, 19 in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ (Romans 15:18-19).

18 For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18 NAS).

24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24 NAS).

19 But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. 20 For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power (1 Corinthians 4:19-20 NAS).

4 In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, (1 Corinthians 5:4 NAS).

14 Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power (1 Corinthians 6:14 NAS).

24 then [comes] the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power (1 Corinthians 15:24 NAS).

43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; (1 Corinthians 15:43 NAS)

5 in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, (2 Corinthians 6:5 NAS)

6 in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, (2 Corinthians 6:6 NAS)

7 in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, (2 Corinthians 6:7 NAS)

19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. [These are] in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly [places], 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. (Ephesians 1:19-21 NAS).

7 of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power (Ephesians 3:7 NAS).

10 that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; (Philippians 3:10 NAS)

21 who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself (Philippians 3:21 NAS).

5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake (1 Thessalonians 1:5 NAS).

9 And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, (2 Thessalonians 1:9 NAS)

11 To this end also we pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power; (2 Thessalonians 1:11 NAS)

7 For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. 8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with [me] in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, (2 Timothy 1:7 NAS)

5 holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these (2 Timothy 3:5 NAS).

(7) God saves us by His power.

(8) The kingdom of God and power:

19 But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. 20 For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power (1 Corinthians 4:19-20 NAS).

(9) God's power and the gospel:

18 For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18 NAS).

24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24 NAS).

(10) God's power and the resurrection of Christ.

(11) God's power and the Scriptures.

(12) God's power and the Holy Spirit.

13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13 NAS).

18 For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, 19 in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ (Romans 15:18-19).

(13) God's power and human weakness.

(14) God's power and those who oppose God and His servants.

22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? (Romans 9:22 NAS)

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16 NAS).

20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse (Romans 1:20 NAS).

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH" (Romans 9:17 NAS).

## **Lesson 3: The Goodness of God**

### **Introduction**

Mo, one of the inmates in a maximum security prison where I conducted a seminar, was a very substantial fellow. While Mo did not quite meet the requirements of a sumo wrestler, he came close enough to command a great deal of respect. For all of his size and strength, he had lost virtually all of his front teeth. When Mo volunteered to provide special music for the seminar, my friend Dick Plowman, a former member of our church and prison ministry colleague, introduced Mo to the audience: “Now, let’s see, what number is Mo going to sing for us? Right! Anything he wants!”

Here was a man of great strength, a man most inmates would not wish to challenge or offend. Because of his strength, he could do anything he wanted within the limits of the prison system. The power and raw physical strength of an evil man is a frightening reality. The power of a good man is a comfort. But the other attributes a man possesses determines how his power is viewed.

In and of itself, God’s power is not nearly as comforting as when seen in light of several of His other attributes. Two of these attributes are the “goodness” of God and the “wisdom” of God. The God who is all-powerful is the same God who is good and wise; God’s power becomes a source of great comfort and encouragement to the Christian. This lesson considers the attribute of God’s goodness, and our following lesson will study the attribute of God’s wisdom. A brief review of some important truths about the goodness of God should help to show us the importance of studying God’s goodness.

### **The Goodness of God is One of His Attributes**

1 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting (Psalms 107:1).

19 How great is Thy goodness, which Thou hast stored up for those who fear Thee, which Thou hast wrought for those who take refuge in Thee, before the sons of men! (Psalms 31:19).

5 Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the LORD and to His goodness in the last days (Hosea 3:5).

### **The Importance of the Goodness of God**

The goodness of God is not only an attribute of God but a foundational truth every Christian should embrace. Consider some of the reasons God’s goodness is important to us.

#### **(1) The “goodness” of God is prominent in the opening chapters of the Bible.**

Repeatedly, God pronounced everything which He created “**good**” (see Genesis 1:4, 10, 18; 1 Timothy 4:4). In chapter 2, God saw that it was “**not good**” for Adam to be alone, and so He created a wife for him (2:18-25). In the garden of Eden, where God had placed Adam and Eve, there was “**the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.**” From the fruit of this one tree, the man and woman were forbidden to eat. We shall return to this matter of “goodness” in the garden, for it is a vitally important truth. Suffice to say the issues of “goodness” and “evil” are prominent at the beginning of the Bible.

#### **(2) The goodness of God appears to be the sum total of all of God’s attributes.**

The goodness of God may thus be viewed as one facet of His glorious nature and character and also the overall summation of His nature and character.

19 Then Moses said, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!" And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exodus 33:19; see also Exodus 34:5-7).

### **(3) We cannot separate what is good from God.**

You cannot have goodness without God, just as you cannot have God without goodness. God alone is good:

2 I said to the LORD, "Thou art my Lord; I have no good besides Thee" (Psalms 16:2).

16 And behold, one came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" 17 And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is [only] One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:16-17).

No man is good:

1 (For the choir director. [A Psalm] of David.) The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good (Psalms 14:1; see Psalm 53:1; Romans 3:9-18).

God is the source of everything that is good:

17 Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow (James 1:17).

God does not withhold anything that is truly good from His children.

11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; The LORD gives grace and glory; No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly (Psalm 84:11).

We simply cannot separate "good" from "God." Here is where our society, and especially our educational system, had better take note. You cannot teach values, you cannot teach morality, without teaching about God. "**Be ye holy,**" God said, "**for I am holy**" (see 1 Peter 1:16; Leviticus 11:44f.).

### **(4) Man's eternal destiny is determined by his decision as to how one can truly be good in God's sight**

(See John 5:28-29; Romans 3:1-26; Titus 3:3-7).

### **(5) Apart from the divine revelation of the Scriptures, we cannot recognize true goodness, for it cannot be understood apart from knowing God and seeing life from His perspective.**

This is precisely the point of Psalm 73 which we will now consider, for it gives us a radically different definition of "good."

#### **Good Defined in Psalm 73**

Asaph, a Levite who was chief of the musicians under David (1 Chronicles 16:4-7,37), composed Psalm 73. My conviction is that the central theme of Psalm 73 is the goodness of God. The first and the last verses of the psalm contain the word "**good.**" Through the course of time and this psalm, Asaph undergoes a radical change in his understanding of the meaning of the term "**good.**" Because Asaph's misconception of the meaning of "**good**" is virtually the same as evangelical Christians today, we must understand the message of this psalm and the meaning of the term "**good.**"

Asaph describes a period in his life when he had serious spiritual struggles. His premise was the goodness of God, particularly His goodness to His own people, Israel: "Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart!" (verse 1).

To Asaph, this affirmation of truth meant that because God was “**good**” to Israel, God’s blessings would constantly be poured out upon those Jews who were righteous. On the other hand, the unrighteous could expect many difficulties. Now there is an element of truth in this, as we can see from the blessings and cursings of Deuteronomy 28-30. But it was not altogether true, and this was evident even in the Book of Deuteronomy:

2 “And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 3 And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:2-3).

Asaph admits to his readers that he strayed far off course. He was so far from the truth that he came close to destruction. In his words, “**his feet had almost slipped**” (verse 2). He seems to be confessing that he considered giving up the faith and forsaking the way of righteousness, supposing that it was of no real benefit.

Asaph’s problem was largely due to his distorted perspective. *First* of all, he was envious of the wicked. Unlike Lot, whose righteous soul was vexed by the sin all about him, Asaph wished he could be in the sandals of those who were wicked. He did not hate their sin; he envied their success (verse 3). *Second*, he was self-righteous. He looked upon himself as being better than he was. He seems to have supposed he deserved God’s blessings and concluded his “righteous living” had been in vain:

13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, And washed my hands in innocence; 14 For I have been stricken all day long, And chastened every morning (Psalms 73).

These verses also suggest Asaph views his suffering as coming from God. God was punishing him, he supposed, for being godly. *Third*, Asaph seems to have been consumed with self-pity. It is really difficult to see life clearly when you are looking at it through tear-filled eyes. And these tears were the tears of self-pity.

I believe Asaph’s words in verses 4-9 which describe the wicked are a description of those whom Asaph saw in the congregation of Israelites who came to worship. Asaph is talking about wicked Jews rather than pagan Gentiles. I also believe Asaph’s analysis is highly distorted and inaccurate.

Asaph makes some very sweeping generalizations in the first half of the psalm, implying that all the wicked prosper and the righteous, which surely included him, suffer. He wrongly supposes the wicked are always healthy and wealthy and thinks none of the wicked experience the difficulties of life. Even in their death, they are spared from discomfort. He likewise thinks those who prosper are all arrogant, blaspheming God, daring Him to know or care about what the wicked are doing.

There is some measure of truth in this. Some of the wealthy wicked would be just as Asaph has described them. But Asaph has over-generalized, making it seem God blesses all the wicked and punishes all the righteous. The wicked flaunt their wickedness and are blessed. The righteous practice their righteousness and are punished for doing so. As far as Asaph is concerned, there is good reason to consider joining the wicked rather than fighting them (see verses 10-14).

But Asaph was wrong, and this he confesses at several points in the psalm.

2 But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; My steps had almost slipped. 3 For I was envious of the arrogant, [As] I saw the prosperity of the wicked (verses 2-3).

15 If I had said, “I will speak thus,” Behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children (verse 15).

21 When my heart was embittered, And I was pierced within, 22 Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was [like] a beast before Thee (verses 21-22).

The turning point in the psalm is verse 15. Up to this point, Asaph viewed life from a distorted human perspective. To him, the goodness of God meant health and wealth, not unlike the “good life gospeleers”

of our own day. But, as Asaph admits, he was wrong. In verses 15-28, he explains why he was wrong, ending with an entirely different definition of **“good.”**

When Asaph came **“into the sanctuary of God,”** he was able to **“perceive their end”** (verse 17). Now Asaph viewed the prosperity of the wicked in the light of eternity rather than simply from the vantage point of time. Those who seemed to be doing so well in their wickedness Asaph now saw in great peril. Their feet were on a slippery place. In but a short time, they would face the judgment of God. Their payday for sin might not come in this life, but it would surely come in eternity:

18 Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places; Thou dost cast them down to destruction. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, Thou wilt despise their form (verses 18-20).

How foolish, even beastly, Asaph had been to think the wicked would get away with their sin, and there would be no day of reckoning. How foolish to conclude God was punishing him for avoiding the sinful ways of the wicked. Asaph now sees his relationship with God in its true light. Eternity holds for him the bright hope of God’s glorious presence. But in addition to this future blessing, Asaph has the pleasure of God’s presence in this life:

23 Nevertheless I am continually with Thee; Thou hast taken hold of my right hand. 24 With Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me, And afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven [but Thee]? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (verses 23-26).

Asaph now sees that the prosperity of the wicked has hardened their hearts toward God. They have become proud, arrogant, and independent of God. Asaph also sees his **“affliction,”** whatever that might be, as a source of great blessing. His suffering and agony drew him closer to God; the prosperity of the wicked drew them away from God. His trials were indeed a gift from God for Asaph’s good. His struggles had led him into a deeper intimacy with God and were thus worth all the agony and distress of soul. Trusting God and living a holy life are not just the means to eternal blessings; they are the way to great temporal blessings as well.

Now Asaph understands the **“goodness”** of God in a different way. He has a new definition for **“good.”** In verse 1, **“good”** really meant the absence of pain, difficulty, trouble, sorrow, ill health, or poverty. In verse 28, **“good”** means something far better than physical prosperity:

28 But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, That I may tell of all Thy works (verse 28).

Nearness to God--intimate fellowship with God--is our highest good. We may say then that whatever interferes with our nearness to God, our fellowship with Him, is actually evil. And whatever draws us into a deeper fellowship with God is actually **“good.”** When God brings suffering and adversity into our lives, our confidence in His goodness should not be undermined. Instead, we should be reassured of His goodness to us.

In the end, Job’s suffering brought him nearer to God; thus it was good, and God was good in afflicting him. Paul’s suffering brought him nearer to God, and he saw it as a blessing (Philippians 3:10). The chastening of the Lord in the life of the Christian is not only evidence of our sonship, it is God’s working in us for good (Hebrews 12:1-13; see Romans 8:28).

### **The Relevance of the Goodness of God**

The goodness of God is a life-transforming truth. Let us conclude by considering ways the goodness of God should intersect our attitudes and actions.

**(1) The goodness of God is a character trait which applies to every other attribute.**

God's wrath is good. God's holiness is good. God's righteousness is good. God is good in His entirety. There is nothing about God that is not good. There is nothing God purposes for His children that is not good. God gives to His children only that which is good. And He withholds nothing good from us. God is good, and He is at work in our lives for good. Nothing which God creates, nothing which God accomplishes, is not good.<sup>1</sup>

We must take this truth of God's goodness one more step. God allows nothing to happen to the Christian which is not good. We all know this passage well:

28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to [His] purpose (Romans 8:28).

We may be convinced of God's goodness and yet doubt that everything which happens to us is good. We carefully avoid blaming God, because we know He is good. So we blame Satan for our trials and tribulations. Or, we can always blame people. May I remind you Paul's "**thorn in the flesh**" was brought about by a "**messenger of Satan**" (2 Corinthians 12:7), and yet God permitted this so His strength might be manifested through Paul's weakness (12:7-10). And the "**evil**" Joseph's brothers intended against him God intended "**for good**" (Genesis 50:20). Whatever comes into the life of the Christian is a part of God's purpose to bring about our good and His glory.

**(2) We must conclude that teachers who tell us God wants only to bless us with healing and prosperity in this life are, in truth, false teachers.**

Their teaching leads Christians to the same conclusion Asaph reached in error, a conclusion which, upon reflection, he confesses to be evil and beastly. Knowing God is not the way to the "good life" as taught by the "good life gospellers." In fact, as Asaph indicates, along with countless others in the Bible, suffering is often the means by which we come to know God more intimately.

67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Thy word (Psalms 119:67). 75 I know, O LORD, that Thy judgments are righteous, And that in faithfulness Thou hast afflicted me (Psalms 119:75).

18 That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death (Philippians 3:10).

7 And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me--to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Years ago while I was in seminary, one of my professors, Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, asked our class to pray for his wife. She was going to see the doctor because of some symptoms which might indicate cancer. Later, Dr. Pentecost reported to us the tests were negative, and his wife's malady was not a malignancy. We all breathed a sigh of relief, and rightly so.

But Dr. Pentecost was not through with his report to us. He went on to challenge us concerning our definition of "good." He indicated several people had responded something like "God is good!" to the report that his wife did not have cancer. "Yes," Dr. Pentecost said, "God is good. But, men, I have to say

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<sup>1</sup> There will be some who point out texts such as: 10 But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips (Job 2:10, AV). There are occasions in the Bible where "good" refers to success or prosperity, and "evil" is employed in reference to failure, adversity, or suffering. God does sovereignly choose to send prosperity to one and adversity and suffering to another. But never is God the author of evil (see James 1:13-17).



to you that if the doctor's report had been that my wife did have cancer, God is still good." He knew what we also must know if we are to think biblically about the goodness of God--God is *always* good, whether He sends prosperity or pain, health or sickness.

### **(3) The goodness of God is evident in the gospel of Jesus Christ.**

The gospel is the "**good news**" (Isaiah 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:6; Luke 1:19; 2:10; Acts 8:12; 13:32; Hebrews 4:2, 6), and good it is! God is good to all men in His common grace, showering blessings on the wicked and the righteous alike (Matthew 5:43-45; Acts 14:16-17). But God is particularly good to those who believe in the gospel.

The gospel is predicated on the truth that man is a sinner, deserving God's eternal wrath (see Romans 1:18-3:23). This is the bad news of our sinful condition and the eternal wrath of God which it deserves. But the "good news" is that God in His goodness has made possible one way by which men may escape judgment, have their sins forgiven, and spend eternity in the blessed presence of God. That way is through the coming of Jesus Christ to live a perfect life, to die on the cross of Calvary in the sinner's place, and to rise from the dead and ascend into heaven.

Nowhere is the goodness of God more evident than in the person of our Lord. In His goodness, God provided a way for sinners to be forgiven and to be declared righteous. It is not by any good works which we do, but on the basis of the goodness of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Romans 3:19-26; Titus 3:4-7). If you have never trusted in His saving work, I have words of exhortation for you,

8 O taste and see that the LORD is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! (Psalms 34:8).

With this offer of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, I must also issue a word of warning. The goodness of God is directed toward our repentance (Romans 2:4). If we reject the goodness of God in Christ, if we reject the gospel, then we bring upon ourselves the divine wrath of God:

22 For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him" (Ezra 8:22).

22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off (Romans 11:22).

### **(4) The goodness of God is a foundational truth that shapes our perspective toward God and His dealings with us in this life.**

The goodness of God is a fact to which the Bible often testifies. It is a fact which every Christian should believe and embrace. But more than this, it is a *perspective* through which all of life's experiences should be viewed.

In the biblical account of the fall of Adam and Eve, it is significant that Satan's attack was on this dimension of the character of God. It is true Satan virtually called God a liar, but the first attack of Satan was waged against the attribute of His goodness. It was a subtle attack, but one that should be obvious to the Christian who reads these words:

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" 2 And the woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; 3 but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.'" 4 And the serpent said to the woman, "You surely shall not die! 5 For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:1-5).

God is good, and everything He created is good. But the one thing in the garden which was not "**good**" to eat was "**the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.**" Satan's seemingly innocent question was intended to undermine Eve's confidence in the goodness of God. By the time Satan has finished, Eve has come to

view God as the One who is less than good, and the forbidden fruit as that which is good. *Once Eve doubted the goodness of God, it was a great deal easier for her to disobey Him.* If God was not good and was not acting for her good, then why should she obey Him? Indeed, why should she not act independently of God in seeking her own good--the forbidden fruit?

*Satan first changed Eve's perspective of God, and then he was able to persuade her to disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit. The goodness of God is a perspective from which we can and should view all of God's commands, including His prohibitions. It is apparent from what happened as a result of the eating of the forbidden fruit that God forbade that fruit for man's good. The prohibition was an expression of God's goodness. She did not understand why God forbade it, but knowing that God was good should have been enough. What a good God forbids must be evil, and what a good God commands must be good. We must know the truth found in the Word of God to avoid Satan when he tempts us to change our perspective of God. He often does this by causing us to doubt God and His Word.*

My dear friend from seminary days, Tony Emge, phoned last week to tell me his wife had died of cancer. I flew to California to attend the funeral and be with Tony and his children. I do not understand all God purposed to accomplish through Cathie's tragic death, but the goodness of God gives me a perspective through which I can view it in faith, giving thanks for all He has done (see 1 Thessalonians 5:18).

In the midst of sorrow and unanswered questions, there are certain truths I know to be true. *God is good.* For the Christian, I know this good God causes all things to work together for good, for all whom He has chosen and who have placed their trust in Him (Romans 8:28). I know Cathie Emge's death came from the hand of our good God and that He is using it for good. I even can reflect on some of the ways this tragedy is being used for good.

*First*, I already know Cathie's death is for her good. The apostle Paul looked forward to the possibility of his death, knowing that to be with Christ is far better (Philippians 1:23) because to be absent from the body means the Christian is present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). *Second*, Cathie's death has a good purpose for those who are unsaved. It is a reminder of the certainty of death, sometimes much sooner than we expect. It has provided the opportunity for Christians to demonstrate the reality of their faith in the darkest hours of human experience. It gave the opportunity for the gospel to be clearly communicated at her funeral. And it would seem that already at least one person has come to faith as a result of Cathie's death.

As I thought of Cathie's husband and my friend, Tony, it occurred to me that Cathie's death is also for his good. I had never made this connection before, but I think it is a legitimate application of this text:

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; 21 for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

While thinking about her death before the funeral, it occurred to me we were laying up treasure at the funeral ceremony. Cathie was treasured by her friends and loved ones far more than money. To remain here on earth was to remain subject to corruption (see 2 Corinthians 4:16). To be present with the Lord is to be removed from all corruption (see 1 Corinthians 15:42-53). And to realize that Cathie is now in heaven makes those who love and miss her hunger all the more for heaven as well. How good God is, even in the death of our loved ones!

May God grant that His goodness becomes a truth we not only accept, but embrace, so that it becomes the perspective from which we view all of the events of our lives.

"There is such an absolute perfection in God's nature and being that nothing is wanting to it or defective in it, and nothing can be added to it to make it better. 'He is originally good, good of Himself, which nothing else is; for all creatures are good only by participation and communication from God. He is essentially good; not only good, but goodness itself: the creature's good is a super-added quality, in God it is His essence. He is infinitely good; the creature's good is but a drop, but in God there is an infinite ocean or gathering together of good. He is eternally and

immutably good, for He cannot be less good than He is; as there can be no addition made to Him, so no subtraction from Him' (Thos. Manton). God is summum bonum, the highest good."<sup>2</sup>

God is summum bonum, the chiefest good . . . "All that emanates from God--His decrees, His creation, His laws, His providences--cannot be otherwise than good: as it is written, '**And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was *very good***'" (Gen. 1:31).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 52, 53.

## **Lesson 4: The Wisdom of God**

### **Introduction**

Recently several from our church attended the Ligonier's 1994 Dallas Conference. Among the speakers were Charles Colson and R. C. Sproul. My favorite speaker was my former seminary professor, Dr. Bruce Waltke, who spoke on the subject, "What Does God Require," from Micah 6:8. After a very fine exposition, Dr. Waltke gave opportunity for questions. One question concerned the particular words used in the original text of Micah 6:8. When he heard the question, Dr. Waltke tipped his head back, closed his eyes, and prepared to answer.

Sitting beside me was my friend and colleague in ministry, Mark Sellers, who was hearing Dr. Waltke for the first time. Most impressed, especially by the way Dr. Waltke prepared to answer the question, Mark said, "When he closed his eyes, he was mentally reading the text, wasn't he?" "Yes," I replied, "with one significant addition . . . he was mentally scrolling the *Hebrew* text in his mind's eye." I am convinced that is exactly what happened.

Dr. Waltke is one of my favorite Bible expositors, and the first thing that always impresses me is his great love for the Lord. The second is his love and commitment to the text of the Scriptures. Here is a man whose knowledge of the Old Testament is awesome.

It is a joy to behold wisdom and knowledge in a man. How much greater then to find in God wisdom and knowledge unsurpassed and infinite. The beauty of God's character is that each of His attributes compliments the other attributes. We have already considered the infinite power of God--His omnipotence--which enables Him to do anything He chooses. We further studied the goodness of God, which motivates God's every action toward those who believe, as well as His common grace to unbelievers and believers alike. Now we turn to His infinite wisdom. When we consider these attributes together--God's goodness, wisdom, and power--we find great comfort and encouragement.

If there is anything the Bible teaches us about God, it is that He is all-wise.

13 "With Him are wisdom and might; To Him belong counsel and understanding" (Job 12:13).

28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable (Isaiah 40:28).

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! (Romans 11:33; see also Job 9:1-4; 36:5; Isaiah 31:1-2).

God is all-wise, infinitely wise:

5 "Behold, God is mighty but does not despise [any;] [He is] mighty in strength of understanding" (Job 36:5).

5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite (Psalms 147:5).

God's wisdom is vastly superior to human wisdom:

8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For [as] the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9; see also Job 28:12-28; Jeremiah 51:15-17).

God alone is wise:

25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26 but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, [leading] to obedience of faith; 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen (Romans 16:25-27; see also 1 Timothy 1:17; Jude 1:25).

It is God who is the source of wisdom:

6 For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth [come] knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:6).

20 Daniel answered and said, "Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to Him" (Daniel 2:20).

5 But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).

### What is Wisdom?

One might sum up the meaning of the term "**wisdom**" with the words, "know how." Wisdom is based upon knowledge. Often, in fact, wisdom and knowledge are mentioned together (see Jeremiah 10:12; 51:15; Luke 1:17 (AV); Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 1:24; 2:5; Colossians 2:3; Revelation 5:12; 7:12). Wisdom cannot exist without a knowledge of all the facts pertinent to any purpose or plan. For example, building a Disneyland in Europe seems to have been a disaster. If this venture fails as it seems certain to do, it is because it was planned and built without the knowledge of some very crucial data. Some very serious miscalculations were made which may prove fatal to this venture. The God who is all-wise is also the God who is all-knowing.

God knows everything. Theologians use the term "omniscient" when speaking of God's infinite knowledge. God knows everything about everything. He knows what men are thinking (see Ezekiel 11:5; Luke 5:21-22). He knows everything that is going to happen. He even knows everything that could happen, under any set of circumstances (see, for example, 1 Samuel 23:10-12; 2 Kings 8:10). God cannot devise a bad plan or fail to bring His purposes and promises to their conclusion because He knows everything. His omniscience undergirds His wisdom.

Wisdom is not just knowledge, but "know *how*." God's wisdom enables Him to "know *how*" to do anything (see 2 Peter 2:9). Wisdom entails the skillfulness to formulate a plan and to carry it out in the best and most effective manner. Bezalel was a craftsman, a man with incredible "wisdom" in the art of making the furnishings for the Tabernacle (see Exodus 31:1-5). Joshua had been given wisdom to know how to lead the nation Israel (Deuteronomy 34:9). Solomon asked for and received the wisdom and knowledge needed to rule Israel (2 Chronicles 1:7-12).

A. W. Tozer and J. I. Packer have defined wisdom as follows:

"In the Holy Scriptures wisdom, when used of God and good men, always carries a strong moral connotation. It is conceived as being pure, loving, and good. . . . Wisdom, among other things, is the ability to devise perfect ends and to achieve those ends by the most perfect means. It sees the end from the beginning, so there can be no need to guess or conjecture. Wisdom sees everything in focus, each in proper relation to all, and is thus able to work toward predestined goals with flawless precision."<sup>1</sup>

"Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. Wisdom is, in fact, the practical side of moral goodness. As such, it is found in its fulness only in God. He alone is naturally and entirely and invariable wise."<sup>2</sup>

### The Wisdom of God in the Bible

When it comes to the wisdom of God, a picture is worth more than a thousand words. As we look at a few passages of Scripture which speak of the wisdom of God, we will attempt to sharpen the definition of God's wisdom and show its relevance to our daily lives.

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<sup>1</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 80.

### Wisdom at the Fall of Man: Genesis 2 and 3; Proverbs 3

I must confess I had never considered the account of the fall in Genesis in light of the wisdom of God. Nevertheless, it is clear that Eve's desire for wisdom contributed to her fall:

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" 2 And the woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; 3 but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.'" 4 And the serpent said to the woman, "You surely shall not die! 5 For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 *When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make [one] wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate (Genesis 3:1-6, emphasis mine).*

Verse 6 informs the reader just how Eve came to perceive the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She perceived it as good, good for food. She came to see it as delightful to look at and as desirable because she now believed the fruit of this tree would make her wise.

Let us be very clear: the way Eve perceived the forbidden fruit of that tree was not reality. Eve now saw the fruit of that tree as Satan wanted her to perceive it. She saw the tree as desirable because she was deceived:

13 For it was Adam who was first created, [and] then Eve. 14 And [it was] not Adam [who] was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression. 15 But [women] shall be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint (1 Timothy 2:13-15).

The fruit of the tree was not good for food, because God had forbidden Eve and her husband to eat it. And neither was the fruit of that tree able to make one wise. The tree was able to do what its name indicates. It was not called the "tree of wisdom," but the "**tree of the knowledge of good and evil.**" Eating of the fruit of the tree did enable Adam and Eve to "know good and evil."

Wisdom is not "knowing good and evil." *Wisdom is knowing good from evil.* Eating the fruit of the forbidden tree did cause Adam and Eve to know evil. They knew evil by experience.<sup>3</sup> The worst of it is that Adam and Eve did come to a new awareness of "good and evil," but notice what happened in the process. What was evil became "good" in their eyes. Eating of the fruit of that tree was forbidden by God. To eat that fruit was to do what was evil. And yet, with a little prompting and deception by Satan, Eve came to see this "evil" (by God's definition) as "good" (in her perception, as suggested by Satan).

After eating the forbidden fruit, that which was "good" came to be looked upon as evil. When God made Adam and then His wife, they (like all the rest of God's creation) were good in His sight. They were created naked, and they knew no shame. Their nakedness was good in their state of innocence. But once they sinned by eating the fruit of that tree, they were ashamed of their nakedness and tried to cover themselves. Their nakedness was no longer "good" but "evil." And the fellowship they enjoyed with God was most certainly good. But once they disobeyed Him, they tried to hide from His presence rather than enjoy it. Why? Because this "good" (of enjoying God) was now "evil." They knew good and evil, but now the labels have been switched. Is Satan not guilty of doing that which God forbade?

20 Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20).

Satan assured Eve that in eating the fruit of the forbidden tree she would be "**like God, knowing good and evil**" (verse 5). Satan's sin was in trying to be "**like God**" in a competitive way and by his own effort (Isaiah 14:14). I fear Eve's motivation may have been similar. The truth was that eating of "**the tree of the knowledge of good and evil**" would not make Eve "**like God.**" Eating that fruit was disobedience; it

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<sup>3</sup> In Genesis 4:1, we are told Adam "knew" his wife. This speaks not of intellectual knowledge, but of personal, intimate, and experiential knowledge. I believe "knowing" good and evil is the knowledge of evil which comes by experiencing it.

was sin. God is righteous, and one does not become like Him by sinning. She was deceived, quite deceived, as Paul points out in 1 Timothy 2:14.

But was it wrong for Eve to desire to be wise? Surely it cannot be evil to desire to be wise, can it? When “knowledge” is the knowledge of evil, then ignorance truly is bliss. But did God want to keep Adam and Eve ignorant? Did He forbid them to become wise? Not at all! God wanted Adam and Eve to be wise concerning what is good and ignorant of what is evil:

19 For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil (Romans 16:19).

Satan’s “wisdom” was a knowledge of “good” *and* “evil.” And in the knowing of evil, Adam and Eve became alienated from the enjoyment of “good.”

Adam and Eve were given every opportunity and encouragement by God to know Him, to be like Him, and to be wise with respect to all that is good. Let us note some of the ways God made this possible. *First*, they could be wise concerning good by becoming students of creation:

24 O LORD, how many are Thy works! in wisdom Thou hast made them all; The earth is full of Thy possessions. 25 There is the sea, great and broad, In which are swarms without number, Animals both small and great. 26 There the ships move along, [And] Leviathan, which Thou hast formed to sport in it (Psalms 104:24-26).

5 Him who made the heavens with skill, For His lovingkindness is everlasting (Psalms 136:5).

19 The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; By understanding He established the heavens. 20 By His knowledge the deeps were broken up, And the skies drip with dew (Proverbs 3:19-20).

22 “The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, Before His works of old. 23 From everlasting I was established, From the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth. 24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, When there were no springs abounding with water. 25 Before the mountains were settled, Before the hills I was brought forth; 26 While He had not yet made the earth and the fields, Nor the first dust of the world. 27 When He established the heavens, I was there, when He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, 28 When He made firm the skies above, When the springs of the deep became fixed, 29 When He set for the sea its boundary, So that the water should not transgress His command, When He marked out the foundations of the earth; 30 Then I was beside Him, [as] a master workman; And I was daily [His] delight, Rejoicing always before Him, 31 Rejoicing in the world, His earth, And [having] my delight in the sons of men” (Proverbs 8:22-31).

12 [It is] He who made the earth by His power, Who established the world by His wisdom; And by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens (Jeremiah 10:12).

15 [It is] He who made the earth by His power, Who established the world by His wisdom, And by His understanding He stretched out the heavens. 16 When He utters His voice, [there is] a tumult of waters in the heavens, And He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain, And brings forth the wind from His storehouses (Jeremiah 51:15-16).

Did Adam and Eve wish to be wise? Then let them study the creation of which they were a part. Did they wish to know “good?” Then let them know it in His creation:

24 Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind”; and it was so. 25 And God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good (Genesis 1:24-25).

Did Adam and Eve desire to know “good” and to become wise, like God? Then let them take every advantage which God gave them to be with Him in sweet communion and fellowship. It would seem God daily was walking in the garden with Adam and his wife (Genesis 3:8). And the moment they sinned by disobeying Him, they attempted to avoid being in His presence. How much they could have learned of Him and from Him!

Did Adam and Eve wish to become wise and understanding? Then let them obey God:

6 “So keep and do [them], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deuteronomy 4:6).

10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do [His commandments]; His praise endures forever (Psalms 111:10).

Satan deceived Eve into believing disobedience was the path to wisdom when the opposite was, and still is, true. Wisdom is not the cause of obedience as much as the result of obedience. We obey God not because we are wise enough to do so, but because we trust in God and His wisdom which is revealed in His commandments. By disobeying God, Adam and Eve evidenced their distrust in God and His infinite wisdom.

Finally, Adam and Eve could have become wise by eating of the fruit of that other tree, just as prominently placed, perhaps even more prominently placed, in the center of the garden--the tree of life. Our understanding of Genesis 3 is greatly enhanced by a consideration of Proverbs 3.

1 My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your heart keep my commandments; 2 For length of days and years of life, And peace they will add to you. 3 Do not let kindness and truth leave you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart. 4 So you will find favor and good repute In the sight of God and man. 5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And do not lean on your own understanding. 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight. 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil. 8 It will be healing to your body, And refreshment to your bones. 9 Honor the LORD from your wealth, And from the first of all your produce; 10 So your barns will be filled with plenty, And your vats will overflow with new wine. 11 My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD, Or loathe His reproof, 12 For whom the LORD loves He reproves, Even as a father, the son in whom he delights. 13 How blessed is the man who finds wisdom, And the man who gains understanding. 14 For its profit is better than the profit of silver, And its gain than fine gold. 15 She is more precious than jewels; And nothing you desire compares with her. 16 Long life is in her right hand; In her left hand are riches and honor. 17 Her ways are pleasant ways, And all her paths are peace. 18 She is a *tree of life* to those who take hold of her, And happy are all who hold her fast. 19 The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; By understanding He established the heavens. 20 By His knowledge the deeps were broken up, And the skies drip with dew (Proverbs 3:1-20, emphasis mine).

From a cursory study of this text, several truths are self-evident and serve as a most helpful commentary on Genesis 3 and the fall of man. *First*, we are urged to desire wisdom as something of the highest value (see verses 13-18). Divine wisdom is to be greatly desired. Satan turned Eve's desires in the opposite direction--to that which would lead her from wisdom to folly--from life to death. *Second*, we are told that divine wisdom is evident in creation (verses 19-20). Adam and Eve had all creation before them to teach them of God's wisdom. *God was not withholding His wisdom from them, but displaying it before them.* *Third*, wisdom does not balk at discipline, but recognizes it as an evidence of the love of God (verses 11-12). Eve was led to believe exactly the opposite. Satan suggested God withheld the forbidden fruit because He was selfish and unloving. *Fourth*, wisdom is the result of obedience (verses 1-2). Satan convinced Eve that wisdom would result from her disobedience. *Fifth*, to have true wisdom, we must cease trusting in ourselves and our own assessment of what is "good" and trust rather in God's wisdom and in His commands. *Sixth*, we should see that wisdom is a "**tree of life**" (verses 2, 18). I do not think this image of a "**tree of life**" is haphazard. Eating of the "**tree of life**" was the way to wisdom, which is why Satan sought to change the focus of Eve's attention and desire from this tree to the forbidden tree.

The fall of Adam and Eve may seem a distant, unrelated event of ancient history, but do not be deceived by this false perception. We have much to learn from Eve and much to apply in our own daily lives. As Paul urged, we must seek to be wise about what is good and ignorant concerning evil: "**I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil**" (Romans 16:19b). We must learn to focus our desires on what is good and to discipline those desires which lead to our destruction:

6 Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved (1 Corinthians 10:6).

11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul (1 Peter 2:11).

1 As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for Thee, O God (Psalms 42:1).



1 Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, 2 like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation (1 Peter 2:1-2).

Christians today seek to be wise, but all too often it is not God's wisdom they seek. They seem ignorant of the fact that there is a false wisdom which must be rejected:

13 Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and [so] lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. 18 And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:13-18).

12 For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you (2 Corinthians 1:12).

23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, [but are] of no value against fleshly indulgence (Colossians 2:23).

The wisdom of God and the "wisdom" of men are not the same; they are not compatible. Indeed, they are in opposition to each other:

18 For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not [come to] know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

1 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4 And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. 6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden [wisdom,] which God predestined before the ages to our glory (1 Corinthians 2:1-7).

We sometimes hear, "All truth is God's truth." In a sense, I suppose this is true. But the only "truth" we know to be truth is the "truth" which is in Christ, the truth revealed in God's Word (John 17:17). All other "truths" are claims of truth which may or may not be true. The one thing we do know about these other "truths" is that they are not essential truths, for God has revealed to us "**all that is necessary for life and godliness**" (2 Peter 1:3-4).

True wisdom, the wisdom which is a "**tree of life,**" does not come from below, from man; it comes from above, from God. Too many Christians try to become wise by reading secular sources (not that we should avoid all secular reading, but we should not read these to become wise). And even more Christians are reading books and works written by "Christian experts," who merely mouth secular thinking baptized with religious terminology. Let us desire God's wisdom as a "**tree of life,**" and let us look for it in God's Word and pursue it by keeping His commands. Let us not persist in the very thing which brought about the fall.

6 For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth [come] knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:6). 12 "I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, And I find knowledge [and] discretion. 13 The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way, And the perverted mouth, I hate. 14 Counsel is mine and sound wisdom; I am understanding, power is mine. 15 By me kings reign, And rulers decree justice. 16 By me princes rule, and nobles, All who judge rightly. 17 I love those who love me; And those who diligently seek me will find me. 18 Riches and honor are with me, Enduring wealth and righteousness. 19 My fruit is better than gold, even pure gold, And my yield than

choicest silver. 20 I walk in the way of righteousness, In the midst of the paths of justice, 21 To endow those who love me with wealth, That I may fill their treasuries” (Proverbs 8:12-21).

### **The Wisdom of God in Christ and His Church: Ephesians 1 and 3**

7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, 8 which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight 9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fulness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth (Ephesians 1:7-10).

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; 10 in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly [places.] 11 [This was] in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. 13 Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory (Ephesians 3:8-13).

### **God’s Wisdom Revealed Through Israel: Romans 9-11**

God promised Abraham that in him, in his seed, all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). It seems this would have taken place through the entire nation, but history makes it clear the nation will not be subject to God and will persistently resist and rebel against God. It was not through the seed (plural) of Abraham that God brought about the blessing of the world, but through the seed (singular) of Abraham--Jesus Christ:

16 Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as [referring] to many, but [rather] to one, “And to your seed,” that is, Christ (Galatians 3:16).

And the **“sons of Abraham”** are not just the physical seed of Abraham (see Romans 9:6-13) but the spiritual seed of Abraham:

26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:26-29; see also Romans 4).

It was not through the obedience of the nation Israel the Gentiles came to possess the blessings of Abraham’s seed; it was through their disobedience:

30 For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so these also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. 32 For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all (Romans 11:30-32).

Looking back on the salvation God has brought about in Christ, in spite of and even because of Israel’s disobedience, Paul can only stand in awe of the wisdom of God to plan such a thing and bring it about:

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! 34 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? 35 Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him [be] the glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:33-36).

God’s wisdom exceeds man’s wisdom and even man’s imagination. God brings about what He has promised in ways we could never imagine or even believe if we were told in advance. God’s wisdom is seen in His dealings with the nation Israel.

### **God’s Wisdom Revealed in Christ to the Church: Ephesians 1**

Paul indicates in Ephesians 1 the eternal purpose of God to sum up all things in Christ. In the Old Testament, the coming of Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah was progressively revealed in greater

detail. This began with the promise of salvation from sin and the defeat of Satan through Eve's seed in Genesis 3:15. It was more fully disclosed in the Abrahamic (Genesis 12:1-3) and Davidic (2 Samuel 7:14) covenants. In the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 22) and the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 52:13--53:12), more and more was said about Messiah, until in Micah 5:2, we are told His birthplace.

God promised to bring salvation and blessing not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. He promised a Messiah who was a man, the seed of Eve and of Abraham and of David, but also One who was the divine Son of God. He foretold of a coming of Christ in which He would be rejected and suffer for the sins of men (Psalm 22; Isaiah 52:13--53:12) and of a triumphal coming of Messiah to put down His enemies (Psalm 2:7-9; 110). These seemingly contradictory promises made the whole matter of God's purpose a mystery (see, for example, 1 Peter 1:10-12). But with the first coming of Christ, the mystery has been resolved. And now, as Paul indicates in Ephesians 1, the matter has come into focus in Christ. *All of God's purposes and promises culminate in Christ.* And now, in place of wonder at the mystery of the past, we are overcome with wonder at the wisdom of God which accomplished all of this.

### **God's Wisdom is Being Revealed Through the Church: Ephesians 3**

God's eternal purpose is to reveal His wisdom to the celestial beings as well as to His church. God is still accomplishing His purpose, which will culminate in the second coming of His Son and the establishment of His kingdom upon the earth. When this purpose and program is completed, the full scope of God's wisdom will have been revealed, and this wisdom will be revealed as so great it will provide the fuel for the praise of God throughout all eternity.

Is it any wonder the basis for every creature's (earthly and heavenly) eternal praise may be worthy of thousands of years to establish? No wonder God is taking His time in revealing and bringing to completion His marvelous plan decreed in eternity past, which in its culmination discloses His infinite wisdom.

In thinking about this text in Ephesians 3, it suddenly occurred to me that God is something like an awesome writer, producer and director, although I wouldn't press the analogy too far. In eternity past, the script of history was written, and there are no edits. His eternal plan was formulated in His goodness and wisdom. The Israelites and saints of Old were the actors or players in times past, and the saints (not to mention all others) are the players today. Even the angelic host, including Satan, is involved in this great drama. Each act is a dispensation or, for non-dispensationalists, a new outworking of God's plan. Act I began with the creation of the angelic hosts and ended with the fall of Satan. Act II began at the creation of the world and with mankind, starting with Adam and Eve. Act III commenced with the calling of Abraham. Act IV began with the birth of the nation Israel at the Exodus. Act V commenced with the first coming of Christ. The great and final act begins with the second coming of Christ.

The purpose of this lengthy drama is the demonstration of the glory of God. In Ephesians 3, Paul speaks of God's purpose as God presently working to display His wisdom through the church. When this act or chapter is consummated, all creation, including the heavenly creatures, will have all eternity to marvel at His wisdom and to praise and glorify Him.

Do we sometimes wonder why God takes so long to fulfill His promises and to answer our prayers? It is because His drama is vastly bigger than we are, and He has chosen to take thousands of years to present it to the cosmic audience. Do we wonder why we cannot understand at present exactly what God is doing, how he is using the most unusual circumstances (including man's sin and rebellion, sickness, death, sorrow) to achieve His purposes? God leaves these matters a mystery because He is creating and sustaining the interest of His audience. He, the great author, producer, and director, is creating the suspense appropriate to the grand conclusion of the final act. He dare not inform us, because we would then not be proven faithful to the degree that we are. And He also dare not inform us because this would

dispel the intense curiosity and wonder which holds all of heaven in rapt attention (see 1 Peter 1:12; 1 Corinthians 11:10).

Do we sometimes wonder why God is putting us to the test in a seemingly private and personal way, a way that no one seems to be aware of but us? Our thinking is wrong! There is, as the writer to the Hebrews informs us, a “**great cloud of witnesses**” (Hebrews 12:1) looking on with fixed attention even this moment. When we endure the tests and trials of this life, without knowing as Job did, for example, we are left with only one thing in which to trust--God Himself. When life simply does not make sense, we must look to Him who is the Author and the Finisher of our faith, to Him who has a great cosmic plan, a plan to reveal His glory and to accomplish that which is good for His people. We must trust in Him who is all-wise and who is also all powerful.

What a great privilege is ours to be a part of this great drama and to have a part in bringing praise and glory to our all-wise God! This matter is beautifully summed up by A. W. Tozer:

“With the goodness of God to desire our highest welfare, the wisdom of God to plan it, and the power of God to achieve it, what do we lack? Surely we are the most favored of all creatures.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 70.

## **Lesson 5: The Holiness of God**

### **Introduction**

Many people attend church on Easter Sunday for the first or second time of the year (they also come at Christmas). There seems to be something positive, something encouraging and hopeful about Easter. There is the emphasis on the resurrection of Christ and the hope of resurrection for all men, although, for the unbeliever, this hope is ill-founded.

The crucifixion of Christ began as a festive celebration, appearing to be a victory for His opponents and a stunning defeat for Christ. But as events leading to the death of our Lord took place, all of this changed. The crowds were terrified by what they saw, and they left shaken:

48 And all the multitudes who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, [began] to return, beating their breasts (Luke 23:46-48).

After our Lord had risen from the dead and ascended to the Father, the disciples began to proclaim Him as the promised Messiah and risen Lord (see Acts 2:22-36; 3:11-26). This caused great consternation for those who thought they had silenced Him once for all (see Acts 4:1-2).

For the Christian, the resurrection of our Lord from the grave is a comforting truth, which should also inspire reverence and awe, for the resurrection of Christ from the dead is proof of His holiness. But this same resurrection should instill a different kind of fear in the hearts of those who have rejected Him, for when He returns to this earth He will do so to defeat His enemies. If they truly understand its implications, the resurrection of our Lord should not comfort the unbeliever. It can, however, motivate unbelievers to repent and turn to Him for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life, even as it did for thousands on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:37-42).

As we study the attribute of the holiness of God and the Son of God (not forgetting the Holy Spirit of God), let us consider the response which this truth should produce in our lives as we seek to worship and serve Him.

### **The Importance of the Holiness of God**

As we approach the subject of the holiness of God, let us be mindful of the importance of this divine attribute. R. C. Sproul makes this insightful observation from Isaiah 6:

“The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, or wrath, wrath, wrath, or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy, the whole earth is full of His glory.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Holiness Defined**

The term “holy” is often understood in its contemporary usage rather than its true meaning in the Scriptures. For this reason, our study must begin by reviewing several dimensions of the definition of holiness.

#### **(1) To be holy is to be distinct, separate, in a class by oneself. As Sproul puts it:**

“The primary meaning of *holy* is ‘separate.’ It comes from an ancient word that meant, ‘to cut,’ or ‘to separate.’ Perhaps even more accurate would be the phrase ‘a cut above something.’ When we find a garment or another piece of merchandise that is outstanding, that has a superior excellence, we use the expression that it is ‘a cut above the rest.’”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1985), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

This means that the one who is holy is uniquely holy, with no rivals or competition.

“When the Bible calls God holy it means primarily that God is transcendently separate. He is so far above and beyond us that He seems almost totally foreign to us. To be holy is to be ‘other,’ to be different in a special way. The same basic meaning is used when the word *holy* is applied to earthly things.”<sup>3</sup>

The Scriptures put it this way:

11 “Who is like Thee among the gods, O LORD? Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders? (Exodus 15:11). 2 “There is no one holy like the LORD, Indeed, there is no one besides Thee, Nor is there any rock like our God (1 Samuel 2:2).

8 There is no one like Thee among the gods, O Lord; Nor are there any works like Thine. 9 All nations whom Thou hast made shall come and worship before Thee, O Lord; And they shall glorify Thy name. 10 For Thou art great and doest wondrous deeds; Thou alone art God (Psalms 86:8-10; see also Psalm 99:1-3; Isaiah 40:25; 57:15).

## **(2) To be holy is to be morally pure.**

“When things are made holy, when they are consecrated, they are set apart unto purity. They are to be used in a pure way. They are to reflect purity as well as simple apartness. Purity is not excluded from the idea of the holy; it is contained within it. But the point we must remember is that the idea of the holy is never exhausted by the idea of purity. It includes purity but is much more than that. It is purity and transcendence. It is a transcendent purity.”<sup>4</sup>

3 Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? and who may stand in His holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood, And has not sworn deceitfully. 5 He shall receive a blessing from the LORD And righteousness from the God of his salvation (Psalms 24:3-5).

3 And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD Of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.” 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 6:3-5).

13a [Thine] eyes are too pure to approve evil, And Thou canst not look on wickedness [with favor] (Habakkuk 1:13a).

## **(3) For God to be holy is for Him to be holy in relation to every aspect of His nature and character.**

“When we use the word *holy* to describe God, we face another problem. We often describe God by compiling a list of qualities or characteristics that we call attributes. We say that God is a spirit, that He knows everything, that He is loving, just, merciful, gracious, and so on. The tendency is to add the idea of the holy to this long list of attributes as one attribute among many. But when the word *holy* is applied to God, it does not signify one single attribute. On the contrary, God is called holy in a general sense. The word is used as a synonym for his deity. That is, the word *holy* calls attention to all that God is. It reminds us that His love is holy love, his justice is holy justice, his mercy is holy mercy, his knowledge is holy knowledge, his spirit is holy spirit.”<sup>5</sup>

### **How Important Is Holiness?**

The holiness of God is not merely a theological subject fit for scholars with the interest and stamina to pursue it. Indeed, the holiness of God is a matter of great importance to every living soul. The Christian should be especially concerned with the holiness of God. Several incidents in the Old and New Testaments underscore the importance of holiness to the believer. These examples are but a few of the accounts in Scripture dealing with God’s holiness and its impact on saints.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

### **Moses and the Holiness of God (Numbers 20:1-13; 27:12-14)**

1 Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh. Now Miriam died there and was buried there. 2 And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. 3 The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! 4 Why then have you brought the LORD'S assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? 5 And why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink." 6 Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting, and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them; 7 and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 8 "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink." 9 So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; 10 and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" 11 Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. 12 But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." 13 Those [were] the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the LORD, and He proved Himself holy among them (Numbers 20:1-14).

12 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go up to this mountain of Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the sons of Israel. 13 And when you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother was; 14 for in the wilderness of Zin, during the strife of the congregation, you rebelled against My command to treat Me as holy before their eyes at the water." (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.) (Numbers 27:12-14).

Moses had good reason to be angry with the Israelites. They were indeed a "**stiff-necked people,**" even as God Himself had said (see Exodus 33:5). The Israelites arrived at Kadesh, a place whose name meant "holy." There, Miriam died and was buried. At Kadesh, there was no water for the people to drink. The people were hostile and a mob contended with Moses and Aaron wishing they were dead, or even better, that Moses and Aaron were. They protested they had not been "led" as much as "mis-led" by Moses to a land far from what they were promised. That there was now no water here was the final straw.

Moses and Aaron went to the doorway of the tent of meeting, and there the glory of the Lord appeared to them. God then commanded Moses to take his rod and speak to the rock, from which water would flow for the people. Moses was furious with the people as he gathered them before the rock, the "**spiritual rock**" Paul later identifies as Christ Himself (1 Corinthians 10:4). Instead of merely speaking to the rock as commanded, in his anger, Moses struck the rock twice. The consequences were indeed severe.

Who has not lost his or her temper and done worse than striking a rock with a stick? Yet this act was so serious in God's sight that He forbade Moses to enter into the land of promise. Moses never saw the land to which he came so close. Why? God told him, and he recorded it for us: "**Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel . . .**" (Numbers 20:12). And by dealing severely with Moses for his transgression, God is said to have "**proved Himself holy among them**" (verse 13).

In a moment of anger, Moses sinned, and for this sin he was kept from entering the land of promise. The act was striking the rock. But it was much more than this. Striking the rock was an act of disobedience, of failing to follow God's instructions. Even more, it was identified by God as an act of unbelief:

12 "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (verse 12).

I always thought Moses sinned merely by striking the rock which somehow, like the burning bush of years earlier (see Exodus 3), was a manifestation of the presence of God. The root sin was irreverence,

and that irreverence was the cause of Moses' disobedience<sup>6</sup> and his striking the rock. Moses' anger with the people overcame his fear of God. His fear of God should have overcome his anger with the Israelites. God took Moses' irreverence most seriously.

### **Uzzah and the Holiness of God: (2 Samuel 6:1-11)**

1 Now David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2 And David arose and went with all the people who were with him to Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God which is called by the Name, the very name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned [above] the cherubim. 3 And they placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were leading the new cart. 4 So they brought it with the ark of God from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Ahio was walking ahead of the ark. 5 Meanwhile, David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the LORD with all kinds of [instruments made of] fir wood, and with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals. 6 But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen nearly upset [it.] 7 And the anger of the LORD burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God. 8 And David became angry because of the LORD'S outburst against Uzzah, and that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. 9 So David was afraid of the LORD that day; and he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?" 10 And David was unwilling to move the ark of the LORD into the city of David with him; but David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. 11 Thus the ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household (2 Samuel 6:1-11).

The Philistines had captured the ark of God and sought to keep it as a trophy of their victory. It soon became evident the ark was the source of much suffering to them. They passed it about and finally determined to be rid of it by sending it back to Israel. They transported it in a way the Philistine priests and diviners recommended. They put a guilt offering of gold in the ark and placed it on a newly-made cart drawn by two cows just separated from their calves (see 1 Samuel 6).

If the Philistines could not stand in the presence of the Holy God of Israel, neither could the people of Beth-shemesh where the ark arrived:

19 And He struck down some of the men of Beth-shemesh because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck down of all the people, 50,070 men, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter. 20 And the men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall He go up from us?" 21 So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have brought back the ark of the LORD; come down and take it up to you" (1 Samuel 6:19-21).

The men of Kiriath-jearim came and took the ark of the LORD and brought it to the house of Abinadab and consecrated Abinadab's son, Eleazar, to keep the ark, where it remained for some 20 years (1 Samuel 7:1-2). Finally, David, accompanied by 30,000 Israelites, went to Kiriath-jearim to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

The ark was a symbol of the presence of God, a most holy object (see 2 Samuel 6:2) which was to be hidden in the holiest place in the tabernacle, the "**holy of holies.**" According to God's instructions, it was to be transported by the Kohathites who carried it by holding onto poles inserted through its attached rings (see Exodus 25:10-22; Numbers 4:1-20). No one was to look into the ark, or they would die.

The day the ark was transported to Jerusalem was a great and happy moment. But they had forgotten how holy this ark was, because it was the place where God's presence was to abide. Rather than transporting the ark as instructed in the law, the ark was placed on a new ox cart. It was a most jubilant procession as the ark made its way home. What a happy time. But when the oxen stumbled, and it looked as though the cart might be overturned and hurled to the ground, Uzzah reached out to steady the ark. Instantly, he was struck dead by God.

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<sup>6</sup> The relationship between fear (or reverence) and obedience is indicated in the New Testament as well as the Old. In 1 Peter 1, Peter calls upon the saints to live in fear of God (1:17). In chapter 2, fear (reverence or respect) is the root of obedience to kings, to cruel slave masters, and obedience to harsh husbands (3:1-6; see also Paul's words in Ephesians 5:33). Irreverence is the root of disobedience.



David's first response was frustration and anger with God. Why had God been so harsh with Uzzah? David seems to have forgotten God's instructions in the Law about how the ark was to be transported. He also seems to have forgotten how many had previously died when due reverence for the presence of God associated with the ark was not shown. God had spoiled their celebration, and David was miffed. Only upon reflection did David realize the gravity of the error. And concerning Uzzah, God struck him dead because of his irreverence (2 Samuel 6:7).

Irreverence is a dangerous malady. Even when our motives are sincere and we are actively involved in the worship of God, we must constantly be mindful of the holiness of God and maintain a reverence for Him manifested by our obedience to His instructions and commands.

### **Isaiah and the Holiness of God (Isaiah 6:1-10)**

1 In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD Of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said,

"Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 And he touched my mouth [with it] and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" 9 And He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.' 10 Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed" (Isaiah 6:1-10).

The death of Uzziah seems to have spelled the end of an era, a golden era, for Judah. The "good times" were over; the "hard times" were about to commence as verses 9 and 10 indicate. Isaiah's ministry is commencing from a human point of view at the very worst possible time. His ministry was not going to be regarded a success (as if many of the prophets of old were successful). He was in for a chilly reception. He and his message would be spurned. What did Isaiah need to give him the proper perspective and endurance to persevere in such hard times? The answer: a vision of the holiness of God.

This is precisely what God gave to Isaiah--a dramatic revelation of His holiness. He saw the Lord sitting enthroned, lofty and exalted. The angels who stood above Him were magnificent, and they called out to one another, "**Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory**" (verse 3). The earth quaked, and the temple was filled with smoke. It was as dramatic a vision of God and His holiness as one could wish to see.

Isaiah's response is far from what we hear today from many who claim to teach biblical truth. He was not impressed with his "significance." His "self-esteem" was not enhanced. Just the opposite took place. His vision of the holiness of God caused Isaiah to lament his utter sinfulness. If God was holy, Isaiah saw he was not. Isaiah confessed his own unholiness and that of his people.

What is most significant is that Isaiah sees his sinfulness (and his people's) evidenced by their "lips." Isaiah confessed he was "**a man of unclean lips**" and that he lived among a people with the same malady. How was Isaiah able to be so focused about his sin that he saw it evidencing itself in his speech? Other texts in Scripture say a great deal about the tongue and the way sin is evident in our speech (see, for example, many of the Proverbs, also Matthew 12:32-37; Romans 3:10-14; James 3:1-12).

Notice that if the curse Isaiah recognized was directed toward his lips, so was the cure. One of the seraphim touched Isaiah's mouth with a burning coal, symbolically cleansing him and his mouth. What is God attempting to accomplish in Isaiah's life by this vision? I believe God wanted Isaiah to understand that the vision of His holiness was to have a great impact on what he said and how he said it.

I find the message and meaning of Isaiah 6 much easier to understand in light of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 1-3 and 2 Corinthians 2-6. Paul seems to have been accused of being dull in his speech, while others (especially the false apostles who sought a following among the Corinthians--see 2 Corinthians 11:12-33) were fascinating as they employed persuasive and entertaining techniques. But Paul was a man intent on pleasing God rather than men (2 Corinthians 2:15-16; 4:1-2). Consequently, Paul would not dilute the gospel to make it more appealing to men (2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:1-2). He spoke the truth in the simplest and clearest terms so men would be supernaturally convinced and converted, rather than persuaded by human cleverness (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

At the outset of the revelation given to the apostle John (recorded as the Book of Revelation), John saw a vision of the Lord exalted and holy. This vision preceded the command to record what he saw:

19 "Write *therefore* the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things" (Revelation 1:19, emphasis mine).

It is no wonder then that at the end of this concluding book of the Bible we find these words underscoring the importance of preserving this record just as it was revealed:

18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book (Revelation 22:18-19).

Isaiah was to serve as a prophet in a day when his message would be rejected and resisted. The sinful disposition of man is to avoid pain and persecution, and thus alter, if possible, the message and method of communicating the message of Christ so men will respond more favorably. At the outset of Isaiah's ministry, God manifested His holiness to Isaiah to motivate him to be faithful to his calling and to the message he was to be given. Isaiah never lost the vision of whom he served and whom he must both fear and please.

The glory of his ministry and his message was in the One who gave it to him--the One whom he served. Paul had a somewhat similar experience at the beginning of his ministry; at his conversion, he beheld the glory of God and never forgot it. The glory of his message and ministry sustained him even in the midst of suffering, adversity, and rejection (even by some of the saints). Paul was faithful to his calling and the message he was given to proclaim, even unto death (see 2 Corinthians 3-6).

### **The Holiness of Jesus Christ**

The promises of the coming of Messiah in the Old Testament became increasingly specific, until it was evident that Messiah must not only be human but divine (see Isaiah 9:6-7; Micah 5:2). As such, He must be holy. And so, when the angel told Mary of the child to be miraculously born of her, a virgin, he said, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the *holy offspring* shall be called the Son of God**" (Luke 1:35, emphasis mine).

Throughout the life and ministry of our Lord on the earth, it became increasingly clear this was no ordinary man; indeed, He was more than a prophet and more than a mere man. This was the Son of God. Even the demons had to acknowledge Him as the "**Holy One of God**" (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). The things Jesus said and did marked Him out as One who stood head and shoulders above any other (merely human) being. Peter was a professional fisherman, but when he obeyed the instructions of the Lord Jesus, the results were awesome. Peter's response was appropriate:

8 When Simon Peter saw [that,] he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:8).

When Jesus healed the demon-possessed dumb man, the multitudes marveled, saying,

33 "Nothing like this was ever seen in Israel" (Matthew 9:33).

When Jesus told the paralytic that his sins were forgiven and then proceeded to heal him, the people could not escape the implications:

5 And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." 6 But there were some of the scribes sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, 7 Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 And immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Arise, and take up your pallet and walk'?" 10 But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--He said to the paralytic, 11 "I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home." 12 And he rose and immediately took up the pallet and went out in the sight of all; so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this" (Mark 2:5-12).

When the man born blind was healed by Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees were most reluctant to admit that such a miracle had taken place. The blind man could "see" the implications of what had happened, and he pressed them on his interrogators:

30 The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and [yet] He opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him. 32 Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, He could do nothing" (John 9:30-33).

The miracles and signs performed during Jesus' earthly ministry pointed to His holiness, as did the events surrounding His death. The supernatural darkness for three hours and the rending of the veil of the temple (Luke 23:44-45), along with other factors, caused the crowds to go away shaken by what they saw and heard (Luke 23:46-48). One of the criminals crucified beside Jesus gave testimony to His innocence in his last moments of life and asked Jesus to remember him when He entered into *His* kingdom (Luke 23:36-43). One of the soldiers at the foot of the cross also gave testimony to the uniqueness (shall we say "holiness"?) of Jesus:

47 Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he [began] praising God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent" (Luke 23:47).

50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up [His] spirit. 51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, 52 and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:50-54).

The words spoken tauntingly by the crowds when Jesus was hanging on the cross have even more impact after His resurrection:

42 "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; **let Him now come down** from the cross, and we shall believe in Him. 43 HE TRUSTS IN GOD; **LET HIM DELIVER [Him] now**, IF HE TAKES PLEASURE IN HIM; for He said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matthew 27:42-43, emphasis mine).

I am fascinated by that little word "**now**." They defied Jesus to come down from the cross immediately, thus avoiding death. If He would do this, they said, then they would believe in Him. How much more awesome is His rising from the dead! Which was the greater act, to come down from the cross, or to rise up from the grave? Jesus did the greater, and some did believe.

The implications of this resurrection are emphatically spelled out by the apostles as recorded in the Book of Acts, whether by Peter or by Paul:

23 This [Man], delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put [Him] to death. 24 And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. 25 For David says of Him, 'I WAS ALWAYS BEHOLDING THE LORD IN MY PRESENCE; FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, THAT I MAY NOT BE SHAKEN. 26 THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED; MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL ABIDE IN HOPE. BECAUSE THOU WILT NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW **THY HOLY ONE** TO UNDERGO DECAY' (Acts 2:23-27, emphasis mine).

32 “And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, 33 that God has fulfilled this [promise] to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘THOU ART MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN THEE.’ 34 [And as for the fact] that He raised Him up from the dead, no more to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: ‘I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY [and] SURE [blessings] OF DAVID.’ 35 Therefore He also says in another [Psalm,] ‘THOU WILT NOT ALLOW **THY HOLY ONE** TO UNDERGO DECAY’” (Acts 13:32-35).

Peter and Paul not only proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Psalm 16:10, they also proclaimed Him to be the “**Holy One**” of God, whom God would not allow to undergo decay because He was holy. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead not only vindicates Jesus’ claim to be Israel’s Messiah, it demonstrates Him to be the promised “**Holy One**” of God. The resurrection is the seal of approval on the holiness of Jesus Christ.

All too often we find ourselves thinking of Jesus now as He once was when He walked on this earth during His three-year public ministry. In truth, His resurrection from the dead changed Him so that He no longer possesses a merely earthly body but now is glorified by His transformed body. His glory and holiness are no longer veiled, so that the description of Jesus in the Book of Revelation is the description of Him as He now is and forever will be. The John who once walked with our Lord and even reclined on his breast (see John 13:23) now falls before Him as a dead man, overcome by His holiness and glory:

12 And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; 13 and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. 14 And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; 15 and His feet [were] like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice [was] like the sound of many waters. 16 And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. 17 And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. 19 Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things” (Revelation 1:12-19).

### **The Holiness of God and the Church (Acts 5:1-16; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34)**

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a familiar one to Christians. In the early days of the church, there was a great concern for the poor. When needs arose, saints would sell some of their possessions and lay the proceeds at the feet of the apostles for them to distribute (see Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-37). Ananias and Sapphira did likewise, but with a divided heart and in a deceptive way. They sold a piece of property but kept back a part of the proceeds for themselves. They gave the remainder of the money to the apostles as though it were the whole amount. When their sin was exposed to Peter, he confronted them, and both of them died. Great fear came upon the entire church, not to mention the rest of the community.

I have always concentrated on the fact that this couple lied, which they did. But in the context of studying the holiness of God, two additional details seem of more import than I had previously thought. First, these two lied to the *Holy Spirit*. Their deception was an offense to God’s holiness. It was also an act which could have had a leavening effect on the church itself (see also 1 Corinthians 5:6-7). Just as the generosity of Barnabas encouraged others to give in the same way, the half-hearted, deceptive act of Ananias and his wife could have adversely affected others in the church by encouraging them to do likewise. Remember that it is now the church that is the dwelling place of God upon the earth. God is holy, and thus His church must be holy as well. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was an affront to the holiness of God in His church.

Further, Luke includes a comment on the effect the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira had on the church and the community. A great fear came upon the whole church and on all who heard of this (Acts 5:11, 13). Unbelievers were prompted by their fear to keep their distance from the church, and the saints were motivated to keep their distance from the world (as far as its sins are concerned).

Fear is the response of men to the holiness of God. Thus, the sin of Ananias and his wife was a sin of irreverence, a sin against God's holiness. But the outbreak of divine holiness which brought about the death of this couple also brought fear on those who heard of this incident.

A related text is found in 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul rebukes and admonishes the church because of the misconduct of some at the Lord's Table. The church remembered the Lord by having communion as a part of a meal, just as we see the last supper (the Passover) described in the Gospels. Some were able to bring much food and drink to this potluck dinner while others could bring little or nothing. Some had the luxury of coming early, while others had to come later. Those who brought much and came early did not wish to wait or to share with the rest, so they over-indulged. In the process, some became drunk and disorderly so that the celebration of the Lord's death was shameful, resembling the heathen celebrations of their pagan neighbors in Corinth.

Paul rebuked the Corinthians, not for partaking of the communion in an unworthy state but for partaking of it in an unworthy manner. "**Unworthily**" in the King James Version is rendered "**in an unworthy manner**" in the NASB. Both are an accurate representation of the adverb employed in the original text--not an adjective. Most Christians suppose Paul is rebuking the Corinthians for partaking of the bread and the cup as those who are "unworthy" (adjective) of it, rather than realizing he is forbidding the partaking of the bread and the cup in a manner that is unbecoming--"**unworthily**" (an adverb). No one is ever worthy of the body and blood of our Lord, but we can remember it in a fashion which is worthy and appropriate.

Paul further says that when the Corinthians eat the bread and drink the cup "**unworthily**," they are guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:27), and in so doing they do not "**judge the body rightly**" (verse 29). He goes on to explain that this kind of conduct at the Lord's table has brought about the sickness of some and the death of others (verse 30).

As I understand Paul's words, the sin of the Corinthians at the Lord's Supper was irreverence. The body of our Lord--His physical body and blood--are holy. He was a sinless sacrifice dying in our place. The body of our Lord is also the church, and it too is to be holy. By conducting themselves in a drunk and disorderly manner at the Lord's Supper, the church showed a disregard for Christ's physical body and His spiritual body, the church. This irreverence so offended God He struck some with illness and others with death. Irreverence in worship is both a failure to grasp God's holiness and an affront to His holiness. Irreverence is a sin of great magnitude with dreadful consequences. The holiness of God requires us to take our worship seriously and not to participate frivolously. This does not mean our worship must be joyless, solemn and somber. It simply means we must regard God's presence seriously and be very cautious about offending His presence by our irreverence.

### **The Holiness of God and Contemporary Christianity**

The holiness of God is not simply a doctrine to which we give assent. Rather, the doctrine of the holiness of God should guide and govern our lives.

#### **(1) The holiness of God should guide and govern our thinking on "God's acceptance."**

I often hear Christians use the expression "unconditional acceptance." It seems this term is first applied to God and then to the saints. "God unconditionally accepts us," they reason, "and so we must accept others unconditionally." My difficulty is that this is not a biblical expression. Perhaps even worse, it does not appear to be a biblical concept. God does not "accept us regardless" of what we do. Look at the nation Israel. Because of their persistent sin, God said they were no longer His people (see Hosea 1). God did not accept Cain or his offering (Genesis 4:5). *God accepts us only through the shed blood of Jesus Christ* so that even Christians are not unconditionally accepted, regardless of their attitudes and actions. The holiness of God indicates God does not accept what is not holy. In reality, all God accepts from us is that

which He produces in and through us. To speak too glibly about unconditional acceptance appears to encourage careless and disobedient living.

The church cannot “accept” those who profess to be Christians but live like pagans (1 Corinthians 5:1-13). We must discipline and remove those who refuse to live like Christians. The church is to be holy, and this means purging out the “leaven” from its midst. Let those who emphasize unconditional acceptance ponder these words:

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 15 ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. 16 ‘So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth’” (Revelation 3:14-16).

## **(2) The doctrine of the holiness of God needs to be considered when we speak of accountability.**

The concept of “accountability” has, in my opinion, been imported from the secular world. I am not entirely opposed to accountability, except that the church sometimes speaks more of accountability to men than of accountability to God. Let us not forget to whom we must give account:

36 “And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment” (Matthew 12:36).

17 Obey your leaders, and submit [to them]; for they keep watch over your souls, *as those who will give an account*. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you (Hebrews 13:17, emphasis mine; see also 1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

12 So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God (Romans 14:12).

4 And in [all] this, they are surprised that you do not run with [them] into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign [you]; 5 but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:4-5).

## **(3) The holiness of God should govern our thinking about self-esteem.**

I was struck by this statement made by a psychologist at the beginning of this century, which is so different from what we are now being told:

“This reverence has been significantly defined by the psychologist William McDougall as ‘the religious emotion *par excellence*; few merely human powers are capable of exciting reverence, this blend of wonder, fear, gratitude, and negative self-feeling.’”<sup>7</sup>

Why do we speak (at best) of finding our self-esteem in Christ when Isaiah’s encounter with the holiness of God caused him to say,

5 “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.” (Isaiah 6:5)?

I fear our whole orientation is wrong, and we come to Christ to feel better about ourselves rather than falling before Him in humility and awe at His holiness. Our hearts should be filled with gratitude and praise for the grace He has bestowed on us. It is the self-righteous who stand upright before God confident in who they are, not the saints who are confident in who He is (see Luke 9-14).

“Hence that dread and amazement with which as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God. . . . Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> William McDougall, *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Methuen, 1908), p. 132, cited by Kenneth Prior, *The Way of Holiness* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, rev. ed., 1982), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, as cited by R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, p. 68.

#### **(4) The holiness of God should caution us about what we accept and practice from the contemporary “church growth” movement.**

The contemporary church growth movement is to be commended in some respects.<sup>9</sup> It seems, however, that in its attempt to evangelize the “seekers” by being “seeker-friendly,” it fails to take the holiness of God seriously enough. I will mention just a few of my concerns. How can a church focus its principle service (Sunday morning) on evangelism when its principle tasks seem to be otherwise, as outlined in Acts 2:42 (namely the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer)? Put differently, how can the church focus on evangelism in its gathering when its principle tasks appear to be worship and edification? Further, how can one invite the unbeliever to participate in worship as an unbeliever? The Bible teaches there are no “seekers” as such (Romans 3:10-12). Those who will be saved are those who are chosen, whose hearts the Holy Spirit will quicken, whose minds He will enlighten. Those who are dead in their sins, He makes alive (Ephesians 2:1-7).

No one whom God has chosen and in whom the Spirit is at work can fail to come to Him, so why the need to woo the lost to come to church? Those who were being saved joined the church in the Book of Acts, and those who were not kept their distance. With all this emphasis on church growth, there seems to be little attention given to church reduction by discipline and little devotion to proclaiming and practicing the holiness of God. When God struck Ananias and Sapphira dead, unbelievers did not flock to church, but all came to fear God and rightly so. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then the holiness of God must not be ignored. God’s holiness will drive some away, but it will drive the elect to the cross.

As I study Isaiah 6 and 2 Corinthians 2-7 among other texts, I find that Isaiah and Paul both had a deep awareness of the holiness of God. This knowledge caused them to be God-pleasers rather than man-pleasers (see Galatians 1:10). Paul would not water down his message nor employ methods inappropriate to the gospel and irreverent in regard to the holiness of God. Men chosen of God and saved by God do not need saving by marketing methods. *The church that has a grasp of the holiness of God will proclaim, practice, and protect a pure gospel.*

#### **(5) A grasp of the holiness of God should change our attitude and conduct in worship.**

In the Old Testament, worship was closely regulated. In the New Testament, more freedom seems to be given in worship. The priesthood of a few in the Old Testament has become the priesthood of all believers in the New. But Acts 5 and 1 Corinthians 5 and 11 strongly warn us about worship that fails to take the holiness of God seriously enough. Irreverence is a most serious offense, as we can see from both the Old and New Testaments. And worship is one area where irreverence is a constant concern. I am distressed by those who, in the enthusiasm and excitement of their worship, transgress very clear instructions to the church regarding worship. One case in point is the biblical teaching on the role women can play in the church meeting. Also, Uzzah seems to have been both sincere and zealous in his role in bringing the ark of God to Jerusalem, yet God struck him dead for his irreverence. Moses was kept from the land of promise because of his irreverence and his failure to obey God precisely as he had been instructed. This leads to the next observation.

<sup>9</sup> Worship the LORD in holy attire [or, in the splendor of holiness]; Tremble before Him, all the earth (Psalms 96:9).

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<sup>9</sup> See Os Guinness, *Dining With The Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), pp. 21-24, for some of the positive contributions of the movement. The rest of the book deals with its critical deficiencies.

### **(6) The appropriate response to the holiness of God is fear (reverence), and the outworking of fear is obedience.**

As I look at the Scriptures that speak of the holiness of God and the fear it should produce in the hearts of men, I find a very strong correlation between fear (or reverence) and obedience. For example, the wife is to respect (literally fear) her husband in Ephesians 5:33. The submission of the wife to her husband most often is expressed by her obedience to him (see 1 Peter 3:5-6). Fear or reverence leads to obedience. The same correlation is seen in 1 Peter 2:13-25 and Romans 13:1-7 with respect to citizens and governing authorities and slaves and their masters.

The fear of the Lord is the result of grasping His holiness. So too it is the source of much that is good. Fear is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7). It causes us to hate and to avoid evil (8:13; 16:6). It is also the basis for strong confidence (14:26). It is a fountain of life (14:27). The holiness of God is the root of many wonderful fruits, springing forth from a heart which has come to reverence God as the Holy One.

### **(7) The holiness of God is the basis and the compelling necessity for our sanctification.**

The holiness of God is the reason we too are commanded to live holy lives:

14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts [which were yours] in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all [your] behavior; 16 because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY." 17 And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay [upon earth]; 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, [the blood] of Christ (1 Peter 1:14-19).

Because God is holy, we who are His people must be holy too. Holiness is our calling (Ephesians 1:4; Romans 8:29; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). We must practice and proclaim His excellencies to the world (1 Peter 2:9), and prominent among God's excellencies is His holiness.

### **(8) The holiness of God makes the gospel a glorious necessity.**

As I think of the holiness of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (not to exclude the Holy Spirit), I am all the more awe-struck by the cross of Calvary. I have often thought of the agony of our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane. Usually, I think of His agony in terms of His horror at the thought of enduring the wrath of the Father, the wrath we deserve. But this study of the holiness of God has impressed me with the revulsion which a holy God has toward sin--toward our sin. And yet, despising sin as a holy God must, the Lord Jesus took all the sins of the world upon Himself as He went to Calvary. Jesus was not only agonizing over the wrath of the Father, He was agonizing over the sin He would bear on our behalf. What a wonderful Savior!

From my understanding of church history, revivals have been closely associated with a renewed and enhanced awareness of the holiness of God, accompanied with a heightened conviction of personal sin. If the holiness of God accomplishes in our lives what it did in the lives of those men like Isaiah whom we read of in the Bible, we will become increasingly aware of the depth of our own sin and our desperate need for forgiveness. Without holiness, we cannot enter into God's heaven. *In His holiness, God made a provision for our sins. By His sacrificial death on the cross of Calvary, Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sins, and thereby made it possible for us to partake of His holiness.* When we acknowledge our sin, our unrighteousness, and trust in Christ's death on our behalf, we are born again. Our sins are forgiven. Our unholiness is cleansed. We become a child of God.

Easter Sunday is the day we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It can be a time when you come to life from the dead as well, if you but place your trust in Him.

1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3



Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly [places], in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:1-7).

## **Lesson 6: The Righteousness of God**

### **Introduction**

The righteousness of God, one of the most prominent attributes of God in the Scriptures, is also one of the most elusive. Initially, distinguishing the righteousness of God from His holiness or His goodness seems difficult. In addition, the righteousness of God is virtually synonymous with His justice:

While the most common Old Testament word for just means 'straight,' and the New Testament word means 'equal,' in a moral sense they both mean 'right.' When we say that God is just, we are saying that He always does what is right, what should be done, and that He does it consistently, without partiality or prejudice. The word just and the word righteous are identical in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Sometimes the translators render the original word 'just' and other times 'righteous' with no apparent reason (cf. Nehemiah 9:8 and 9:33 where the same word is used). But whichever word they use, it means essentially the same thing. It has to do with God's actions. They are always right and fair.

God's righteousness (or justice) is the natural expression of His holiness. If He is infinitely pure, then He must be opposed to all sin, and that opposition to sin must be demonstrated in His treatment of His creatures. When we read that God is righteous or just, we are being assured that His actions toward us are in perfect agreement with His holy nature.<sup>1</sup>

These words by Richard Strauss bring us very close to a concise definition of righteousness. Righteousness, in relation to men, is their conformity to a standard. Unlike men, God is not subject to anything outside of Himself. No one states this better than A.W. Tozer:

It is sometimes said, 'Justice requires God to do this,' referring to some act we know He will perform. This is an error of thinking as well as of speaking, for it postulates a principle of justice outside of God which compels Him to act in a certain way. Of course there is no such principle. If there were it would be superior to God, for only a superior power can compel obedience. The truth is that there is not and can never be anything outside of the nature of God which can move Him in the least degree. All God's reasons come from within His uncreated being. Nothing has entered the being of God from eternity, nothing has been removed, and nothing has been changed.

Justice, when used of God, is a name we give to the way God is, nothing more; and when God acts justly He is not doing so to conform to an independent criterion, but simply acting like Himself in a given situation. . . . God is His own self-existent principle of moral equity, and when He sentences evil men or rewards the righteous, He simply acts like Himself from within, uninfluenced by anything that is not Himself."<sup>2</sup>

We must then say the righteousness of God is evident in the way He consistently acts in accord with His own character. God always acts righteously; His every action is consistent with His character. God is always consistently "Godly." God is not defined by the term "righteous," as much as the term "righteous" is defined by God. God is not measured by the standard of righteousness; God sets the standard of righteousness.

### **Abraham and the Righteousness of God (Genesis 18:16-33)**

23 And Abraham came near and said, "Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt Thou indeed sweep [it] away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are [treated] alike. Far be it from Thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" 26 So the LORD said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account." 27 And Abraham answered and said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am [but] dust and ashes. 28 Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, wilt Thou destroy the whole city because of five?" And He said, "I will not destroy [it] if I find forty-five there" (Genesis 18:23-28).

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<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Strauss, *The Joy of Knowing God*, (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1984), p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, pp. 93-94.

The righteousness of God is introduced very early in the Bible in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. This attribute is the basis for Abraham's appeal to God for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God is described anthropomorphically (in human-like terms) here as having heard the "**great outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah**" (verse 20). I wonder from whom this outcry came. One likely possibility is "**righteous Lot, whose righteous soul was vexed by the wickedness of these cities**" (see 2 Peter 2:6-8).

In the judicial terminology of our day, God was unwilling to act solely on the basis of hearsay. It was His intention to "**go down**" to this place and find out for Himself whether these allegations were true. Now of course we know God is omniscient. He knows all. He did not need to "take a trip to Sodom and Gomorrah" to see if these cities were really wicked. He knew they were wicked. But, from our point of view, God wants us to know He acts justly. He acts on the basis of information of which He has personal knowledge. Thus, when God judges these cities, He does so justly for they were truly wicked.

I find it interesting that verses 17-21 precede the account of Abraham's intercession for these cities. God knew what He was going to do. What He purposed to do was righteous and just. But God wanted Abraham to be a part of what He was doing. If God was to act justly, He was simply acting consistently with His character. But involving Abraham was also consistent with His covenant with him and the goal of this covenant. God's purpose for calling Abraham and making a covenant with him is spelled out in verses 17-19:

17 And the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18 since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? 19 For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD *by doing righteousness and justice*; in order that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him" (Genesis 18:17-19, emphasis mine).

God's purpose for calling Abraham and making a covenant with him was for Abraham to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice and to teach his offspring to do likewise. Righteousness is the divine goal for Abraham and his offspring.

When God informed Abraham He was about to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham began to intercede for them. His concern was for the righteous in those cities. How could God possibly destroy these cities if there were righteous men and women living in them? If God destroyed both the wicked and the righteous without distinguishing them, then God would not be acting righteously or justly. And surely God, as "the Judge of all the earth," must act justly (verse 25).

Abraham proceeds to intercede with God on behalf of the righteous. Beginning with 50 righteous, Abraham petitioned God not to destroy these cities if 50 righteous could be found. Eventually, Abraham was able (so it seemed) to lower the required number of the righteous to as few as ten (verse 32). But there simply were not ten righteous in these cities. There were but four (if one includes Lot's wife). But God, in His justice, would not deal with the wicked in a way that punished the righteous as well. He did not spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but He did spare Lot and his family by rescuing them from the city of Sodom before the angels destroyed them.

We see here in the Book of Genesis God's purpose in calling Abraham and his offspring: to raise up a people characterized by righteousness and justice. God not only showed himself to be righteous and just, He also worked in Abraham's life to show he was a man who loved righteousness and justice.

### **God's Righteousness and the Nation Israel**

God's righteousness was to be seen in His every dealing with the nation Israel:

6 Then Samuel said to the people, "It is the LORD who appointed Moses and Aaron and who brought your fathers up from the land of Egypt. 7 So now, take your stand, that I may plead with you before the LORD concerning all the righteous acts of the LORD which He did for you and your fathers" (2 Samuel 12:6-7).

God's righteousness in His dealings with the nation Israel has various manifestations.

**(1) God reveals His righteousness by revealing His will and His word to the world through the nation Israel.**

5 “See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do [them], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? 8 Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?” (Deuteronomy 4:5-8; see also Psalm 33:4).

God deals with men on the basis of what He has revealed to them. He often tells men what He will do well in advance of the event so they will know God is God and that He has accomplished what He promised:

21 “Declare and set forth [your case;]. Indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me” (Isaiah 45:21).

What God has not revealed does not need to be known (see Deuteronomy 29:29). All that is necessary for “**life and godliness**” has been revealed to us (see 2 Peter 1:4) so that we are fully equipped (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

**(2) God reveals His righteousness by instructing men in His word.**

8 Good and upright is the LORD; Therefore He instructs sinners in the way (Psalm 25:8).

Often this instruction came through the levitical priests (Leviticus 10:11; Deuteronomy 24:8; Nehemiah 8:9; 2 Chronicles 17:7-9) or through the prophets like Moses (Deuteronomy 4:1, 5, 14; Exodus 18:20).

**(3) God reveals His righteousness by fulfilling His promises:**

8 “And Thou didst find his heart faithful before Thee, and didst make a covenant with him to give [him] the land of the Canaanite, of the Hittite and the Amorite, of the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite--to give [it] to his descendants. *And Thou hast fulfilled Thy promise, for Thou art righteous*” (Nehemiah 9:7-8, emphasis mine).

**(4) God reveals His righteousness by judging the enemies of Israel:**

27 Then Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and said to them, “I have sinned this time; the LORD is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones” (Exodus 9:27).

13 Before the LORD, for He is coming; For He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, And the peoples in His faithfulness (Psalm 96:13).

God likewise shows Himself to be righteous when He judges the nation Israel for their sin and disobedience:

1 It took place when the kingdom of Rehoboam was established and strong that he and all Israel with him forsook the law of the LORD. 2 And it came about in King Rehoboam’s fifth year, because they had been unfaithful to the LORD, that Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem 3 with 1,200 chariots and 60,000 horsemen. And the people who came with him from Egypt were without number: the Lubim, the Sukkiim, and the Ethiopians. 4 And he captured the fortified cities of Judah and came as far as Jerusalem. 5 Then Shemaiah the prophet came to Rehoboam and the princes of Judah who had gathered at Jerusalem because of Shishak, and he said to them, “Thus says the LORD, ‘You have forsaken Me, so I also have forsaken you to Shishak.’” 6 So the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, “The LORD is righteous” (2 Chronicles 12:1-6).

15 “O LORD God of Israel, Thou art righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as [it is] this day; behold, we are before Thee in our guilt, for no one can stand before Thee because of this” (Ezra 9:15).

7 “Righteousness belongs to Thee, O Lord, but to us open shame, as it is this day--to the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near by and those who are far away in all the countries to which Thou hast driven them, because of their unfaithful deeds which they have committed against Thee. 8 Open shame belongs to us, O Lord, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against Thee” (Daniel 9:7-8).

**(5) God reveals His righteousness in the way He rules.**

6 Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Thy kingdom (Psalm 45:6).<sup>14</sup> Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Thy throne; Lovingkindness and truth go before Thee (Psalm 89:14, see also Psalm 97:2).

**(6) God reveals His righteousness in His hatred and in His anger.**

5 The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, And the one who loves violence His soul hates (Psalm 11:5).<sup>311</sup> God is a righteous judge; And a God who has indignation every day (Psalm 7:11).<sup>3</sup>

**(7) God reveals His righteousness in His protection of the poor and the afflicted.**

12 I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted, And justice for the poor (Psalm 140:12; see also Psalm 12:5; 82; 116:6 below).

**(8) God reveals His righteousness when He shows mercy and compassion.**

5 Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; Yes, our God is compassionate; 6 The LORD preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me (Psalm 116:5-6).

18 Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. The LORD is a God of justice; How blessed are those who long for Him (Isaiah 30:18).

**(9) God reveals His righteousness in saving sinners.**

2 The LORD has made known His salvation; He has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations. 3 He has remembered His lovingkindness and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God (Psalm 98:2-3). 11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities (Isaiah 53:11).

I believe this to be a very significant aspect of God's righteousness. God is righteous in saving sinners. So often we think God's righteousness is revealed in His judgment of sinners and His mercy by His salvation of sinners. The Scriptures teach that God's righteousness is the cause of both condemnation and justification. He is righteous in saving sinners, as well as merciful and compassionate. God is righteous in all His dealings with men, indeed in all His dealings.

The righteousness of God and the justice of God are not secondary matters; they are primary. The righteousness or justice of God is to be the guiding principle for the people of God. When the Old Testament prophets sought to sum up the essence of the Old Testament teaching regarding man's conduct, it was that men practice righteousness or justice:

21 "I hate, I reject your festival, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. 23 Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. 24 But let justice roll down like waters And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24).

6 With what shall I come to the LORD And bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, With yearling calves? 7 Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8).

When summarizing the very essence of what the Old Testament Law was about, Amos and Micah both spoke first of justice and righteousness. God is not interested in a legalistic keeping of the Law, as though one might make himself righteous by so doing. God is interested in men seeking to know the heart of God and pleasing Him by doing that in which He delights and that which He does.

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<sup>3</sup> When God is angry, He is also righteous. The Bible does not teach, "Do not be angry, and thus sin." Rather it teaches there are times we should be angry (like God), but not let our anger lead to sin. There is a righteous anger, which is not sinful. Sometimes we sin by not becoming angry because of sin.

## **The Righteousness of God in the New Testament**

If righteousness and justice are the heart of the Old Testament Law, they are also at the heart of the dispute between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>4</sup> At the very outset of His earthly ministry, Jesus set out to contrast His interpretation of the Old Testament teaching on righteousness with that of the scribes and Pharisees. In reality, Jesus did not offer a “new” interpretation of righteousness or of the Law; rather He sought to reestablish the proper understanding of righteousness as taught in the Law and the Prophets. Thus, Jesus repeatedly used the formula, “You have heard it said. . .” (“This is what the scribes and Pharisees teach. . .”), “But I say to you. . .” (“But the Old Testament was meant to be understood this way. . .”).

The scribes and Pharisees thought of themselves as setting the standard for righteousness. They felt that they, of all men, were righteous. Jesus shocked all when He said,

20 “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

It was clear that if the scribes and Pharisees could not produce enough righteousness on their own, no one could. The standard of righteousness the Law held forth was even higher than that of the scribes and Pharisees. No one was righteous enough to get into heaven. What a shock to the self-righteous who thought they had box office seats in the kingdom.

If Jesus shocked His audience when He said those who appeared to be the most righteous would not make it into the kingdom on their kind of righteousness, He also shocked them as to who would be “blessed” by entrance into the kingdom: those the scribes and Pharisees thought unworthy of the kingdom. Those blessed were not the scribes and Pharisees, but the “poor in spirit,” those who “mourn,” the “gentle,” those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” the “merciful,” the “pure in heart,” the “peacemakers,” and those who are “persecuted” on account of their relationship with Jesus (Matthew 5:3-12).

Jesus taught that true righteousness is not that which men regard as righteous based upon external appearances, but that so judged by God based upon His assessment of the heart:

15 And He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15).

The Scribes and Pharisees, who thought themselves so righteous because of their rigorous attention to external matters, proved to be just the opposite when judged by our Lord:

28 “Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 29 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31 Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers. 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell? 34 Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, 35 that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar” (Matthew 23:28-35).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against externalism and ceremonialism.

1 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 6:1).

According to Jesus, true righteousness is vastly different from the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. False righteousness is measured by men on the basis of externalism. True righteousness is

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Matthew 23; Luke 16:15; Philippians 3:1-11.

judged such by God, in accordance with His Word. Because of this, men need to beware of attempting to judge the righteousness of others (see Matthew 7:1). Those whose deeds seemed to indicate they were righteous were those whom God denied ever having known as His children (Matthew 7: 15-23). Those who appeared to be righteous were not, and those who appeared unrighteous by the Judaism of that day may well have been righteous.

It is no wonder then that Jesus was not regarded as righteous by many of the Jews but was considered a sinner:

16 Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. . . . 24 So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner." 25 He therefore answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see" (John 9:16, 24-25).

The great division which arose among the Jews was over the issue of whether Jesus was a righteous man or a sinner (see John 10:19-21).

The Old and New Testament leave no doubt in our minds whether the Lord Jesus was righteous. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming Messiah as the "Righteous One" who would "justify the many" (Isaiah 53:11). Jeremiah spoke of Him as the "righteous Branch" (Jeremiah 23:5). When Jesus was baptized, it was to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). Both Pilate's wife (Matthew 27:19) and the soldier at the foot of the cross (Luke 23:47) acknowledged His righteousness at the very moment when men were condemning Him.

The apostles likewise bear witness to the righteousness of Christ:

1 My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).

29 If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him (1 John 2:29).

The righteousness of God is particularly important in relation to salvation. In Romans 3, Paul points out God not only justifies sinners (that is, He declares them righteous), but He is also shown to be just (righteous) in the process:

21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. 27 Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. 28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law (Romans 3:21-28).

Men have failed to live up to the standard of righteousness laid down by the Law (Romans 3:9-20). God is just in condemning all men to death, for all men without exception have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). All men are worthy of death because the "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). God is just in condemning the unrighteous.

But God is also just in saving sinners. As Paul puts it, He is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26). How can this be? God is just because His righteous anger has been satisfied. Justice was done on the cross of Calvary. God did not reduce the charges against men; He did not change the standard of righteousness. God poured out the full measure of His righteous wrath upon His Son on the cross of Calvary. In Him, justice was meted out. All of those who trust in Him by faith are justified. Their sins are forgiven because Jesus paid the full price; He suffered the full measure of God's wrath in

their place. And for those who reject the goodness and mercy of God at Calvary, they must pay the penalty for their sins because they would not accept the payment Jesus made in their place.

The cross of Calvary accomplished a just salvation, for all who will receive it. But we also know that only those whom God has chosen--the "elect"--will repent and trust in the death of Christ on their behalf. This raises another question related to divine justice. After clearly teaching the doctrine of divine election, Paul asks how election squares with the justice of God, and then gives us the answer:

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; 7 neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named." 8 That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. 9 For this is a word of promise: "At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son." 10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; 11 for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, 12 it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." 13 Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! 15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." 16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." 18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" 20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? 21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? 22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? 23 And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, 24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles (Romans 9:6-24).

The question assumes that divine election has been taught by Paul as a biblical fact. If it were not so--as it clearly is--the question would not have been raised by Paul. And if there is no such thing as election, Paul could have simply brushed the question aside as illogical and unreasonable. But Paul assumes the truth of election and the possibility that some might object on the grounds that election would make God unjust. Paul first rebukes the one who dares to judge God and pronounce on His righteousness. How presumptuous can a man be? Should God stand before the bar of human judgment? Of course not!

As seen in chapter 3, God is righteous in that He has condemned all, and in Christ, those who are justified have been punished and then raised to newness of life. God is also righteous for judging all those who refuse to accept His offer of salvation in Christ. God would be unjust only if He set aside justice rather than fulfilling it in Christ, whether by His sacrificial death at His first coming or by His judging the unbelieving world at His second coming.

Divine grace, the grace by which God reaches out to save men from their sins, is meted out not on the basis of men's merits but in spite of men's sin. Grace, as we shall later emphasize in another message, is sovereignly bestowed. God would be unjust only if He withheld blessings from men which they deserved. Since God is free to bestow unmerited blessings on any sinner He may choose, God is not unrighteous in saving some of the worst sinners, while choosing not to save other sinners. God does not owe salvation to anyone, and thus He is not unjust in saving some and choosing not to save others.

The good news of the gospel is that salvation by grace is offered to all men, and by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, men may be forgiven of their sins and made righteous:

20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:20-21).



### Conclusion

If sin is the manifestation of our unrighteousness and we can be saved only through a righteousness not our own--the righteousness of Christ--then the ultimate sin is self-righteousness. Jesus did not reject sinners who came to Him for mercy and salvation; He rejected those who were too righteous (in their own eyes) to need grace. Jesus came to save sinners and not to save those righteous in their own eyes. No one is too lost to save; there are only those too good to save. In the Gospels, those who thought themselves most righteous were the ones condemned by our Lord as wicked and unrighteous.

If we are among those who have acknowledged our sin and trusted in the righteousness of Christ for our salvation, the righteousness of God is one of the great and comforting truths we should embrace. The justice of God means that when He establishes His kingdom on earth, it will be a kingdom characterized by justice. He will judge men in righteousness, and He will reign in righteousness.

We need not fret over the wicked of our day who seem to be getting away with sin. If we love righteousness, we most certainly dare not envy the wicked, whose day of judgment awaits them (see Psalm 37; 73). Their day of judgment is rapidly coming upon them, and justice will prevail.

If we realize that true righteousness is not to be judged according to external, legalistic standards and that judgment belongs to God, we dare not occupy ourselves in judging others (Matthew 7:1). We should also realize that judgment begins at the house of God, and thus we should be quick to judge ourselves and to avoid those sins which are an offense to the righteousness of God (see 1 Peter 4:17; 1 Corinthians 11:31).

The doctrine of the righteousness of God means that we, as the children of God (if you are a Christian), should seek to imitate our heavenly Father (5:48). We should not seek to find revenge against those who sin against us, but leave vengeance to God (Romans 12:17-21). Rather than seeking to get even, let us suffer the injustice of men, even as our Lord Jesus, that God might even bring our enemies to repentance and salvation (Matthew 5:43-44; 1 Peter 2:18-25). And let us pray, as our Lord instructed us, that the day when righteousness reigns may come:

10 "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

## Lesson 7: The Wrath of God

### Introduction

Over 400 bikers recently gathered to pay their last respects to “Grandpa Bob.” Bob Shields, a founding member of the once-feared motorcycle gang known as the Bandidos, died of cancer at the age of 78. Middle age and older bikers gathered to drink beer and swap stories of the good old days of drug-running, assault, terrorism and murder, not to mention some legal sins. What caught my attention was the macho manner in which they attempted to deal with death and the reality of future judgment.

“Give ‘em hell, Grandpa,” one gray-bearded biker said. “The devil’s in the unemployment line now.” Lamont, another heavily tattooed gang member, is reported to have said, “Where he’s gone, that’s where we’re all going someday. He’s just waiting on us.”

“I don’t want no preachers ranting and raving over me,” he wrote. “Besides, I’m down below, drinking whiskey and . . . on the devil.”<sup>1</sup>

I do not know if these bikers believe there is a hell, but they certainly do not have a correct view of the wrath of God. Most people do not want to think of God’s wrath at all, preferring to think and speak of God’s love. Those who do believe God is a God of wrath as well as a God of love prefer to think of His wrath in the past tense. Many seem to believe God’s wrath is an Old Testament truth, and that with the coming of Christ, we are now safe to think only in terms of God’s love. This is wrong thinking about God. A. W. Pink observes:

It is sad to find so many professing Christians who appear to regard the wrath of God as something for which they need to make an apology, or at least they wish there were no such thing. While some would not go so far as to openly admit that they consider it a blemish on the Divine character, yet they are far from regarding it with delight; they like not to think about it, and they rarely hear it mentioned without a secret resentment rising up in their hearts against it. Even with those who are more sober in their judgment, not a few seem to imagine that there is a severity about the Divine wrath which is too terrifying to form a theme for profitable contemplation. Others harbor the delusion that God’s wrath is not consistent with His goodness, and so seek to banish it from their thoughts.

Yes, many there are who turn away from a vision of God’s wrath as though they were called to look upon some blotch in the Divine character, or some blot upon the Divine government. But what saith the Scriptures? As we turn to them we find that God has made no attempt to conceal the fact of His wrath. He is not ashamed to make it known that vengeance and fury belong unto Him.<sup>2</sup>

The wrath of God is not just taught in the Bible, it is a prominent truth in the Scriptures as A. W. Pink calls attention to in his book:

A study of the concordance will show that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness.<sup>3</sup>

The wrath of God is an attribute of God as much a part of God as any other attribute, an attribute without which God would be less than God:

Now the wrath of God is as much a Divine perfection as is His faithfulness, power, or mercy. It must be so, for there is no blemish whatever, not the slightest defect in the character of God; yet there would be if ‘wrath’ were absent from Him!<sup>4</sup>

If we are going to discuss the wrath of God, we must first define it. Pink, one of the students of the attributes of God, defines God’s wrath this way:

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<sup>1</sup> “Bikers bid farewell to Bandido co-founder,” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 17, 1994, p. 12D.

<sup>2</sup> A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, (Swengel Pa.: Reiner Publications, 1968 [Reprint]), p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

The wrath of God is His eternal detestation of all unrighteousness. It is the displeasure and indignation of Divine equity against evil. It is the holiness of God stirred into activity against sin. It is the moving cause of that just sentence which He passes upon evil-doers. God is angry against sin because it is a rebelling against His authority, a wrong done to His inviolable sovereignty. Insurrectionists against God's government shall be made to know that God is the Lord. They shall be made to feel how great that Majesty is which they despise, and how dreadful is that threatened wrath which they so little regarded. Not that God's anger is a malignant and malicious retaliation, inflicting injury for the sake of it, or in return for injury received. No; while God will vindicate His dominion as Governor of the universe, He will not be vindictive.<sup>5</sup>

J. I. Packer takes us to the dictionary for a definition of wrath:

'Wrath' is an old English word defined in my dictionary as 'deep, intense anger and indignation'. 'Anger' is defined as 'stirring of resentful displeasure and strong antagonism, by a sense of injury or insult'; 'indignation' as 'righteous anger aroused by injustice and baseness'. Such is wrath. And wrath, the Bible tells us, is an attribute of God.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps a more concise definition will suffice for the purpose of our study:

Divine wrath is God's righteous anger and punishment, provoked by sin.

### **The Wrath of God in the Old Testament**

The Old Testament not only speaks of God's wrath as one of His attributes, it speaks of His wrath as a part of God's glory:

18 Then Moses said, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!" 19 And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." 20 But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" 21 Then the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; 22 and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen." 34:1 Now the Lord said to Moses, "Cut out for yourself two stone tablets like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered. 2 So be ready by morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to Me on the top of the mountain. 3 And no man is to come up with you, nor let any man be seen anywhere on the mountain; even the flocks and the herds may not graze in front of that mountain." 4 So he cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. 5 And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. 6 Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 33:18--34:7).

God's wrath is not an embarrassment to Him. He need never be ashamed, like men, for losing His temper. God's wrath is inseparably linked with His glory. God brings glory to Himself when He exercises His wrath.

God's wrath is provoked when men rebel against His Word. After God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, He gave them His laws to guide and govern their conduct so they might be a holy people in whose midst He would dwell. In Deuteronomy 28:1-14, God described the blessings which would result from obedience to the covenant He made with them at Mount Sinai. Verses 15-68 provide a much more extensive and graphic description of His judgment as a consequence of breaking this covenant. In the context of Deuteronomy 28, it is clear that Israel will not keep His covenant and that they will be judged. God will not tolerate sin among His people any more than He will tolerate it in others. The Israelites were destined to drink deeply from the cup of God's wrath.

Numerous instances can be seen in the Old Testament where God's wrath is demonstrated. In Numbers 16, God's wrath is poured out on Korah, Dathan, Abiram and some 250 others who rebelled against

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 134.

Moses as God's appointed leader (verses 1-3). When summoned to appear, Dathan and Abiram refused, and their words indicate their rebellion was as much against God as it was against Moses:

12 Then Moses sent a summons to Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come up. 13 Is it not enough that *you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey* to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us? 14 Indeed, *you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey*, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!" (Numbers 16:12-14, emphasis mine).

God promised to lead the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt to a land of "**milk and honey**" (Exodus 13:5; see also Numbers 13:27). These rebels viewed Egypt, the place of their former bondage, as the land of "milk and honey" and the promised land as a barren wilderness and place of bondage. They also rejected Moses' leadership and proposed a more democratic form of government. God seemed ready to destroy the entire nation (Numbers 16:20-21), but Moses and Aaron knew God better; thus, they petitioned God not to pour out His wrath on all, but only on those who were guilty of this rebellion (verse 22).

Moses then declared a means by which all would know those whom God had appointed to lead His people:

28 And Moses said, "By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these deeds; for this is not my doing. 29 If these men die the death of all men, or if they suffer the fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. 30 But if the Lord brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, and they descend alive into Sheol, then you will understand that these men have spurned the Lord."

31 Then it came about as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground that was under them split open; 32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah, with their possessions. 33 So they and all that belonged to them went down alive to Sheol; and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. 34 And all Israel who were around them fled at their outcry, for they said, "The earth may swallow us up!" 35 Fire also came forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense (Numbers 16:28-35).

Korah, Dathan, Abiram and all those who followed them were first burned to death and then given an ignoble burial in a way that had never happened before in history--the ground opened, swallowed them, and then closed over them. God thereby made it clear that Moses and Aaron were his appointed leaders, and at the same time demonstrated His righteous wrath upon those who rebelled against Him and the leaders whom He appointed.

In Old Testament times, God not only displayed His wrath toward rebellious Israelites, He also demonstrated His wrath against wicked pagans. He destroyed the inhabited earth by means of the flood (Genesis 6-9). He also destroyed the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). And after the exodus, He employed the nation Israel to destroy the wicked Canaanites for their sin, just as He had indicated earlier to Abraham:

12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 And God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. 14 But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. 16 Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete" (Genesis 15:12-16).

1 "When the Lord your God shall bring you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and shall clear away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, 2 and when the Lord your God shall deliver them before you, and you shall defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. 3 Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. 4 For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will quickly destroy you. 5 But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire. . . . And you shall consume all the peoples whom the Lord your God will deliver to

you; your eye shall not pity them, neither shall you serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you” (Deuteronomy 7:1-5, 16; see also 20:16-18).

God indicated to Abraham that his descendants would be persecuted in Egypt for 400 years (although God did not name the place), and then He would bring them back to possess the land. The reason for the delay at least in part was to allow the iniquity of the Amorites to fill up. The Israelites were to be the instrument of God’s wrath toward these Canaanites. They were to show no mercy. They must not allow any of the Canaanites to live. This was for Israel’s own good. If allowed to live, the Canaanites would most certainly intermarry with the Israelites and also teach them to sin, duplicating the very sins for which God was pouring out His wrath upon them.

Often in the Old Testament Israel did experience God’s wrath as did the Gentiles. But there are a number of texts in the Old Testament which speak of a future wrath even greater than any seen before:

6 Wail, for the day of the Lord is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty. 7 Therefore all hands will fall limp, And every man’s heart will melt. 8 And they will be terrified, Pains and anguish will take hold of them; They will writhe like a woman in labor, They will look at one another in astonishment, their faces aflame. 9 Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, Cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation; And He will exterminate its sinners from it. 10 For the stars of heaven and their constellations Will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises, And the moon will not shed its light. 11 Thus I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud, and abase the haughtiness of the ruthless. 12 I will make mortal man scarcer than pure gold, And mankind than the gold of Ophir. 13 Therefore I shall make the heavens tremble, And the earth will be shaken from its place at the fury of the Lord of hosts In the day of His burning anger. 14 And it will be that like a hunted gazelle, Or like sheep with none to gather them, they will each turn to his own people, And each one flee to his own land. 15 Anyone who is found will be thrust through, and anyone who is captured will fall by the sword. 16 Their little ones also will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; Their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished (Isaiah 13:6-16).

If you are a careful student of the Scriptures, you may have noted that this great oracle of woe is pronounced against Babylon upon whom the “**day of the Lord**” will come. It may appear then that this prophecy is fulfilled in Old Testament times. Babylon is judged for the zeal with which this nation punished the nation Israel. Yet this imminent judgment of Babylon is but a foreshadowing of the great “**day of the Lord,**” which is yet future for the nation Israel and all the nations which have rebelled against God.

### **The Wrath of God in the New Testament**

Those willing to accept that God is a God of wrath are sometimes eager for the wrath of God to be viewed as primarily an Old Testament matter which is no longer a threat for those who live today. They like to think that with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the subject of wrath is largely a matter of past history. But this is simply not the case.

Since John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets, we almost expect him to speak of divine wrath. But when John spoke of the wrath to come, he did so in relationship to the coming of the Christ. According to John’s teaching, divine wrath was related to the coming of Messiah in two ways. *First*, he spoke of Messiah coming to experience the wrath of God. *Second*, John spoke of Messiah as the One who would execute the wrath of God.

### **Jesus, the Messiah, Who Was to Experience God’s Wrath**

When John the Baptist first saw Jesus and recognized Him as the Messiah, He spoke of Him as the Sin-bearer who was to experience God’s wrath as the “**Lamb of God.**”

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

The expression, “**the Lamb of God,**” to which John referred has a rich Old Testament background. There was the “**Passover lamb,**” sacrificed at the time of Israel’s exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12), which was a

prototype of our Lord (see 1 Corinthians 5:7). There were the other sacrificial lambs that were a part of Israel's worship (see Genesis 22:8; Exodus 13:13; 29:39-41; 34:20; Leviticus 3:7, etc.). In particular, there is the "**Lamb of God**" described by Isaiah which is clearly a reference to the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ:

4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. 7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered That He was cut off out of the land of the living, For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? . . . 10 But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand. 11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities (Isaiah 53:4-8, 10-11).

This prophecy speaks of the suffering of the Messiah as the Sin-bearer, the One on whom the sins of the world are laid and thus on whom the wrath of God is poured out. This enables us to understand why our Lord was so troubled by the knowledge that the time of His suffering and death drew near:

27 "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify Thy name." There came therefore a voice out of heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." 29 The multitude therefore, who stood by and heard it, were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, "An angel has spoken to Him." 30 Jesus answered and said, "This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. 31 Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out. 32 And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." 33 But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die (Matthew 12:27-34).

Here is why the Lord could say in the Garden of Gethsemane, "**My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death . . .**" (Matthew 26:38), and why Luke could tell us our Lord's sweat in the Garden became as "**drops of blood**" (Luke 22:44). Who more than our Lord knew the wrath of God toward sin and sinners? Yet He was obedient to the will of the Father to suffer that wrath in the sinner's place.

Our Lord's greatest suffering came because He was the object of the Father's wrath. The great agony of our Lord is seen in these words recorded in the Messianic prophecy of Psalm 22 and then spoken by our Lord as He hung upon the cross:

46 "My God, My God, Why has Thou forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46).

One of the most beautiful truths of the Bible for the sinner deserving God's wrath is summed up by the theological term, *propitiation*. Propitiation speaks of the satisfaction of God's holy wrath.

24 Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:24-26).

2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

4 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).

In a chapter entitled, "The Heart of the Gospel," J. I. Packer has this to say about propitiation in the context of his comments on Paul's teaching in Romans 3 and 5:

The wrath of God against us, both present and to come, has been quenched. How was this effected? Through the death of Christ. 'While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son' ([Romans] 5:10). The 'blood'--that is, the sacrificial death--of Jesus Christ abolished God's anger against us, and ensured that His treatment

of us for ever after would be propitious and favourable. Henceforth, instead of showing Himself to be against us, He would show Himself in our life and experience to be for us. What, then, does the phrase 'a propitiation . . . by His blood' express? It expresses, in the context of Paul's argument, precisely this thought: that by His sacrificial death for our sins Christ pacified the wrath of God.<sup>7</sup>

Propitiation means God's wrath has been appeased for all who have trusted in Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel is that those who have placed their trust in the Lord Jesus as the "**Lamb of God**" are no longer under the sentence of divine wrath:

1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, that no one should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:1-10).

9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

### **Jesus, the Messiah, Who Executes Divine Wrath**

John the Baptist was the last Old Testament prophet and the one privileged to introduce Jesus as Israel's Messiah. When John spoke of the coming Messiah, he spoke of His coming as the One who would execute divine wrath:

5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:5-12).

Although the primary purpose of our Lord's first coming was not to execute the wrath of God, Jesus did reveal (God's) wrath on several occasions. He was angered by the way the Jewish religious leaders had commercialized the worship at the temple, and thus He cleansed the temple of the money changers both at the beginning (John 2:13-17) and at the end (Matthew 21:12-13) of His public ministry. He also had some scathing words of rebuke for the scribes and Pharisees. The "woe's" of this text are a pronouncement of divine wrath:

29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers. 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell? 34 Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, 35 that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation.

37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. 38 Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! 39 For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Matthew 23:29-39).

There is something particularly significant about Jesus’ words in these verses which I had never noticed. Men not only become subject to the wrath of God for their own sin of rejecting Christ as the Messiah, they also become guilty for the sins of their predecessors. How can this be? The Old Testament saints looked forward to the coming of Messiah through whom God would make atonement for sin (see John 8:56). The Old Testament prophets spoke of the coming of Messiah (see Deuteronomy 18:15; Isaiah 52:13--53:12; Malachi 4). The scribes and Pharisees professed to honor these saints of old, and yet they denied the One in whom the saints put their trust. In this way, those who reject Christ as the Messiah disassociate themselves from the saints of old and identify themselves with those who rejected, persecuted, and even killed the saints and prophets of old. In rejecting Jesus as Messiah, they cast their vote with those who killed the righteous and thus became guilty of these past sins of unbelieving Jews as well as their own. Here is a thought worth pondering.

Jesus warned those who were inclined to judge on the basis of outward appearances (Luke 16:15). He cautioned them not to assume every earthly calamity is a manifestation of divine wrath and that those who suffer greatly must be guilty of great sin:

1 Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 And He answered and said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? 3 I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4 Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:1-5).

Disaster is not necessarily a manifestation of divine wrath (unless specifically indicated as such), just as prosperity should not be interpreted as proof of piety. Men’s suffering in this life is not necessarily proportionate to their blessings or suffering in eternity as the story of the rich man and Lazarus makes clear (see Luke 16:19-31).

Jesus warned of God’s future wrath upon sinners and taught that a day of wrath is coming which will surpass any previous instance of divine judgment. It will be a terrible day, unparalleled in human history:

15 “Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), 16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; 17 let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; 18 and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. 19 But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! 20 But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath; 21 for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. 22 And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short” (Matthew 24:15-22).

48 “But if that evil slave says in his heart, ‘My master is not coming for a long time,’ 49 and shall begin to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; 50 the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, 51 and shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 24:48-51; see also chapter 25).

20 “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city; 22 because these are days of vengeance, in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled. 23 Woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land, and wrath to this people, 24 and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.



25 “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, 26 men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:20-28).

This great future wrath of God is necessary and certain because men reject the provision God has made for sinners in the sacrificial death of Christ at Calvary:

16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. . . . He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:16-21, 36).

The solution to the problem of sin and judgment is to repent, to acknowledge one’s sin and guilt, and to trust in the Lord Jesus who has borne the wrath of God in the sinner’s place.

18 “But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled. 19 Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; 20 and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, 21 whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. 22 Moses said, ‘The Lord God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed in everything He says to you. 23 And it shall be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people’” (Acts 3:18-23).

If men are to escape from the wrath of God, they must repent and trust in the One who bore God’s wrath on Mount Calvary. Those who reject God’s provision for forgiveness and salvation face the future outpouring of divine wrath, a judgment far greater than man has ever seen before. It is of this wrath that the Book of Revelation speaks:

12 And I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. 14 And the sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. 15 And the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; 16 and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; 17 for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:12-17).

1 And I heard a loud voice from the temple, saying to the seven angels, “Go and pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God into the earth.” 2 And the first angel went and poured out his bowl into the earth; and it became a loathsome and malignant sore upon the men who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped his image. 3 And the second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became blood like that of a dead man; and every living thing in the sea died. 4 And the third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of waters; and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel of the waters saying, “Righteous art Thou, who art and who wast, O Holy One, because Thou didst judge these things; 6 for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and Thou hast given them blood to drink. They deserve it.” 7 And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Thy judgments.” 8 And the fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun; and it was given to it to scorch men with fire. 9 And men were scorched with fierce heat; and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues; and they did not repent, so as to give Him glory. 10 And the fifth angel poured out his bowl upon the throne of the beast; and his kingdom became darkened; and they gnawed their tongues because of pain, 11 and they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores; and they did not repent of their deeds (Revelation 16:1-11).

11 And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. 12 And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself. 13 And He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. 15 And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may

smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. 16 And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (Revelation 19:11-16).

The wrath of God on the wicked is great. Men deserve it. And there is no escaping it. Men know that the outpouring of wrath is from God, a judgment on them for their sin. And yet not one person repents. The time for repentance is past. Those who chose to reject the sacrifice of Christ for their sins must now be judged according to their works. It is a terrible fate, but one which sinners richly deserve. Divine wrath is not just a phenomenon of the Old Testament; it is a certainty of biblical prophecy. Men are urged to take heed and repent while there is still time to escape the wrath of God by faith in Christ.

38 And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

30 "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

### **Conclusion: The Implications of Divine Wrath**

The first and most obvious implication of the biblical doctrine of divine wrath is that sinners desperately need to repent of their sin and place their trust in Christ, who bore God's wrath for their sin at Calvary. Let me make it more personal. Have your sins been forgiven, or is the wrath of God your fate? The solution is as simple as acknowledging your sin and trusting in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in your place.

6 But the righteousness based on faith speaks thus, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), 7 or 'Who will descend into the ABYSS?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"-- that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; 10 for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed."

Once we have trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation, we have this confidence:

9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him (Romans 5:9).

The biblical doctrine of the wrath of God should motivate Christians to evangelize, to warn the lost of the impending wrath of God, and to urge them to be saved.

44 Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

11 Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences (2 Corinthians 5:11).

22 And have mercy on some, who are doubting; 23 save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh (Jude 1:22-23).

As we seek to evangelize, we do not do so in the manner of some who would seek to make the gospel more pleasing and palatable. We do not avoid the negative aspects of the gospel. We proclaim the whole gospel, seeking to please God rather than men (see 2 Corinthians 2:14-17; 4:1-2; 5:11; Galatians 1:6-10). We know He has promised to "**convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment**" (John 16:8-11), and thus our message must focus on sin, righteousness, and judgment just as Paul's did (see Acts 17:30-31; 24:25).

The doctrine of the wrath of God is an incentive for the Christian to live a holy life. Our desire should be to please God (2 Corinthians 5:9), and this will be done as we pursue holiness and flee from sin:

3 But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; 4 and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. 5 For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. 7 Therefore do not be partakers with them (Ephesians 5:3-7).

14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; 16 because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." 17 And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay upon earth; 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:14-19).

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. 11 Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! 13 But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless (2 Peter 3:10-14).

The wrath of God is a reminder of the holiness of God and a measure of God's hatred of sin. God's wrath is proportionate to the unrighteousness which provokes it. The immensity of God's wrath toward sin is an indication of His holy hatred of sin. We should hate it as well.

The wrath of God should make us uncomfortable with sin. In addition, we should never forget that our sin resulted in the suffering and agony of our Savior on whom God's wrath was poured out. To think lightly of sin is to take Christ's suffering lightly. To sin willfully is to come dangerously close to crucifying afresh the Son of God (Hebrews 6:6).

The doctrine of the wrath of God instructs us not to fret over the wicked. While they may appear to be getting away with evil, they will come under the wrath of God:

16 When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight 17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end. 8 Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places; Thou dost cast them down to destruction. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, Thou wilt despise their form (Psalm 73:16-20)..

17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 19 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. 20 "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21).

9 Then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment (2 Peter 2:9).

Let us take the doctrine of God's wrath seriously. Let us neither neglect nor conceal it. Let us regard it as a part of the goodness and glory of God. May the doctrine of God's wrath be an incentive to evangelism and the proclamation of a pure gospel, which includes sin, righteousness, and judgment. To the glory of God and our own good, may this doctrine be the basis for holy living for each of us.

14 Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; 16 that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears. 18 For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 19 and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them. 20 For they could not bear the command, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned." 21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said,

“I am full of fear and trembling.” 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. 25 See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. 26 And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.” 27 And this expression, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; 29 for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:14-29).

### **Addendum: Characteristics of Godly Wrath**

- Godly wrath is vastly different from the wrath of man (James 1:20).
- The wrath of God is always in accordance with the standards set down in Scripture for man’s conduct and the warnings God has given for disobedience (Deuteronomy 29:26-28; 30:15-20; 2 Samuel 12:9-10; 2 Kings 22:10-13; 24:2; 2 Chronicles 19:8-10; 34:18-28; 36:15-16; Jeremiah 22:11-12; 44:2-6).
- The wrath of God is in accordance with the deeds of men. God’s wrath is always in direct proportion to man’s sin (Psalm 28:4; Isaiah 59:18; Jeremiah 17:10; 21:14; 25:14; Ezekiel 20:44; 24:14; 36:19).
- God’s wrath is slow and controlled, not sudden and explosive (Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18).
- God’s wrath comes after warning of judgment (see, for example, the warnings given to men in the days of Noah (Genesis 6-9), of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), and throughout the Old Testament by the prophets).
- God’s wrath is always provoked by man’s sin (Deuteronomy 4:25; 9:18; Jeremiah 25:6-7; 32:32).
- God wrath is not exercised in sin but in righteousness (Romans 2:5; James 1:19-20).

## **Lesson 8: The Grace of God**

### **Introduction**

To illustrate the grace of God, I have often told the true story of my friend who bought a brand new Jaguar convertible upon returning as a veteran from Viet Nam. While still wearing his army fatigues, my friend set out early one morning driving down a lonely stretch of road in Oklahoma. Deciding to see just how fast his car would go, he allowed it to accelerate to its maximum speed. Just as he came to the crest of a small hill, he reached top speed. And there, just over the hill, out of sight until it was too late, was a highway patrolman with his radar. My friend knew it was all over, although it took him a mile or so to bring the car to a stop, where he sat waiting for the policeman to catch up with him.

The patrolman stopped his car and slowly proceeded to approach my friend, waiting with driver's license in hand. "Do you have any idea just how fast you were going?" he asked. "Not exactly," my friend sheepishly replied. "One hundred and sixty-three miles per hour," the policeman responded. "That sounds about right to me," my friend said.

My friend did not expect the patrolman's next statement: "Would you mind if I took a look at that engine?" he asked. "Not at all," my friend said. A half hour or so later, the two men finished a cup of coffee at a nearby coffee shop before the patrolman drove off, never having given my friend a ticket!

I used to say that if the officer paid for the coffee, this was grace. But it really is not the kind of grace of which the Bible speaks. In response to Moses' request to see God's glory (Exodus 33:18), God allowed Moses to see a portion of it:

5 And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. 6 Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:5-7).

God's glory is seen, in part, by His grace. He is gracious and compassionate (verse 6). But, in addition, God also does not leave the guilty unpunished (verse 7). God's grace does not overlook sin; it punishes sin, but in a way which forgives those who are guilty.

I therefore must revise my illustration, adding a little fiction to more accurately describe the grace of God. As my friend broke over the top of that hill at 163 miles per hour, he slammed on the brakes, causing the car to go out of control, smashing into the police car, nearly destroying it and shaking up the police officer badly. Instead of letting my friend go, without a ticket, the officer must write out a ticket, and then pay the fine himself. He must not allow my friend to pay for anything--even the coffee. Now that would be grace, the kind of grace the Bible speaks of, the grace of God toward those who are saved.

Our lesson considers the grace of God, a subject so immense we could spend eternity trying to fathom it. Consequently, I will attempt to summarize some of the essential elements of God's grace by calling your attention to three stories in the Bible which describe the grace of God. The first story is of Jacob and the grace of God (Genesis 25-32; Hosea 12:2-6), the second of Jonah and the grace of God, and the last is about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). In these three stories, we will encounter a man who finally ceases striving with God and men and casts himself on the grace of God (Jacob). We will consider a man who is a prophet, and yet he hates the grace of God (Jonah). And we will see a woman who is the recipient of God's grace, while she stands condemned by some of her self-righteous peers (the woman of John 8:1-11).

## Jacob and the Grace of God<sup>1</sup>

Jacob is not the first example of God's grace, but he is one of the most striking examples in the Old Testament. It seems to have taken Jacob 130 years to begin to grasp what it means to live by the grace of God (see Genesis 47:9). There is one crucial turning point in Jacob's life where he begins to rely upon the grace of God. It is that turning point, recorded in Genesis 32:22-32 and more carefully interpreted in Hosea 12:2-6, upon which I would like to focus our attention.

Even before his birth, Jacob was a man who struggled with others.

21 And Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. 22 But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. 23 And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples shall be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger." 24 When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. 25 Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. 26 And afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them (Genesis 25:21-26).

When the boys were grown, Jacob sought to get ahead by striving with his brother:

27 When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. 28 Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. 29 And when Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; 30 and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished." Therefore his name was called Edom. 31 But Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." 32 And Esau said, "Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?" 33 And Jacob said, "First swear to me"; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright (Genesis 25:27-34).

The final blow to the relationship between Jacob and Esau occurred when Jacob deceived his father into thinking he was Esau, thereby obtaining his father's blessing (Genesis 27). In reality, it was Jacob who was to rule over Esau. Isaac seems to be trying to reverse the fact that Jacob would take the place of the first-born, just as God had indicated (Genesis 25:23). But Rebekah and Jacob were wrong in the way they obtained Isaac's blessing. Once again, Jacob was striving with men and not in a way that commends him.

As a result of his deception, Esau was furious with Jacob, so his parents sent him to Paddan-aram to obtain a wife (Genesis 27:41--28:5). On his way, Jacob had a vision which indicated the land he was leaving was the "**gate of heaven**" (28:10-17). It was to serve as a strong incentive for Jacob to return and not stay permanently in Paddan-aram. After his dramatic vision, Jacob made a covenant with God, one which shows him still striving and failing to rest in God's grace:

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, 21 and I return to my father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God. 22 And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house; and of all that Thou dost give me I will surely give a tenth to Thee" (Genesis 28:20-22).

Some might look at Jacob's promise as a kind of "faith pledge." I see it otherwise. Look at all the "if's." Jacob's commitment to God is based on God's performance in meeting Jacob's needs, as Jacob defines them. *If* God: (1) protects him on his journey, (2) provides him with adequate food and clothing, and (3) brings him home safely to his father's house, *then* Jacob will have the LORD as his God, and then he will give him a tithe. The order is just the opposite of what God requires of us. We are to "**seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,**" and then "**all these things**" (like food and clothing) will be added to us (Matthew 6:33). Consider how Jacob's offer contrasts with these words from our Lord:

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<sup>1</sup> Other Old Testament texts which are profitable for a study of the grace of God are Genesis 6:8; Deuteronomy 8:11-20; Nehemiah 9 (all); Psalm 6:1-3; 103:6-18; Isaiah 30:15-18; Joel 2:11-17; Zechariah 12:10--13:1.

25 “For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25).

Jacob’s “deal” with God is one with which even Satan would agree:

9 Then Satan answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? 10 “Hast Thou not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 But put forth Thy hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse Thee to Thy face” (Job 1:9-11).

And so we find the same old Jacob in Paddan-aram “serving” his uncle Laban. He is once again striving with men, seeking to get ahead at the expense of others. Not until after Jacob leaves Laban’s house and the land of Paddan-aram does he finally come to grips with grace. As Jacob is about to enter into the land of Canaan, he knows he must face his brother Esau, and this poses a considerable threat to his safety. A wrestling match with an angel of the LORD seems to be a significant turning point for Jacob:

22 Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 And he took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had. 24 Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 And when he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” 27 So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” 28 And he said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” 29 Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there. 30 So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” 31 Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh. 32 Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew of the hip (Genesis 32:22-32).

From this account alone, it would be possible to reach the wrong conclusion. We might wrongly suppose that Jacob actually overpowered the angel (an amazing feat!) and that due to Jacob’s persistent striving with men (and God) over the years, he has finally prevailed. God is now at Jacob’s disposal.

But that is not the way it was. We know from the story that this “**angel**” was really God (verse 30). Could Jacob overpower God in a wrestling match? We know further that while the struggle appeared to be an even match, when the time came, the angel struck a crippling blow to Jacob by smiting his thigh so that his hip was dislocated (verse 25). Jacob is now in no position to bargain with God at all. The interpretation of this story is given centuries later by the prophet Hosea speaking to the nation Israel, whom Jacob personified.

1 Ephraim feeds on wind, And pursues the east wind continually; He multiplies lies and violence. Moreover, he makes a covenant with Assyria, And oil is carried to Egypt. 2 The Lord also has a dispute with Judah, And will punish Jacob according to his ways; He will repay him according to his deeds. 3 In the womb he took his brother by the heel, And in his maturity he contended with God. 4 Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed; He wept and sought His favor. He found Him at Bethel, And there He spoke with us, 5 Even the Lord, the God of hosts; The Lord is His name. 6 Therefore, return to your God, Observe kindness and justice, And wait for your God continually (Hosea 12:1-6).

Wayward Israel is being rebuked by the prophet Israel. They are about to be disowned by God for a period of time, the times of the Gentiles. They have not trusted in God nor have they obeyed His covenant with them. They, like the harlot Gomer, are reaping what they have sown. But there is a way back, a way to enter into God’s blessings, into His grace. That way is by humbly beseeching God for grace. This is what Hosea tells the nation Israel that Jacob had to do (remember that Jacob’s name was changed to “**Israel**” in Genesis 32:27-28). All of his life he had been striving with God and with men. He had been trying to get ahead by his own cunning, cheating, and effort. But when the angel struck the crippling blow to Jacob, he had no way to “force” the angel to bless him. All he could do was weep and beg for mercy (for God’s favor). Jacob finally learned how God’s blessings are granted to men--not by grabbing, but by grace. While Jacob quickly forgot this lesson (note how he will cling to his sons in Genesis 37-43), it was nevertheless a significant turning point, for at least once Jacob sought God’s blessing by grace.

### **Jonah and the Grace of God (Jonah 3 and 4)**

Grace was the basis of God's dealings with Israel as it was for His dealings with the Gentiles. When rightly understood, the Law was a gift of divine grace. Israel's entrance into the blessings of God's covenant was to be by grace (Deuteronomy 30:1-14). The other prophets spoke of God's grace as the basis for His dealings with His people and the basis for Israel's hope and praise (Isaiah 30:18-19; Jeremiah 3:12; Joel 2:12-14; Amos 5:15). As a prophet of God, one would expect Jonah to delight in the grace of God. Such is simply not the case.

In Jonah 1, the heathen sailors are gracious to Jonah as they try desperately to save his life at the risk of their own lives. They pray to God, concerned that they not take the life of an innocent man. But Jonah shows no grace toward them. He seems to care little that he has endangered their lives by his rebellion against God. They have to virtually drag the truth from him, that he indeed is a prophet of the one true God, the God who made the heavens and the earth.

In Jonah 2, God spares Jonah's life by a means that appeared to be his destruction--a giant fish. Jonah was drowning. Only moments of life remained. Suddenly he was enveloped in darkness. Around him were slimy walls of flesh. The odor must have been ugly. He had been swallowed by a fish! It was an even slower death which seemed to await Jonah. And then he must have realized the fish was actually his salvation. While inside the fish, Jonah composed a prayer recorded in the second chapter of Jonah. A more careful look at Jonah's prayer reveals it is really a poem. More precisely, it is a psalm. As we look at the marginal references in our Bible, we realize it is a psalm in which Jonah uses many terms and expressions found in the psalms.

However, this "psalm" is like the psalms of the Book of Psalms only in form and in vocabulary. It is not like any of the psalms of the Bible in terms of emphasis or theology. Jonah speaks too much of himself, of his experience, of his danger, of his agony. He speaks too little of God. He speaks of looking and praying toward God's holy temple (verses 4, 7). He speaks in a derogatory manner of pagans and elevates himself in comparison:

8 "Those who regard vain idols Forsake their faithfulness, 9 But I will sacrifice to Thee With the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the Lord" (Jonah 2:8-9).

What is missing is any reference to his own sin or any hint of repentance. This is especially interesting in that Jonah is in "captivity" as a result of his sin, and he does make reference to God's temple. Consider, however, this text which very precisely outlines how a sinful Israelite is to repent:

36 "When they sin against Thee (for there is no man who does not sin) and Thou art angry with them and dost deliver them to an enemy, so that they take them away captive to a land far off or near, 37 if they take thought in the land where they are taken captive, and repent and make supplication to Thee in the land of their captivity, **saying, 'We have sinned, we have committed iniquity, and have acted wickedly'**; 38 if they return to Thee with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their captivity, where they have been taken captive, and pray toward their land which Thou hast given to their fathers, and the city which Thou hast chosen, and toward the house which I have built for Thy name, 39 then hear from heaven, from Thy dwelling place, their prayer and supplications, and maintain their cause, and forgive Thy people who have sinned against Thee" (2 Chronicles 6:36-39, emphasis mine).

Solomon not only indicates that an Israelite who is in a distant country may turn to God's holy temple and pray for forgiveness, he also gives the very words a repentant Jew should use to express that repentance:

37 'We have sinned, we have committed iniquity, and have acted wickedly' (verse 37).

When we look down the corridor of Israel's history, those who truly repented for their sins and the sins of their nation followed this pattern set down by Solomon:

6 Let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father's house have sinned. 7 "We have acted very corruptly against Thee and



have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses (Nehemiah 1:6-7).

33 “However, Thou art just in all that has come upon us; for Thou hast dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly. 34 For our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our fathers have not kept Thy law or paid attention to Thy commandments and Thine admonitions with which Thou hast admonished them” (Nehemiah 9:33-34).

5 We have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly, and rebelled, even turning aside from Thy commandments and ordinances (Daniel 9:5).

Would anyone dare say Jonah’s “psalm” is an expression of repentance? He speaks of the Gentiles as sinners and of himself (and, by inference, all Jews) as righteous (Jonah 2:8-9). From Jonah 1, this is hard to defend. Jonah, the prophet, is acting like a pagan, while the pagan sailors are worshipping the God of Israel.

Some have pointed to the last words of Jonah’s pseudo-psalm as a last ditch expression of repentance:

9 “Salvation is from the LORD” (verse 9).

I think not, although I have only recently come to this conclusion. This statement, “**Salvation is from the LORD,**” is also a citation from the Psalms. Consider the more complete expression of this statement in Psalm 3:

6 I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people Who have set themselves against me round about. 7 Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God! For Thou hast smitten all my enemies on the cheek; Thou hast shattered the teeth of the wicked. 8 Salvation belongs to the Lord; Thy blessing be upon Thy people! Selah (Psalm 3:6-8).

Note especially the last words of verse 8, the words Jonah did not include but which I believe he implied. Jonah wanted God to save *His people* Israel and to condemn the Gentiles to hell (as chapter 4 makes very evident). His words in Psalm 2 express relief more than they express praise, they focus on Jonah more than on God, and they hope for the deliverance of the Jews but not the Gentiles. Remember that Jonah had been commanded to preach to the people of Nineveh and had refused! He did not want these unworthy Gentiles saved, only the worthy Jews.

Does this sound harsh? It is, and it is also true. That is what the Book of Jonah is all about. Jonah the rebellious, unrepentant prophet, is a picture of the nation Israel. He illustrates the refusal of the Jews to be a “**light to the Gentiles,**” to take the good news of God’s grace to the heathen. The Jews thought God had chosen them because they were better, more worthy, and that He had rejected the Gentiles, condemning them to eternal hell because they were not worthy of His blessings.

If Jonah were repentant, he would have turned around; he would have changed his heart and his actions, as the word repentance implies. This means that he would have immediately headed for Nineveh, where God had previously commanded him to go. Instead, chapter 3 begins with a repetition of this command. He is not going to Nineveh until God demands it, again. And so he reluctantly goes to Nineveh, where he proclaims the message God gave to him.<sup>2</sup>

If you want to see genuine repentance, do not look at Jonah; look at the Ninevites. The people of the city believed in God (verse 5) and began to fast. The entire population repented and demonstrated this by fasting. Even the cattle were included in this fast. The king, likewise, repented and fasted, which he appears to do without personally hearing Jonah but having heard his message second hand (see verse 6). The king called the fast, and he led the nation in repentance with a certain sense of confidence that God was gracious and that He might relent their destruction if they did repent. This has good biblical basis:

5 Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, 6 “Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?” declares the Lord. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. 7 At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; 8 if that

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<sup>2</sup> I very much doubt he did so with zeal or with joy. He probably did as poor a job as possible, meeting only the minimum requirement of obedience. I can safely say this on the basis of chapter 4.

nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it” (Jeremiah 18:5-8).

12 “Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping, and mourning; 13 And rend your heart and not your garments.” Now return to the Lord your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, And relenting of evil. 14 Who knows whether He will not turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him, Even a grain offering and a libation For the Lord your God?” (Joel 2:12-14).

And so God did relent of the evil He had threatened through Jonah, and the city was spared (3:10). This is where Jonah really gets steamed at God. Imagine this, Jonah, the prophet, warns men of God’s righteous wrath toward sinners, and this sinner Jonah is angry with God and not even reluctant to fully vent his anger Godward. I do not find God’s grace to the Ninevites so amazing as His grace to Jonah. He should have been a tiny little pile of human ashes by now, and yet here he is, shaking his fist in the face of his God. And God says to him so gently, “**Do you have good reason to be angry?**” (verses 4, 10).

Jonah’s prayer in chapter 4 is absolutely amazing. He protests against God on the basis of His grace, compassion, lovingkindness, and turning from calamity (verse 2). This is the only place in the Bible where a person protests against God rather than praises Him for these attributes. Such attributes are the essence of God’s glory according to Exodus 34:6. They become the basis for men’s intercession, requesting divine forgiveness for sinners (Numbers 14:18). They are the basis for men’s repentance (Deuteronomy 4:31; Joel 2:12-14) and the reason God perseveres with this stiff-necked people (Nehemiah 9:17, 31). They are the basis for God’s acts of salvation (Psalm 116:5) and forgiveness (Psalm 103:8-10). They are the motivation and basis for men’s praise of God (Psalm 111:4; 145:8). Yet Jonah finds these attributes repulsive and disgusting, the basis for protest to God.

As the story unfolds, we finally find Jonah happy. In spite of the fact that God has forgiven the Ninevites and called off the day of destruction, Jonah constructs a little booth outside the city, hoping God will still destroy it, and he will have the pleasure of watching it go up in smoke. In the intense heat (which Jonah had no reason to suffer), God graciously gave Jonah a plant to provide him with shade. And then God took the plant away, which made Jonah even more angry. God inquired of Jonah as to whether it was right for him to be angry regarding the plant. Jonah assured God he had every right.

For a long time I thought Jonah’s sin was that of selfishness and preoccupation with his own comfort. Finally, I have come to see what I think is the underlying message of this book. Jonah was angry about God’s grace. He was angry that God showed grace to the Ninevites. He was happy that God showed grace to him in the shade plant, but he became furious when God took it away. Jonah did not deserve that plant, and he most certainly did not earn it. It was a gift of God’s grace, and God could give it or, just as freely, take it away.

Jonah wanted God’s blessings. He expected God’s blessings. And he was angry when God took these blessings away or gave them to others. Jonah wanted God’s grace, but not as grace. He wanted the benefits and blessings of God, but as one who deserved them rather than as an unworthy sinner who did not deserve them. This is what angered Jonah about God’s dealings with the Ninevites. He had to admit this was grace, but he loathed grace. Grace humbles the recipient of God’s blessings. Grace indicates the unworthiness of the recipient. Jonah wanted to be blessed, but not on the grounds of grace.

Jonah’s problem is precisely that of the Jews, both then and now. Jonah was self-righteous. Self-righteous people do not want to confess their sins and beg God for grace. They think they are worthy of God’s blessings, and they are only angry when God does not jump through their hoops and fulfill all their desires. Jonah, like the Israelites of his day, and like the Jews of Jesus’ day, were self-righteous sinners who expected God’s blessings as though they were deserved, and they were angered whenever God showed grace to the unworthy. Jonah, like many then and now, loathed the grace of God.

### The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ

2 And early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. 3 And the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the midst, 4 they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. 5 Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" 6 And they were saying this, testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground. 7 But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And again He stooped down, and wrote on the ground. 9 And when they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the midst. 10 And straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" 11 And she said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more" (John 8:2-11).

We know that when our Lord came to this earth, He was the personification of grace and truth (John 1:14). One incident in the life and ministry of our Lord tells us much about the grace which our Lord shows to men. While He was in the temple teaching, the scribes and Pharisees sought to embarrass Him by dragging before Him a woman who had just been caught in the act of adultery<sup>3</sup>--the "**very act**" (verse 4). Being self-righteous, these hypocrites were not worried about the wrath of God toward their own sin, because they looked upon others--such as this woman--as sinners. Since Jesus showed such compassion on sinners and since He spent so much time with them, the scribes and Pharisees sought to put Jesus in an impossible situation. They sought to make Him either look soft on sin or to take a hard line on sin and lose face with the people by putting this woman to death.

They reminded Him that the Law required this woman to die. They were right, of course, but it also required the death of the man (see Leviticus 20:10ff.; Deuteronomy 22:22ff.). They then demanded that He give His opinion as to what should be done with this woman. Would Jesus dare challenge the Law of Moses?

Jesus was more interested in the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees than in putting this woman to death. If sinners were to die (for the wages of sin is death--the soul that sinneth shall die), then let the sinless one throw the first stone. No one could quite work up the courage to claim sinlessness. No one dared claim to be righteous enough to pronounce judgment and begin the execution. And so all this woman's accusers disappeared one by one, from the oldest to the youngest.

Jesus then spoke to the woman, asking her where her accusers were. She responded there were none left to accuse her. Jesus then said, "**Neither do I condemn you; go your way; from now on sin no more.**" It is clear from these words that this woman had sinned. Why then did our Lord not condemn her? He alone was "**without sin.**" He alone could have cast the first stone. Instead, He told her He did not condemn her and that she was to go her way, but not to continue her life of sin.

Why could the Lord Jesus do and say these things? Why didn't Jesus obey the Law by casting a stone at this woman? The reason is simple and can be summed up in but one word: grace. Jesus' purpose in His first coming was not condemnation but salvation. He came to seek and to save sinners. He could rightly refuse to cast a stone at this woman, not because the Law was wrong, but because His purpose in coming was to suffer the death sentence Himself. He came to die for that woman's sins, and thus He would most certainly not cast a stone at her. He was not minimizing her sin, or its consequences, but rather He was anticipating that day when He would bear the punishment for sins on the cross of Calvary. That, my friend, is the grace of God, the grace which our Lord came to provide through His substitutionary death in the sinner's place.

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<sup>3</sup> How interesting that the man was not brought forward. Surely they knew who the man was if she had been caught in the "very act". What hypocrisy!

## Conclusion

There is no word sweeter to the sinner's ears than the word *grace*. And there is nothing more repulsive to the self-righteous than grace, for the self-righteous deny their sins and demand God's blessings as those who deserve them.

Have you ever thought you were too sinful for God to save? Then grace is the good news that God has for you. *Your salvation is not based upon how good you are, and your salvation is not prohibited by how sinful you have been.* Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and the apostle Paul tells us he wins first prize for being the “**chief of sinners**” (1 Timothy 1:15). You will have to stand in line behind Paul (and me) if you wish to think of yourself as too sinful. You are never too sinful to be saved, only too good, too self-righteous, too self-sufficient. Nowhere is grace more eloquent, more glorious, more precious, than when it stands in contrast to sin--our sin.

Before we become too smug in our condemnation of men like Jonah, let me ask if you have ever been mad at God. I venture to say that you have, whether you recognize and admit it or not. And why were you mad at God? Because you felt God did not give you what you deserved. You were mad because God was not dealing with you on the basis of something other than grace. Grace is not obliged to give the unworthy sinner anything. And the unworthy sinner has no grounds for protest if God withholds His grace, for it was not something he earned or deserved anyway.

Grace is such wonderful news, such a glorious offer, to those who are sinners, because they know they deserve nothing other than God's wrath. Grace is only repulsive to the self-righteous. Grace is also the basis for humility. Grace declares that all men are equal in their lost condition. “**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” (Romans 3:23). All are worthy of suffering eternally in hell. Every sinner is lost and doomed and soon to be damned, apart from the grace of God. Grace not only declares all to be equally lost, grace declares all who are saved are equal as well. We are not saved by good works, by our efforts or merits. We are saved by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, by His substitutionary death in our place, and His resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father. Grace puts all men on level ground. There is no room for boasting regarding grace, except for boasting in the One who has been gracious to us.

Grace is the rule of life, and it is also the dominant theme of our lives as we live in this world and serve God in His church. We are to show grace to others, just as God has been gracious to us. Grace is also under attack by those like Jonah and the Jewish religious leaders of New Testament times. We must always be on guard against those who would undermine grace.

Of all the truths which should stir your soul, prompt your worship and service, and produce humility and gratitude, it is the truth that God is a God of grace, and that grace has been manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. *If you would receive the grace of God, you must do so by accepting the gracious gift of salvation God has provided in and through Christ.* May our hearts and minds be continually awe-struck with the “wonderful grace of Jesus.”

## Quotable Quotes

“In God mercy and grace are one; but as they reach us they are seen as two, related but not identical.

“As mercy is God's goodness confronting human misery and guilt, so grace is His goodness directed toward human debt and demerit. It is by His grace that God imputes merit where none previously existed and declares no debt to be where one had been before.

“Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving. It is a self-existent principle inherent in the divine nature and appears to us as a self-caused propensity to pity the wretched, spare the guilty, welcome the outcast, and bring into favor those who were before under just disapprobation. Its use to us sinful men is to save us and make us sit together in heavenly places to demonstrate to the ages the exceeding riches of God's kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 100.

“It is the eternal and absolute free favour of God, manifested in the vouchsafement of spiritual and eternal blessings to the guilty and the unworthy.” Abraham Booth, *The Reign of Grace* (as cited by Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 60).

“Grace is a provision for men who are so fallen that they cannot lift the axe of justice, so corrupt that they cannot change their own natures, so averse to God that they cannot turn to Him, so blind that they cannot see Him, so deaf that they cannot hear Him, and so dead that He Himself must open their graves and lift them into resurrection.” G. S. Bishop, as cited by Pink, *Attributes*, p. 64.

“Since mankind was banished from the eastward Garden, none has ever returned to the divine favor except through the sheer goodness of God. And wherever grace found any man it was always by Jesus Christ. Grace indeed came by Jesus Christ, but it did not wait for His birth in the manger or His death on the cross before it became operative. Christ is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. The first man in human history to be reinstated in the fellowship of God came through faith in Christ. In olden times men looked forward to Christ’s redeeming work; in later times they gaze back upon it, but always they came and they come by grace, through faith.” Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 102.

“But nothing more riles the natural man and brings to the surface his innate and inveterate enmity against God than to press upon him the eternality, the freeness, and the absolute sovereignty of Divine grace. That God should have formed His purpose from everlasting, without in anywise consulting the creature, is too abasing for the unbroken heart. That grace cannot be earned or won by any efforts of man is too self-emptying for self-righteousness. And that grace singles out whom it pleases to be its favoured objects, arouses hot protests from haughty rebels.” Pink, *Attributes of God*, p. 61.

## Lesson 9: The Sovereignty of God in History

### Introduction

Everyone in my family is convinced that God led a collie named Levi to our door. His name was engraved on the tag hanging around his neck when he arrived. Can you imagine a dog named Levi finding the Strauss house? Our youngest son had been praying for a dog for nearly three years, but we had laid down some stringent requirements. He had to be housebroken. He had to be obedient. And he had to be a gentle, people-dog in order to live in a pastor's home where visitors come and go regularly.

When my wife returned the dog to its owner, whose address was also engraved on the tag, she said kiddingly, "If you ever want to get rid of this dog, please let us know." The surprising reply was, "I do. I'm looking for a good home for him right now." My wife asked if we could think about it overnight. To our delight, Levi got out of his house and found his way to our residence again the next morning. This time we decided he could stay. When the owner brought us his papers, we learned that he had been conceived at the approximate time our son began to pray for a dog, that he was born on my wife's birthday, and that he was an honor graduate of obedience school. No one will ever convince us that Levi's coming was anything other than the gracious work of our sovereign God. Incidentally, he did meet the other requirements as well.<sup>1</sup>

Virtually all Christians give at least verbal assent to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. There are simply too many texts which teach this truth to deny it:

19 The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; And His sovereignty rules over all (Psalm 103:19). 3 But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3). 5 For I know that the LORD is great, And that our Lord is above all gods. 6 Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps (Psalm 135:5-6).

The meaning of sovereignty could be summed up in this way:

*To be sovereign is to possess supreme power and authority so that one is in complete control and can accomplish whatever he pleases.*

A number of similar definitions of sovereignty can be found in books on the attributes of God:

"The dictionaries tell us that *sovereign* means chief or highest, supreme in power, superior in position, independent of and unlimited by anyone else."<sup>2</sup>

"Furthermore, His sovereignty requires that He be absolutely free, which means simply that He must be free to do whatever He wills to do anywhere at any time to carry out His eternal purpose in every single detail without interference. Were He less than free He must be less than sovereign.

Grasping the idea of unqualified freedom requires a vigorous effort of the mind. We are not psychologically conditioned to understand freedom except in its imperfect forms. Our concepts of it have been shaped in a world where no absolute freedom exists. Here each natural object is dependent upon many other objects, and that dependence limits its freedom."<sup>3</sup>

"God is said to be absolutely free because no one and no thing can hinder Him or compel Him or stop Him. He is able to do as He pleases always, everywhere, forever. To be thus free means also that He must possess universal authority. That He has unlimited power we know from the Scriptures and may deduce from certain other of His attributes."<sup>4</sup>

Subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent; God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, none can hinder Him. So His own Word expressly declares: '**My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure**' (Isa. 46:10); 'He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand' (Dan. 4:34). Divine sovereignty means that God is God in fact, as well as in

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<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Strauss, *The Joy of Knowing God* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1984), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

name, that He is on the Throne of the universe, directing all things, working all things ‘**after the counsel of His own will**’ (Eph. 1:11).”<sup>5</sup>

“God’s supremacy over the works of His hands is vividly depicted in Scripture. Inanimate matter, irrational creatures, all perform their Maker’s bidding. At His pleasure the Red Sea divided and its waters stood up as walls (Ex. 14); and the earth opened her mouth and guilty rebels went down alive into the pit (Nu. 14). When He so ordered, the sun stood still (Josh. 10); and on another occasion went *backward* ten degrees on the dial of Ahaz (Isa. 38:8). To exemplify His supremacy, He made ravens carry food to Elijah (I Kings 17), iron to swim on top of the waters (II Kings 6:5), lions to be tame when Daniel was cast into their den, fire to burn not when the three Hebrews were flung into its flames. Thus ‘**Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did He in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places**’ (Psa. 135:6).”<sup>6</sup>

In a world reluctant to acknowledge the existence of God, one should not expect the unbeliever to embrace the doctrine of God’s sovereignty:

“The ‘god’ of this twentieth century no more resembles the Supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The ‘god’ who is now talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday School, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most of the so-called Bible Conferences is the figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. . . . A ‘god’ whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity, and so far from being a fit object of worship, merits naught but contempt.”<sup>7</sup>

In the church, one can expect the Christian to embrace the doctrine of the sovereignty of God as both biblical and true. This may be done in principle but not necessarily in practice. Our problems with God’s sovereignty most often come where the “rubber meets the road.”

God is truly and perfectly sovereign. That means He is the highest and greatest being there is, He controls everything, His will is absolute, and He does whatever He pleases. When we hear that stated, we can understand it reasonably well, and we can usually handle it until God allows something that we do not like. Then our normal reaction is to resist the doctrine of His sovereignty. Rather than finding comfort in it, we find that it gets us upset with God. If He can do whatever He pleases, why does He allow us to suffer? Our problem is a misunderstanding of the doctrine and an inadequate knowledge of God.<sup>8</sup>

It is vitally important for every Christian to understand the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. I have chosen to consider the subject in two lessons. The first lesson considers the sovereignty of God over the nations of the world in history, and the next reflects on the sovereignty of God in salvation. The attribute of God’s sovereignty troubles many people; it troubles many Christians. *But the sovereignty of God is crucial because it is taught in the Bible and because it is the basis for godly living.* We must look to the Word of God and the Spirit of God to teach us what we need to know about God’s sovereignty.

As I searched the Scriptures for a concise definition of divine sovereignty, I was surprised to learn where the definition was found. It was not in the New Testament, not from the pen of the apostle Paul, not from Moses in the Law, and not from one of the great prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah. The clearest definition of God’s sovereignty comes from the lips of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. There we find not a begrudging acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty, but an expression of worship and praise:

34 “But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom endures from generation to generation. 35 And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’” (Daniel 4:34-35).

This acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God is made by a man who knows more of human sovereignty than any American ever could. Among the kings of history, this king is “***the king of kings***”

<sup>5</sup> A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Swengel, Pa.: Reiner Publications, 1968), p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Strauss, *The Joy of Knowing God*, pp. 114-115.

(Daniel 2:37). He is the “**head of gold**” (Daniel 2:38). In comparison with his kingdom, the remaining world empires are described as “inferior” (see 2:39-43). When Daniel spoke to Belshazzar of the kingdom of his father, Nebuchadnezzar, he described the extent of his dominion:

18 “O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory, and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. And because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations, and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed, and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated, and whomever he wished he humbled (Daniel 5:18-19).

In our world, we have no political leader or ruler who even approaches the kind of human sovereignty we see in Nebuchadnezzar. The Office of President of the United States is a position of great power, but it is not an example of sovereignty. Former President Richard Nixon was not free to run the country as he saw fit. His role in the Watergate conspiracy cost him the White House. Presidents may be criticized (if not removed from office) for sexual or moral improprieties. They certainly do not find it possible to pass every bill, create every program, or appoint every official that pleases them.

Nebuchadnezzar was a man of great military and political power. He ruled the nation (Babylon) with an iron fist, and Babylon dominated all other world powers of that day. He was the commander who defeated and destroyed Jerusalem and who led most of the Jews into Babylonian captivity. The people of Judah seemed insignificant and impotent against such a great man as Nebuchadnezzar, and indeed they were. But the God of the Jews is the One true God and the One great God. God chose to demonstrate His sovereignty over history and over all the nations of the earth by bringing Nebuchadnezzar to his knees in submission to and the worship of Himself.

This lesson will focus on Daniel 2-4, three chapters which describe the three events which brought Nebuchadnezzar to his knees in submission to the God of the Jews. We will see from these events how God demonstrated His sovereignty over the nations of the earth, and we shall see how God is sovereign in history.

## **Daniel 2: Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream and a Divine Revelation**

As a result of Israel’s persistent rebellion against God and her failure to heed the warnings of the prophets, God raises up Babylon to defeat and destroy Judah and Jerusalem through a series of military campaigns:

9 Jehoiachin was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned three months and ten days in Jerusalem, and he did evil in the sight of the LORD. 10 And at the turn of the year King Nebuchadnezzar sent and brought him to Babylon with the valuable articles of the house of the LORD, and he made his kinsman Zedekiah king over Judah and Jerusalem. 11 Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12 And he did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD. 13 And he also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear allegiance by God. But he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel. 14 Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. 15 And the LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; 16 but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. 17 Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. 18 And all the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. 19 Then they burned the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its fortified buildings with fire, and destroyed all its valuable articles. 20 And those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia. 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete (2 Chronicles 36:9-21; see also Jeremiah 25:1-14; 29:15-20).



In one of the early attacks on Jerusalem, Daniel was taken captive (Daniel 1:1-7). Daniel and his three friends recognized their captivity was God's judgment on the nation for its sin, and they knew that after 70 years God would once again restore the people to their land (see Daniel 9:1-2). They committed to keep themselves pure from the idolatry of Babylon, and they did not eat of the normal provisions of food for captives like themselves (Daniel 1:8-16). These four young men were thus distinguished from the others for their wisdom, and Daniel was able also to interpret dreams and visions (1:17-21).

One night Nebuchadnezzar had a dream he did not understand which caused him much distress. When he summoned the wise men of the land, he wanted to be certain the interpretation they gave him was genuine, so he required them to first tell him what his dream was and then give him the interpretation. The response of his wise men is significant:

10 The Chaldeans answered the king and said, "There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king, inasmuch as no great king or ruler has *ever* asked anything like this of any magician, conjurer or Chaldean. 11 Moreover, the thing which the king demands is difficult, and *there is no one else who could declare it to the king except gods, whose dwelling place is not with mortal flesh.*" 12 Because of this the king became indignant and very furious, and gave orders to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. 13 So the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain; and they looked for Daniel and his friends to kill them (Daniel 2:10-13, emphasis mine).

How God loves to reveal His sovereignty against the backdrop of man's weaknesses and limitations! The king did not know the meaning of his dream, and the wise men of the land knew it was humanly impossible for them to know what the king had dreamed. He was asking of mere men that which only the "**gods**" could perform. This was a task for the "**gods.**" The king was pressing his sovereignty too far by asking mere men to do what only "**gods**" could do. But Daniel was a servant of the Most High God, the sovereign God of the universe. His God could reveal the dream and its meaning.

Daniel was placed in a situation where he must act, for all the wise men were condemned to die. Daniel and his three friends first prayed that God would reveal the dream and its meaning. All of this is directly related to verses 17-21 in chapter 1. Daniel prayed to the sovereign God and then praised Him for the revelation of the dream.

19 Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven; 20 Daniel answered and said, "Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, For wisdom and power belong to Him. 21 And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to wise men, And knowledge to men of understanding. 22 It is He who reveals the profound and hidden things; He knows what is in the darkness, And the light dwells with Him. 23 To Thee, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, For Thou hast given me wisdom and power; Even now Thou hast made known to me what we requested of Thee, For Thou hast made known to us the king's matter" (Daniel 2:19-23).

The dream was not the product of Daniel's wisdom alone; it was revealed by God (2:28). Daniel then reveals the dream to Nebuchadnezzar, along with its meaning:

31 "You, O king, were looking and behold, there was a single great statue; that statue, which was large and of extraordinary splendor, was standing in front of you, and its appearance was awesome. 32 The head of that statue was made of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze, 33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. 34 You continued looking until a stone was cut out without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay, and crushed them. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were crushed all at the same time, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

36 "This was the dream; now we shall tell its interpretation before the king. 37 *You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory; 38 and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has given them into your hand and has caused you to rule over them all. You are the head of gold.* 39 And after you there will arise another kingdom inferior to you, then another third kingdom of bronze, which will rule over all the earth. 40 Then there will be a fourth kingdom as strong as iron; inasmuch as iron crushes and shatters all things, so, like iron that breaks in pieces, it will crush and break all these in pieces. 41 And in that you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it will be a divided kingdom; but it will have in it the toughness of iron, inasmuch as you saw the iron mixed with common clay. 42 And as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of pottery, so some of the kingdom will be strong and part of it will be brittle. 43 And in that you saw the iron mixed with common clay, they will combine with one another in the seed of

men; but they will not adhere to one another, even as iron does not combine with pottery. *44 And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever.* *45 Inasmuch as you saw that a stone was cut out of the mountain without hands and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what will take place in the future; so the dream is true, and its interpretation is trustworthy."*

*46 Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face and did homage to Daniel, and gave orders to present to him an offering and fragrant incense. 47 The king answered Daniel and said, "Surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery" (Daniel 2:31-47, emphasis mine).*

The king's words indicate his recognition that the God of Daniel is a sovereign God. Daniel's "god" is not just "God," but the "**God of gods.**" He is the God who is sovereign not only over heavenly powers, but over earthly powers as well. And so he also refers to God as "**Lord of kings.**"

In addition, Nebuchadnezzar praises Daniel's God for being "**a revealer of mysteries.**" Daniel's God enabled him to know the king's dream and its interpretation. But more is involved because of the subject matter of the dream. The dream, as revealed and interpreted by Daniel, was about Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom and about others which would follow it. His was the greatest of these kingdoms, but it was a kingdom that would, nevertheless, end. Other inferior kingdoms would follow. In the end, an eternal kingdom would be built, as it were, on the ashes of all the preceding kingdoms. The "**head of gold**" was great, but the "**stone made without hands**" (2:34-35, 44-45) was the greatest. The kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar was great, but the kingdom of the future was one that would "**endure forever**" (2:44).

Nebuchadnezzar recognized that his kingdom was inferior to the eternal kingdom which would be established later and that he was inferior to the "**stone**" who would establish that kingdom. He also realized that the God who made known these future kingdoms was the God who was sovereign over history. Only such a God could reveal future kings and kingdoms, for only a God who controls history can foretell that history centuries in advance.

*9 "Behold, the former things have come to pass, Now I declare new things; Before they spring forth I proclaim them to you" (Isaiah 42:9). 5 "Therefore I declared them to you long ago, Before they took place I proclaimed them to you, Lest you should say, 'My idol has done them, And my graven image and my molten image have commanded them'" (Isaiah 48:5).*

Nebuchadnezzar seems to have recognized that only a God who is sovereign over history can foretell that history before it has come to pass. But there is still more for him to learn about divine sovereignty.

### **Daniel 3: Nebuchadnezzar's Image and Daniel's Three Friends**

It seems the fact that Nebuchadnezzar was the "**head of gold,**" revealed to the king in chapter 2, went to his head. The king seems to have focused only on his greatness, not on the greatness of God and the kingdom yet to be established on earth. He made an image of gold and commanded all to fall before it in worship (2:1-6). All who were given the musical cue fell down in worship of the image, except those faithful Jews like Daniel's three friends who were accused before Nebuchadnezzar (2:7-12). In a rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned the three and gave them one final chance to avoid his wrath (2:13-15). His final statement sets the stage for him to learn yet another lesson concerning the sovereignty of God:

*14 Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? 15 Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you will not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?" (Daniel 3:14-15, emphasis mine)*

Nebuchadnezzar had apparently forgotten that his sovereignty was relative and that it had been divinely bestowed. Among men, Nebuchadnezzar had no superior and not even an equal. As king of Babylon, his power was unchallenged by men. But when he erected the golden image and commanded men to worship

it, he stepped beyond the realm of authority God had given to men. If he was not seeking the worship of himself *as a god*, he was certainly compelling men of all nations to worship his gods. He seems to be linking his greatness and his power to his gods. In so doing, he denied the One true God, the God of Israel, the God whom he previously acknowledged as a “**God of gods**” and “**Lord of kings**” (2:47). While Daniel’s three friends were willing to obey Nebuchadnezzar as the king whom God had placed in authority over them, they were not willing to worship his gods or to worship him as a god. They had to obey the One true God, even if it meant disobeying such a powerful king as Nebuchadnezzar:

16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. 17 If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that *we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up*” (Daniel 3:16-18, emphasis mine).

The response of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego to Nebuchadnezzar is instructive concerning the sovereignty of God and submission. When they chose to disobey this king, they did so as an act of submission to the One who has absolute sovereignty, the God of Israel. And even when they must “**obey God rather than men**” (see Acts 5:29), they still speak to the king with due respect. Their response to Nebuchadnezzar reveals the depth of their understanding of the sovereignty of their God. Their words express their confidence in God’s absolute sovereignty. He is able to do whatever He wishes. He does not take orders from men; He does as He pleases:

3 But our God is in the heavens;  
He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3).

5 For I know that the LORD is great,  
And that our Lord is above all gods.

6 Whatever the LORD pleases, He does,  
In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps (Psalm 135:5-6).

Because the sovereign God is able to do as He pleases, these three servants of God are not about to pronounce just what God will do. That is a matter of His good pleasure. He will do with them as He pleases. They are convinced that He can and will deliver them from Nebuchadnezzar’s hand, but this deliverance could take different forms. He could deliver them from being cast into the furnace. He could deliver them through the furnace (as He does), or He could deliver them through death, raising them in the last day. How He will deliver them they do not know. Their deliverance is within God’s sovereign purpose, and they make no effort to indicate what this might be. That is God’s business, for He is sovereign.

Nebuchadnezzar was enraged by the response of these three men who dared to defy his “sovereign” decree. He ordered his servants to heat the furnace seven times hotter and then throw the three men into it (3:19-20). The fire was so intense the king’s servants attending it were themselves killed by the heat. Once the men were in the furnace, what the king saw when he looked into the furnace completely astounded him:

24 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he responded and said to his high officials, “Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “Certainly, O king.” 25 He answered and said, “Look! I see four men loosed and walking about in the midst of the fire without harm, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!” (Daniel 3:24-25).

Would Nebuchadnezzar command these Hebrews to bow down to his golden image and worship his gods? The fourth person in the furnace with these three men appeared as one of the gods! Obviously, the “God” of these three men was greater than the “gods” of Nebuchadnezzar. What “**god is there who can deliver them out of the king’s hand?**” Nebuchadnezzar challenged (2:15). Their God, the God of the Jews, did deliver them.

Seeing the hand of God deliver the three men he had attempted to intimidate with his power, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the men released. When they emerged from the furnace, he observed that these men were not harmed or even affected by the fire in any way. The intense heat and flames which smote

the king's servants (3:22) did not so much as sing a hair on one of these three Hebrews. Not even the smell of fire was on them. Now Nebuchadnezzar speaks of their "god" (see verse 15) as the "Most High God." He once again acknowledges the God of Israel to be the sovereign God, the "God of gods" and "Lord of kings" (2:47).

28 Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king's command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God. 29 Therefore, I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way" (Daniel 3:28-29).

### **Daniel 4: Caviar to Crabgrass**

The fourth chapter of Daniel is the final crowning event in God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. You will notice that this chapter is told in part by king Nebuchadnezzar himself (see verses 1-18). Nebuchadnezzar confesses his arrogance and pride and his humbling by the sovereign hand of God. The chapter begins with Nebuchadnezzar's praise of the sovereign God of Israel:

1 Nebuchadnezzar the king to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language that live in all the earth: "May your peace abound! 2 It has seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me. 3 How great are His signs, and how mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation" (Daniel 4:1-3).

Nebuchadnezzar's "fall" takes place some time after he was warned of his humbling by God in a dream which greatly troubled him (4:5). All the wise men of Babylon were unable to interpret the dream even though he related it to them (4:7). When Daniel was brought before the king, Nebuchadnezzar described his vision:

10 'Now these were the visions in my mind as I lay on my bed: I was looking, and behold, there was a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. 11 The tree grew large and became strong, And its height reached to the sky, And it was visible to the end of the whole earth. 12 Its foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, And in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, And the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches, And all living creatures fed themselves from it. 13 I was looking in the visions in my mind as I lay on my bed, and behold, an angelic watcher, a holy one, descended from heaven. 14 He shouted out and spoke as follows: "Chop down the tree and cut off its branches, Strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit; Let the beasts flee from under it, and the birds from its branches. 15 Yet leave the stump with its roots in the ground, But with a band of iron and bronze around it in the new grass of the field; And let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, And let him share with the beasts in the grass of the earth. 16 Let his mind be changed from that of a man, And let a beast's mind be given to him, and let seven periods of time pass over him. 17 This sentence is by the decree of the angelic watchers, And the decision is a command of the holy ones, in order that the living may know That the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, And bestows it on whom He wishes, and sets over it the lowliest of men." 18 This is the dream which I, King Nebuchadnezzar, have seen. Now you, Belteshazzar, tell me its interpretation, inasmuch as none of the wise men of my kingdom is able to make known to me the interpretation; but you are able, for a spirit of the holy gods is in you' (4:10-18).

When Daniel heard the dream the king had received, he was greatly troubled also for he recognized that the vision was a warning to the king of a most humbling sentence God would bring upon him in the future. It is clear Daniel is submissive toward his king and desires his best interests. He does not delight in what will happen to the king. Nebuchadnezzar encouraged Daniel to speak freely about the meaning of this vision. Daniel then proceeded to inform the king about the dream. The great tree which the king saw represented him, the great king of Babylon. Its size and strength and the creatures which it sustained all symbolized the power and majesty of his kingdom. These images spoke of his "sovereignty" over the earth:

22 "It is you, O king; for you have become great and grown strong, and your majesty has become great and reached to the sky and your dominion to the end of the earth" (4:22).

As was evident to the king by Daniel's alarm over this dream, there was a message of warning, the threat of a dramatic fall:

23 "And in that the king saw an angelic watcher, a holy one, descending from heaven and saying, "Chop down the tree and destroy it; yet leave the stump with its roots in the ground, but with a band of iron and bronze around it in the new grass of the field, and let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him share with the beasts of the field until seven periods of time pass over him"; 24 this is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king: 25 that you be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven; and seven periods of time will pass over you, . . . ." (Daniel 4:23-25).

Just as the king's position of greatness was given to him by God, it was also to be taken away and the king thereby humbled for seven years. The majesty and splendor the king once enjoyed would be exchanged for the humiliation of beastly appearance and conduct. All of this was to be for the king's good, to teach him humility. He was to learn that human sovereignty is bestowed upon men through divine sovereignty:

25 ". . . until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes" (Daniel 4:25b).

Whatever sovereignty the king of Babylon possessed was a limited sovereignty and a delegated sovereignty. The king's position and power was not due to his greatness but rather due to the greatness of God who gave him his position of power.

In this word of warning, there was also a two-fold message of hope. *First*, the king was told how he might avoid the fate of which his dream warned.

27 "Therefore, O king, may my advice be pleasing to you: break away now from your sins by doing righteousness, and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, in case there may be a prolonging of your prosperity" (Daniel 4:27).

This instruction is hardly different from that which the prophets Amos and Micah gave to the nation Israel:

21 "I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. 23 Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. 24 But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24).

8 He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).

The nation Israel had been promised sovereignty over the nations of the world (Genesis 18:17-19; 22:17; 24:60; 27:29; Deuteronomy 15:6; 28:7-14; see also Isaiah 66). Power was given to Nebuchadnezzar (and to Israel) so he might deliver the oppressed and care for the helpless. In his vanity and pride, Nebuchadnezzar seems to have gone the way of the world, using his power to oppress the helpless rather than care for them. If he would repent of his pride and use his God-given power as God would have him do, then there would be no need for the humiliation of which this dream warned. He might avoid God's chastening if he would repent and rule righteously.

There is a *second* message of hope. Even if Nebuchadnezzar were to ignore this warning, and even though he might be humbled by becoming beastly, this was only for a time--for seven years. This humbling work would then bear the fruit of repentance, and thus the king's former sovereignty would be restored. Nebuchadnezzar was offered the hope of restoration if he repented--at the time of his warning or after the time of his humiliation.

By Nebuchadnezzar's own confession, he did not heed the warning God gave him through the dream and Daniel's interpretation. A year later, he foolishly took pride in his sovereignty as though he were the one responsible for his success. As a result, the dream came true:

29 “Twelve months later he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon. 30 The king reflected and said, ‘Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?’ 31 While the word was in the king’s mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, 32 and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes.’ 33 Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until his hair had grown like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws (Daniel 4:29-33).

I know of no greater humiliation than what this great king had to undergo nor of another human being who has undergone such a malady. Some still attempt to find an instance in history when such a malady occurred, as though we might then be assured of the accuracy of the Bible’s description. (They also try to find a man who was swallowed by a great fish!) I am inclined to think this was a unique, one-time phenomenon, which points all the more to a sovereign intervention of God into human history. The exact ailment is hard to fully understand because the description of Nebuchadnezzar is spoken of in terms of what he looked like, not what ailment he actually had. He did not grow feathers; his hair was long and bushy so that it looked feather-like. His nails were not bird’s claws; they were so long they were like bird’s claws. On top of all this, the king ate grass, *like* cattle, and was obviously out of his mind.

Whatever the king’s ailment, it accomplished its divine purpose in the precise time frame indicated--seven years. The king looked heaven-ward, and his sanity returned. He immediately praised God as the Most High. He confessed that He alone is sovereign and that He does what He wills so that no one should dare to challenge His deeds (verses 34-35).

### Conclusion

We have been considering the sovereignty of God as taught in chapters 2-4 in the Book of Daniel. The sovereignty of God was a truth the disobedient Jews in Babylon needed to understand, and it is also a truth desperately needed today. Let us consider how the sovereignty of God related to the Jews in the Babylonian captivity, and later, how God’s sovereignty applies to us today.

God is sovereign over secular governments. Throughout the history of Israel, God used the pagan nations to accomplish His purposes. God used Egypt to preserve and proliferate the nation Israel for 400 years before they were to possess the promised land. God used the hard-hearted Pharaoh to display His greatness and power. He used the surrounding nations to chasten Israel when the nation fell into sin and disobedience. He used the nations of Assyria and Babylon to lead the Jews into captivity. Nebuchadnezzar was even called God’s “**servant**” (Jeremiah 25:9; 27:6; 43:10). The sacking of Judah and Jerusalem was no fluke of history; it was no mere fate. It was the outworking of the plan and purpose of the sovereign God of Israel to achieve His purposes, to fulfill His promises and prophecies.

The sovereignty of God was important to the Jews, as it is to us, because it is the basis for our assurance that God’s prophecies concerning His future kingdom will be fulfilled. The vision God gave to Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 2 was of the coming of the eternal kingdom, which Christ, “**the stone made without hands,**” would establish. It was to be established by abolishing the present kingdoms of men. Only a God who is sovereign over history could fulfill the prophecies of the coming kingdom of God. No wonder the sovereignty of God is such a prominent theme in Daniel. Daniel is a book of history and prophecy. In the historical portions, God’s sovereignty is demonstrated. In the prophetic portions, God’s sovereignty is not only necessary; it is assumed. The God who has shown Himself sovereign over the nations is the God who promises to establish His kingdom over all nations.

Here is a lesson we need to learn and be constantly reminded of in our twentieth century. We live in a day of chaos and change. The USSR has virtually dissolved before our eyes. The Berlin Wall has been torn down. Nations are in civil war, and thousands of innocent lives are being sacrificed as we look on,

helplessly it would seem. Christians seem to be shaken when a Democrat is elected to the highest office in the land. It is as though God's sovereignty is not believed.

Our problem is not new. It is the problem of assuming that God is powerless to work out His plan and purposes where pagans are in power. This was the error of Abraham which prompted him to lie about the identity of his wife, passing her off as being merely his sister:

10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?" 11 And Abraham said, *because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place; and they will kill me because of my wife.* 12 Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife" (Genesis 20:10-12, emphasis mine).

Not only did God use Nebuchadnezzar to chasten His people, God actually brought this pagan king to his knees. God "subjected" this sovereign king to Himself. God brought him to faith. This nation Israel was to be a "**light to the Gentiles.**" They were to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, for God's salvation was not for Jews only. They refused to do so, and so God brought about the evangelization of the Gentiles through the unbelief and rebellion of the Jews. The sin of the nation led to their subjugation and captivity in Babylon. There, godly saints like Daniel bore witness to the God of Israel, and even this sovereign king came to bow the knee to Him in worship and adoration. God is not only sovereign among His people and in the land of Canaan, God is sovereign over all the earth and heaven as well!

This must mean that God is sovereign over the decisions of the President of the United States, over the laws passed by Congress, and even over the decisions reached by the Supreme Court. God is even sovereign over the Internal Revenue Service. God is sovereign over kings and kingdoms. If this is true, then we need to believe that every king, every person in a position of political power, is there by divine appointment (see Romans 13:1-2). This means that we owe such authorities our respect, our obedience, and our taxes, unless any of these specifically require us to disobey God (Romans 13:1-7). It means that the laws, decisions, and decrees they make--even those which punish or persecute the saints--have a divine purpose. We may be required to disobey government, like Daniel and his three friends, but only when obeying that government would require us to disobey God. In the chaos and wickedness of our day, let us not lose sight of the fact that God is sovereign in history, and sovereign even over pagan powers.

The sovereignty of God is a truth not quickly or easily learned. God's sovereignty is clearly revealed in the Scriptures, but it often takes a sequence of adverse circumstances before it becomes a part of the fabric of our thinking and behavior. In these three chapters (2-4) of Daniel, God progressively convinces Nebuchadnezzar of His sovereignty. Nebuchadnezzar professed to believe in God's sovereignty in chapter 2, after his dream was revealed and interpreted by Daniel. But in chapter 3, we see the king attempting to compel those under his authority to worship an idol, an affront to the sovereign God of Israel. When God delivers Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego from the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar once again proclaims that God is sovereign. But in chapter 4, we see Nebuchadnezzar exalting himself in pride and God having to humble him through his seven-year insanity.

In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar saw the relationship of God's sovereignty to future world history. In chapter 3, the king was shown the relationship between God's sovereignty and his power to pass laws and to punish men. Now, in chapter 4, king Nebuchadnezzar begins to see how the sovereignty of God relates to his personal attitudes and actions as king of Babylon. The king began to view his position and power as the measure of his personal greatness. He became puffed up with power and pride. It would seem that he began to abuse his power, taking advantage of the weak and the vulnerable rather than using his power to protect them and provide for them. God taught Nebuchadnezzar that one's position and power is God-given and a manifestation of His greatness--not man's. God indeed lifts up "**those whom He wishes,**" and He "**sets over it the lowliest of men**" (Daniel 4:17). Power and position are God-given privileges; they are also stewardships of which we should not be proud but employ for the benefit of others.

Many wish to be leaders today for reasons all too similar to those of Nebuchadnezzar. They wish to rule. They do not wish to serve others but to be served. They are not unlike the disciples during the earthly ministry of our Lord. They are not unlike many Christians today who seek to lead, not to serve but to have status and to be served. Those who are given positions of power and prestige need to beware of pride, being constantly reminded that leadership is both God-given and a manifestation of His greatness--not ours.

Lest we think king Nebuchadnezzar was different from any of us, we should consider that ours is a day in which individuals seek to be sovereign. They want to be autonomous and independent, the captains of their own souls, the masters of their own fate. Perhaps more than any other age, self-hood prevails. This is the age of self, as the Scriptures foretell (2 Timothy 3:1,2a). A friend handed me a brochure for a seminar which promises to teach ten steps to success. Every single step is dominated by the word "self." We, like Nebuchadnezzar, and like his predecessor and ours, Satan, want to be "gods." We wish to dethrone the one true God and to enthrone ourselves. Let Nebuchadnezzar be our teacher, and let us humbly bow the knee to Him from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things).

36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:36).

### **Addendum: Sovereignty Texts in the Bible**

Genesis 50:20

Exodus 18:11

Deuteronomy 4:39

1 Samuel 2:1-10

2 Kings 19:15

1 Chronicles 29:11-12

2 Chronicles 20:5-6

Job 9:12; 12:13-25; 23:13; 33:12-13; 41:11; 42:2

Psalms 2 (all); 22:27-28; 37:23; 75:6-8; 76:10; 95:3-5; 103:19; 115:3\*; 135:5-18 (5-6)

Proverbs 16:1-5, 9, 33; 19:21; 20:24; 21:1

Ecclesiastes 3:14; 9:1

Isaiah 14:24-27; 40:12-15, 18, 22, 25; 44:6,24-28; 45:5, 7, 9-13; 46:9-11

Jeremiah 18:6; 32:17-23, 27; 50:44

Lamentations 5:19

Daniel 2:21, 37-38; 4:17, 32, 34-35; 5:18; 7:27; 6:26

Matthew 11:25-26; 20:1-16

John 19:11

Acts 2:22-24; 4:24-28; 17:26

Romans 8:28; 11:36; 14:11

Ephesians 1:11; 4:6

Philippians 2:9-11

Colossians 1:16-17

1 Timothy 6:15

Hebrews 1:3

James 4:12

Revelation 1:5-6



## **Lesson 10: The Sovereignty of God in Salvation (Romans 9:1-24)**

### **Introduction**

As the end of my seminary training neared, I had to give thought to what I would do after graduation and just where that might be. In the back of my mind, it seems I had determined that Houston, Texas, was one place I would not want to go. Although I never verbalized that Houston was off limits, somehow it became apparent to me that I would not seriously consider inquires from there. At that point in time, I inwardly removed Houston from the black list of my heart, “All right, Lord, even Houston,” I sighed. That night, a call came from a group in Houston, which I neither initiated nor invited. While I did give the ministry opportunity consideration, I must admit some relief when it did not materialize.

As much as we like to believe we are fully submissive to the sovereignty of God, virtually all of us have areas we have consciously or unconsciously fenced off, as though God could be “sovereign” in some areas of our life but not in others. Most Christians profess to believe in the sovereignty of God but refuse to grant it to operate in certain areas. Death is usually assigned to the category of God’s sovereignty because we have no control over it anyway. Disasters are considered matters of divine sovereignty with even unbelievers referring to certain disasters as “acts of God.”

Much of evangelicalism refuses to grant God sovereignty when it comes to the salvation of sinners, as though this refusal actually could change the fact of His sovereignty. They are willing to grant God much of the credit for the work of Christ on the cross and the Holy Spirit’s work in drawing men to faith. But they are not willing to admit God is in complete control (for this is precisely what sovereignty is-- complete control) of the salvation of lost sinners. Granted men have a role to play in this process, but clearly God is in control, complete control, of the process.

This debate over the relationship between God’s role in salvation and man’s may seem to be reserved only for academicians. But this is not true, for the sovereignty of God in salvation is a most crucial doctrine, as Martin Luther claimed:

““Therefore, it is not irreverent, inquisitive, or trivial, but helpful and necessary for a Christian, to find out whether the will does anything or nothing in matters pertaining to eternal salvation. . . . If we do not know these things, we shall know nothing at all of things Christian and shall be worse than any heathen. . . . Therefore, let anyone who does not feel this confess that he is no Christian. For if I am ignorant of what, how far, and how much I can and may do in relation to God, it will be equally uncertain and unknown to me what, how far, and how much God can and may do in me. . . . But when the works and power of God are unknown in this way, I cannot worship, praise, thank, and serve God, since I do not know how much I ought to attribute to myself and how much to God. It therefore behooves us to be very certain about the distinction between God’s power and our own, God’s work and our own, if we want to live a godly life.””<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean when we say that God is *sovereign* in salvation? Charles H. Spurgeon has said it about as well as can be said by men:

“First, then, DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AS EXEMPLIFIED IN SALVATION. If any man be saved, he is saved by divine grace and by divine grace alone; the reason of his salvation is not to be found in him, but in God. We are not saved as the result of anything that we do or that we will, but we will and do as the result of God’s good pleasure and the work of His grace in our hearts. No sinner can prevent God; that is, he cannot go before Him, cannot anticipate Him. God is always first in the matter of salvation. He is before our convictions, before our desires, before our fears,

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 117, as cited by Michael Scott Horton, *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), p. 60.

and before our hopes. All that is good or ever will be good in us is preceded by the grace of God and is the effect of a divine cause within.”<sup>2</sup>

“Again, the grace of God is *sovereign*. By that we mean that God has an absolute right to give that grace where He chooses and to withhold it when He pleases. He is not bound to give it to any man, much less to all men; if He chooses to give it to one man and not to another, His answer is, ‘**Is thine eye evil because mine eye is good? Can I not do as I will with mine own? I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.**’”<sup>3</sup>

Scripture says the same thing, just as clearly and emphatically:

44 “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day (John 6:44).

65 And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father” (John 6:65).

48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed (Acts 13:48).

14 And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul (Acts 16:14).

34 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? 35 Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:34-36).

30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, 31 that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD” (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

6 For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6).

5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

2 Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2).

Those who are saved are saved because God has chosen them for salvation. The Holy Spirit has given life to a dead spirit and understanding to a mind blinded by sin and by Satan. Those who are saved may be said to choose God, but only after God has first chosen them for salvation:

16 “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you” (John 15:16).

The other side of the equation is also true. Those who are eternally lost are lost because God has not chosen them for salvation:

8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!” 9 And He said, “Go, and tell this people ‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.’ 10 Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, and their eyes dim, Lest they see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed” (Isaiah 6:8-10).

3 And I saw one of his heads as if it had been slain, and his fatal wound was healed. And the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast; 4 and they worshiped the dragon, because he gave his authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?” 5 And there was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies; and authority to act for forty-two months was given to him. 6 And he opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to blaspheme His name and His tabernacle, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 And it was given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them; and authority over

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 4 (a message preached on August 1, 1858, at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens, cited by Warren Wiersbe, *Classic Sermons on the Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1994), 114-115.

<sup>3</sup> Spurgeon, as cited by Wiersbe, pp. 116-117.

every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him. 8 And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain” (Revelation 13:3-8).

8 “The beast that you saw was and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and to go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth will wonder, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come” (Revelation 17:8).

Do not misunderstand what is being said here. In order to be saved, men must trust in Jesus Christ as God’s provision to save lost sinners. And when they do so, it is because God has given them the heart to do so. *Men exercise faith out of the heart God has given them to believe:*

6 “Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jeremiah 31:33).

Likewise, when men are eternally lost, it is because they have chosen to reject God’s revelation (Romans 1:18ff.) and His provision for salvation in Jesus Christ. Why do lost sinners go to hell? They perish because they have not chosen God. They also perish because God has not chosen to rescue them from their sin and rebellion. In the simplest terms, men go to hell not only because God decreed it, but because they deserve it (see Revelation 16:4-7).<sup>4</sup>

Many texts like those cited above clearly reflect that salvation is not our work but God’s, and that we contribute nothing to it which He has not already given to us by His grace. We will turn in this lesson to a text which establishes even more forcefully than the previous texts the sovereignty of God in salvation. The sovereignty of God in salvation can be inferred from a number of biblical texts, and it is claimed or clearly stated by other texts. But the ninth chapter of Romans is devoted to establishing the sovereignty of God in salvation. It is the issue in view and the conclusion of the entire chapter. It is not merely implied, or even stated; it is declared, proven, and even defended against some of the popular objections to this truth. For this reason, we shall trace Paul’s inspired logic through the first 24 verses of Romans 9.

### **Israel’s Pitiabale Plight (Romans 9:1-5)**

1 I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, 4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

In the first eight chapters of the Book of Romans, Paul sets down the most detailed and reasoned explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In 1:18--3:20, Paul establishes the doctrine of man’s depravity--that sinful, fallen condition of every human being, without exception--which places sinners under the sentence of divine condemnation with no human hope of salvation apart from divine intervention. In 3:21-5:21, Paul explains the divine provision whereby sinners may be justified by faith in Christ. In chapters 6-8, Paul speaks of the present and future implications of this justification by faith.

Up until now, Paul has spoken of both Jews and Gentiles as the recipients of justification by faith. In chapters 9-11, he sets out to show that the unbelief of the Jews and the salvation of the Gentiles are not evidences of a failure on the part of God’s Word, but rather a very unexpected but precise fulfillment of His Word. In chapter 9, Paul shows that *the doctrine of election is a manifestation of God’s sovereignty in*

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<sup>4</sup> We must also bear in mind that Satan has a hand in the unbelief of the lost, for he seeks to keep men from the gospel (Mark 4:3-4, 13-14), to blind men to the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:3-4), and also to corrupt and distort the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:4, 13-15).

*salvation*, and that it explains the unbelief of many Jews, as well as the conversion of many Gentiles. Simply put, those many Jews (and Gentiles) who have rejected the work of Jesus Christ and who are therefore eternally lost, are illustrative of the sovereignty of God in salvation. And those Gentiles (and Jews) who have come to faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah are saved as the outworking of the sovereignty of God in salvation.

### Two Crucial Observations

Before considering the details of this passage, two important observations must be noted concerning the text as a whole. These observations are necessary because of those who do not want to acknowledge the sovereignty of God in salvation (including especially the doctrine of election). They seek to avoid the subject by insisting Paul is speaking here of corporate election, not individual election, and that this election is not to salvation or eternal torment, but rather for certain blessings. The text compels us to strongly differ with this view and to oppose it.

**First**, we should observe that verses 1-5, reinforced by verses 22-23, insist that salvation is in view and nothing less. In simple terms, Paul is talking about heaven and hell, who goes there, and why. Paul is greatly distressed because his fellow-Israelites are lost and under divine condemnation. Why else would he say he is willing to be accursed, separated from Christ, for the sake of his brethren (Romans 9:3)? The cure should be no more severe than the malady, and thus we see that the malady is that of eternal doom.

**Secondly**, we observe that the text is not about corporate election but individual election. To say that election is corporate fails to understand that this is precisely what the passage is written to refute. The Jews loved the doctrine of election, because they wrongly applied election corporately to the offspring of Abraham.<sup>5</sup> They thought of themselves as the elect of God and all others as the non-elect. They thought all Jews were going to heaven and all Gentiles to hell. A few token memberships to heaven might be granted to a few Gentiles, but these would have to become Jewish proselytes. Election, viewed in this way, was a delight to the Jews. But this is not the election which the Word of God teaches.

This is exactly the kind of “election” Paul opposes. In Romans 9, Paul proves that God’s election is not corporate, and that not all the physical descendants of Abraham or Jacob (also named Israel) were recipients of God’s promised blessings. The failure of the nation Israel with regard to Messiah was not a failure of God’s Word, but the failure of those who presumed the promised blessings of God were corporate--intended to include all of the Jews and to exclude the Gentiles. Therefore, in Romans 9:6-18, Paul cites three illustrations of God’s individual election: Isaac, not Ishmael (9:6-9); Jacob, not Esau (9:10-13); and Moses, not Pharaoh (9:14-18).

According to Paul, the problem of Jewish unbelief (in Jesus as the Messiah) and Gentile belief is not to be explained away as though God’s promises have failed. Rather, God’s blessing of salvation have never been granted on the basis of who men are or what they do. *Salvation has always been on the basis of divine election.* No “worthy” people are chosen because none are worthy. Those who are chosen are the unworthy, whose salvation is due solely to the sovereign grace of God. In this chapter of Romans, Paul insists that *God ultimately determines the eternal destiny of men.* Only those He has chosen will choose Him. Those whom He has rejected will persistently reject Him. God chooses some to be saved and ordains the rest for eternal condemnation. In Romans 9, Paul not only demonstrates the truth of this from the Old Testament Scriptures, he also raises the objections the doctrine of election precipitates. He then answers them in a way which defends the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in salvation.

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<sup>5</sup> John the Baptist recognized and addressed this error when he told the scribes and Pharisees, “. . . do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Matthew 3:9).

In verses 1-5 Paul, reveals his heart concerning his fellow-Israelites. He writes not as a traitor to his nation, but as a true patriot. He loves his fellow-Israelites and would sacrifice his life for their salvation if he could. He writes with a broken heart and a sincere desire to see his own people saved.

The pitiable spiritual condition of the nation Israel is not due to lack of exposure to God; rather, it is in spite of unparalleled spiritual privileges God heaped upon the Jews. Their unbelief, in spite of the many privileges God granted to them, set them apart from others. Consider some of their privileges:

- Their adoption as sons (their calling to exercise God's sovereign rule on the earth--Exodus 4:22-23; 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 2:1-9; compare Romans 8:18-25)
- The glory (the revelation of God's glory to the Israelites--Exodus 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11)
- The covenants (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:2; Deuteronomy 28-31)
- The giving of the Law (Exodus 20f.; Deuteronomy 5f.; Psalm 147:19)
- The temple service (Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:1f.; Hebrews 9:1-10)
- The promises of God (Acts 2:39; 13:32-33; Galatians 3:13-22; Ephesians 2:12)
- The patriarchs (Deuteronomy 7:8; 10:15; Acts 3:13; Romans 11:28)
- The Jews (specifically the tribe of Judah) are the people from whom the Messiah has come (Genesis 12:1-3; 49:10; 2 Samuel 7:14; Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 1:26-33)

In spite of her many privileges, Israel's condition illustrates a principle closely related to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in salvation or, more simply, divine election: *God's salvation is not directed toward the privileged, whom we might deem worthy of salvation, but to those pathetic souls who are unworthy of it, whom the unbelieving world considers undeserving to receive it.*

The scribes and Pharisees could not fathom why Jesus would associate with "sinners." Our Lord's answer was not what they wanted to hear:

29 And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax-gatherers and other people who were reclining at the table with them. 30 And the Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax-gatherers and sinners?" 31 And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:29-32).

Paul's words to the Corinthian Christians are not flattering to the saints either, for they emphasize that salvation is the result of God's choosing and that those He chooses are not those whom we would expect:

26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, 29 that no man should boast before God. 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, 31 that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

Two things are said in this text which should keep any Christian from becoming proud or taking any credit for their salvation. *First*, it is God who has done it all. It is "**by His doing**" that anyone is saved (verse 30). It is He who has (first) chosen us, not we who have chosen Him (John 15:16). *Second*, we dare not boast in ourselves as Christians because the kind of people God most often chooses are those who are foolish, weak, and base (verses 27-28). If one would boast in his salvation, he must boast in the Lord, for salvation is of the Lord.

Judaism's error is the assumption that being a partaker of Israel's national privileges (those listed above in verses 4-5) assured one of also being an individual partaker of the blessing of eternal salvation. John the Baptist attacked this error early in the Gospels:

8 “Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:8-10).

Salvation is not determined by one’s ancestry or race; it is not determined on the basis of any privileges one may have enjoyed. Salvation is based solely on God’s individual election, resulting in faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

Some wrongly assume that growing up in a Christian home assures them of the blessing of salvation. There are privileges involved in being a part of a Christian family (see 1 Corinthians 7:12-14), but there is no assurance that growing up in a Christian home will save you. Many Christian parents feel guilty if one of their children does not trust in Christ, but they have no control over this matter. All they can do is to live out their faith in obedience to the Scriptures in the context of the family and recognize that salvation is of the Lord. Growing up in the midst of Christians is no guarantee of salvation, just as growing up in a pagan environment does not doom one to unbelief. Just as we cannot take pride in our own salvation, or that of any other, neither should we blame ourselves when those we love reject the gospel we have embraced.

### **Did Something Go Wrong With the Plan? (Romans 9:6-13)**

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; 7 neither are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: “through Isaac your descendants will be named.” 8 That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. 9 For this is a word of promise: “At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.” 10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; 11 for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, 12 it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger.” 13 Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

### **Isaac, Not Ishmael (Romans 9:6-9)**

A first glance suggests something has gone wrong. If many Jews are rejecting Jesus as their Messiah and many Gentiles are coming to faith in Him, is this not the reverse of what God promised? Has something gone wrong with God’s plan? More pointedly, have the promises of God failed? Has the Word of God failed (verse 6)? Paul immediately informs us there has been no failure with the Word of God. He is about to prove that the Word is actually been fulfilled by what is taking place among the Jews and the Gentiles. The plan of God for the salvation of men is being fulfilled not as we would have expected (see Romans 11:33-35), but just as God has promised.

The doctrine of divine election is the only adequate explanation for widespread Jewish unbelief and for many Gentiles coming to faith. This is important to us because, in the final analysis, the ultimate explanation for unbelief and faith is divine election. How does one explain the unbelief and consequent judgment of men? The answer is two-fold. *First*, men are lost because they have not chosen to accept God’s provision of salvation in Jesus Christ. *Second*, they are lost because God has not chosen them. In Romans 9, Paul’s emphasis is on the second reason.

The Jews’ error, that all Jews are elect and thus should be saved, was based upon their wrong assumption that all Israelites are God’s elect, the true Israel of God. The Jews assumed that because they were physical descendants of Abraham, they were guaranteed a place in the kingdom of God. Paul corrects this

misconception, informing us that just because one is a descendant of Jacob (or Israel), he or she is not necessarily a true Israelite.<sup>6</sup> Neither is every child of Abraham one of the “children of God.”

If being a physical descendent of Abraham is not the basis for one’s entrance into the blessings of salvation, what determines who receives these blessings? The answer is simple: divine election. The “children of God” are those who are the “children of promise” (9:8). God promised Abraham he would have a child, and that through this child, God’s promises would be fulfilled. Ishmael was not that child. Ishmael was the result of Abraham and Sarah’s efforts to produce a son through means other than what God intended--a surrogate wife and mother, Hagar. Of these two “sons” of Abraham, only one was the son of promise--Isaac. And so not all the descendants of Abraham were the recipients of the promised blessings of God. God chose Isaac, and He rejected Ishmael. Did God’s Word fail because Isaac was chosen and Ishmael was rejected? Not at all, because God’s promise was only given to Isaac.

### **Jacob, Not Esau (Romans 9:10-13)**

Some might object that the principle of election can hardly be established on the evidence of God’s choice of Isaac and His rejection of Ishmael. After all, these sons had the same father but a different mother, and the mother of Ishmael was a concubine. No wonder Ishmael was rejected, and Isaac was chosen. Paul therefore moves on to his second illustration of election, God’s choice of Jacob and His rejection of Esau (verses 10-13). These two sons were born of the same parents and were even the product of the same union. They were twins. No two sons could be more similar, and yet God rejected the one and chose the other.

God’s choice of Jacob over Esau is contrary to all that we would have expected. By custom, the first-born son received the birthright, and yet God indicated His choice of the younger son to Rebekkah before Jacob or Esau were even born:

21 And Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. 22 But the children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is so, why then am I this way?” So she went to inquire of the Lord. 23 And the Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples shall be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:21-23).

God indicated His choice of Jacob over Esau before their birth without regard to any works either son would do. Some insist God chooses whom He does because He knows beforehand they will choose Him. They suppose God chooses those who will be most beneficial to His work. Too often I hear people commenting on what a dynamic Christian someone would become if they were only saved. They should be taken back by Paul’s words which indicate that God’s choice of Jacob over Esau was made without any regard to what they could or would do, apart from their works. It is not that God was ignorant of what these two would do; rather, His choice was made without regard to their deeds. His choice was a declaration and demonstration of His sovereignty:

11 For though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, 12 it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger” (Romans 9:11-12).

We should not fail to note that when God chose Jacob over Esau, He did so in spite of Isaac’s strong preference for Esau (it was his Rebekkah who favored Jacob, while Isaac preferred Esau, Genesis 25:28), and in spite of Isaac’s efforts to reverse the blessing so as to fall on Esau (Genesis 27). Before it began, Jacob was God’s choice, and Esau was rejected. When it was all over, Jacob was the son who received

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<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Paul makes a point of explaining that a true Israelite is a child of God by faith in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile (see Romans 4:16-17; Galatians 6:16). Incidentally, in Romans 4, Paul makes the point that Abraham was actually a Gentile (uncircumcised) when he became a believer (see 4:10-12).

God's blessing, not Esau. Lest we think God's choice of Jacob did not also include His rejection of Esau, Paul reminds us,

13 Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13).

God's sovereignty was demonstrated in His choice of Jacob and in His rejection of Esau.

### **Moses, Not Pharaoh (Romans 9:14-18)**

14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! 15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." 16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." 18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires (Romans 9:14-18).

Paul raises a question which expects a negative response: "**There is no injustice with God, is there?**" If we doubt what response is expected (the Greek text makes it clear), Paul's response removes all doubt: "**May it never be!**" I prefer the older translation of the King James Version, "**God forbid!**" Of course, God is free from any accusation of injustice. If this question presupposes the answer, it also presupposes the reason for asking it. Paul is teaching divine election. God chooses one and rejects another, and when God chooses a person for salvation, He always does so on the basis of grace, bestowed by His sovereign choice and not on the basis of works. If Paul were not teaching the doctrine of election, this question would be inappropriate and not even deserve an answer. But Paul was teaching on election, which is why he raises the question of justice.

How then can God choose to save one man and harden another and not be accused of injustice? The answer is very simple: grace. Salvation is a matter of divine grace sovereignly bestowed upon those whom God chooses as its recipients. Grace is about something wonderful which God gives to guilty sinners who are not worthy of God's blessings. Justice is about people getting what they deserve. It is unjust when men labor for their employer and are not paid. It is unjust when a guilty criminal is not punished. God is not unjust to condemn sinners to the eternal torment, because they are getting just what they deserve. Furthermore, God is not unjust in saving men. The punishment for sinners whom God has saved has been borne by the Lord Jesus Christ, who died in the sinner's place, bearing the wrath of God. God is therefore just in condemning men to bear the penalty they deserve, and He is just in saving men, whose penalty Christ has borne:

21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

Note the tone of Paul's words in Romans 9:14-18. They are not apologetic. Paul is not shuffling his feet, hesitant as to how he should respond. He is bold and confident. He is incensed that any might even suggest that God is unjust in election. He is not interested in defending God as much as in declaring God's sovereignty.

God is not unjust in the salvation of sinners who deserve the eternal wrath of God (verses 15-16). Neither is God unjust in the condemnation of sinners like Pharaoh, whose heart God hardened (verses 17-18). Moses and Pharaoh are more than just contemporaries who faced off at the exodus. Moses was the man who appears to have been next in line to be the Pharaoh of Egypt. God spared Moses, appointing him to lead His people out of bondage. And God appointed Pharaoh to be the one who would refuse to release



these people from bondage and whose resistance would provide the occasion for God's power to be declared throughout the whole earth.

Through Moses, God displayed His grace. When God began to reveal His glory to Moses in Exodus 33 (climaxing in chapter 34), He declared that His mercy was to be sovereignly granted to whomever He chose. The reason any person received grace was not to be found in that person, the recipient of His blessings, but in God, the Blessor. Grace is unmerited favor, and thus it must be sovereignly bestowed, for no one would ever be worthy of it. If one could be worthy of God's favor (which no one can), God's blessings would not be on the basis of grace but of works. But because no one is worthy of divine favor, every blessing of God is granted on the basis of grace, with no deciding factor other than God's sovereign choice.

God spoke directly to Moses (verse 15) and indirectly (through Moses and the Scripture) to Pharaoh (verse 17). Pharaoh was chosen too but for a very different role and destiny. He was raised up so that God's power could be displayed because of his stubborn opposition. God's victory over Pharaoh, through the plagues and then through the parting of the Red Sea, was widely proclaimed (see Exodus 15:14-16). God was glorified through the hardening of Pharaoh's heart just as He was glorified through Moses.

Here is a very important truth which seems to escape many Christians. Many seem to think God suffers some kind of defeat when lost sinners do not repent and come to faith in Him. They suppose God is glorified only through the salvation of the lost and not through the condemnation of stubbornly resistant sinners. In fact, God is glorified through the salvation of sinners and through the condemnation of sinners. God reveals His mercy in saving sinners and His power in triumphing over those who oppose Him. God is not embarrassed by those who reject Him. He does not "need" to save men in order to be glorified by them.

### **Another Objection (Romans 9:19-23)**

19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" 20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? 21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? 22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? 23 And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.

There is an answer for this question, but Paul is not going to respond to the question raised until after he has made a very important point. Verse 19 is not just a question; it is an insult because it questions the integrity of God. It is actually an indictment against God, a protest. It does not seek an answer; it senses that in asking the question, God is silenced.

In this chapter, Paul has been teaching the sovereignty of God. Centuries before Paul lived, God brought a Babylonian king to his knees. This great king learned some very important lessons about sovereignty. Nebuchadnezzar learned first that while God grants men a certain degree of sovereignty on earth (see Daniel 2:37; 9:18f.), ultimately only He is sovereign:

34 "But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom endures from generation to generation. 35 And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?' 36 At that time my reason returned to me. And my majesty and splendor were restored to me for the glory of my kingdom, and my counselors and my nobles began seeking me out; so I was reestablished in my sovereignty, and surpassing greatness was added to me. 37 Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride" (Daniel 4:34-37).

Especially important to Paul's response in Romans 9:20-21 is the statement of Daniel 4:35:

35 “And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What has Thou done?’”

Sovereignty means that the one who is sovereign is in complete control, above questioning by any subordinate. Paul is very sensitive to this fact and thus immediately reacts, rebuking the attitude of the questioner. Who is man to question God? God is the Creator, and it is His prerogative to use His creations (men) any way He chooses. Men are His creation, and they have no right to question their Creator. If God chooses to use one of His vessels to bring Him glory by being a vessel prepared for destruction, that is His right. If God chooses to bring glory to Himself by making another vessel as a vessel of mercy, a vessel which He will save, that too is His prerogative.

God’s power is demonstrated by the outpouring of His wrath on sinners, as it was at the Exodus. God’s mercy and grace is demonstrated by the outpouring of His grace on unworthy sinners, saving them in spite of their sin. His delay in destroying the “**vessels of wrath**” is purposeful, allowing Him time to show His grace to the “**vessels of mercy.**” And these “**vessels of mercy**” include some who are Jews and some who are Gentiles.

### **Gentiles, And Not Just Jews (Romans 9:24-29)**

I am constantly amazed at how slowly the disciples (and I!) grasped our Lord’s teaching. Even after the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord, we see that the apostles were slow to embrace the teaching of the Old Testament and of Jesus in the Book of Acts. In Acts 1:8, Jesus told them:

8 But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

This was but a repetition of what Jesus had already commanded the disciples before His death:

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20, emphasis mine).

Did the disciples immediately seek to evangelize Gentiles in the Book of Acts? Certainly not. Indeed, they resisted it. The evangelization of Gentiles happened in spite of the apostles more than because of them, another evidence of God’s sovereignty in salvation. It took intense persecution to scatter the Jewish believers from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1ff.). It took a dramatic and repeated divine vision to get Peter to go to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, and preach the gospel (see Acts 10:1ff.). And when word reached the ears of the Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem church, Peter was called on the carpet and rebuked for preaching to Gentiles (Acts 11:1-3).

Peter’s argument was too compelling. They had to admit that God must have intended to save Gentiles too, but notice what they did once they acknowledged this--nothing:

15 “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ 17 If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” 18 And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, “**Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.**” 19 **So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.** 20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:15-21).

Had it not been for that anonymous group of Hellenistic Jews, who did not know any better than to share their faith with Gentiles, the predominantly Gentile church in Antioch would never have been established (humanly speaking, of course).

When we come to verse 24 in Romans 9, Paul wants his readers to understand that the salvation of many Gentiles and the unbelief of many Jews should have come as no surprise. He now turns to the Old Testament to show that far from God's promises having failed by Gentile faith and Jewish unbelief, His promises are being fulfilled.

23 And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, 24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. 25 As He says also in Hosea, "I will call those who were not My people, 'My people,' And her who was not beloved, 'beloved.' 26 And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'you are not My people,' There they shall be called sons of THE LIVING God." 27 And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be AS THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT THAT WILL BE SAVED; 28 for the Lord will execute His word upon the earth, thoroughly and quickly." 29 And just as Isaiah foretold, "Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, We would have become as Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah." 30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; 31 but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. 32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, 33 just as it is written, "Behold, I lay in Zion A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, And he who believes in Him WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED" (Romans 9:1-33).

### Conclusion

All whom God chooses to save are lost sinners, dead in their trespasses and sins, captives not only to their own sins, but to Satan himself, not one bit different from those who will spend eternity in hell (see Ephesians 2:1-3). Those whom God saves do not seek Him; they are saved apart from seeking to be righteous (Romans 9:30-33). They are saved not because of what they are or because of what they will be or could be (Romans 9:11). They are chosen and saved, not because of any decision they make for God; rather the decision to trust God is the result of His doing, not man's (John 1:12; Acts 13:48; 16:14; Philippians 1:29; 2:12-13). Through His Spirit, God regenerates the one dead in his trespasses and sins, giving both life and faith so that the individual is now drawn to Him (John 6:44) and expresses faith in Jesus Christ for salvation, a faith which also comes from God (Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Corinthians 4:7); salvation is thus regarded as the work of the sovereign God--not men (Romans 9:11, 15-16; 11:36; 1 Corinthians 1:30-31; Hebrews 12:2).

Are some distressed that God chooses some and not others? They should not be! When God chooses to save anyone, He chooses one who would never have first chosen Him. Michael Horton puts it this way, "Essentially, election is God's making the decision for us that we would never have made for Him."<sup>7</sup>

We should be grateful that God elects some to salvation; otherwise, no one would ever have been saved. If God looked down the corridors of time and chose those who would choose Him, He would have chosen none, for none would have chosen Him (see Romans 3:10-18).

If God were to have chosen those who were worthy of His salvation, He would have chosen none. Election is the choice of a sovereign God to save some. Election is based solely upon God's grace, not upon any merit of our own. *Election is the outworking of grace, and the only means by which sinners could be saved.* It is not a doctrine to agonize over, but a doctrine over which we should rejoice. It is the basis for gratitude and for praise. As Paul will say in chapter 12:

1 I urge you therefore, brethren, *by the mercies of God*, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:1-2, emphasis mine).

The conclusion to chapters 9-11 of Romans is no begrudging acknowledgment of God's sovereignty but joyful praise for His sovereignty:

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace*, p. 45.

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! 34 For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? 35 Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:33-36).

The sovereignty of God is an incentive to pray for the salvation of the lost and a source of comfort when some reject His offer of salvation in Christ. Knowing that God is sovereign in salvation is a great incentive to witness, because I know God will accomplish His purposes. In spite of my failures in presenting the gospel, and the blindness of those to whom it is preached, God is the One who saves. My labor and yours in evangelism is never in vain. Even when men reject the gospel, God is glorified in the preaching of His gospel, whether men believe it or not. He is glorified both by the salvation of sinners and by the eternal punishment of sinners.

Ultimately, men are not saved because we have convinced them or even because they have (first) decided to choose to believe in God. Men are saved because God has chosen them, enlightened and illuminated them by His Spirit to understand the gospel, and effectually called them by opening their hearts to respond to the gospel. Who would you rather have in control of men's eternal destiny, sinful men or a loving, merciful, and sovereign God? To whom would you rather appeal for the salvation of men? He is a God who loves us and who delights to answer our prayers. Let us rejoice that the salvation of our loved ones is ultimately in His hands, and that we can beseech Him to save them. And when loved ones reject the gospel, we know that He is able to save. When loved ones die without coming to faith, we know this did not take God by surprise but is a part of His great eternal plan.

Often in our presentation of the gospel, I fear we misrepresent God and demean His glory in the picture we convey to the lost. The gospel must not be viewed as God begging and pleading with sinners hoping desperately that they will choose Him. The gospel is a command, and we proclaim this to lost sinners. We know we cannot convince men of their sin or cause them to turn to Christ, but God can and does for all He has chosen. Let us never portray a "wimpy" God, who is dependent on the decisions of men, rather than the true God, who always achieves what He purposes.

No wonder the gospel is offensive to lost sinners who wish to think they are "masters of their fate," the "captains of their souls." We are not in control. Lost men are sinners, who have offended a righteous and holy God and who are destined for eternal hell. They cannot do anything to save themselves. They must acknowledge their sins and cast themselves upon the mercy of God as made available in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, who died to pay the penalty for men's sins and to offer unworthy sinners His righteousness. The gospel is a glorious offer to lost sinners, who know they can do nothing to save themselves. The gospel is an offense to the self-righteous, who think they are saved on their own, by their own merits.

Have you acknowledged your sin and guilt? Have you submitted to the sovereign God of the universe and accepted His provision for your salvation? I cannot convince you or convert you. I can tell you that your sins merit you an eternity in hell and that God by His grace has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to take the sinner's place and to give men His righteousness. He has promised that His Spirit will convince lost sinners of their sin, of His righteousness, and of eternal judgment. Will you submit to God by receiving His way of salvation, the only way of salvation? I pray that you will.

### **What is the Relationship Between Regeneration and Belief?**

Consider these thoughts on the relationship between regeneration and belief:

All men are dead in their trespasses and sins, unresponsive to God, and unable to do anything to change their condition (see Ephesians 2:1-3). Those dead in their trespasses and sins do not understand God; they do not grasp the gospel or seek God. They are destined for divine wrath, hopeless apart from divine grace and intervention.

Regeneration is the supernatural work of God which gives dead men life (Ephesians 2:5; Titus 3:5).

Faith is a gift which God gives to those whom His Spirit has regenerated, thus enabling and causing God's chosen to respond to the gospel by trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Regeneration precedes belief. Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit, giving life to one who is spiritually dead. This new life is expressed by faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. God is the initiator, the first cause, and man's faith is thus the result of God's work in man.

This means that salvation is ultimately the work of God. He is the initiator; we respond (see 1 John 4:19). He is the author and the perfecter/finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2). He will complete what He has begun in us (Philippians 1:6). Rightly, we find God described as the cause of men's faith (Acts 13:48; 16:14).

The other (incorrect) view is that man first acts, trusting in God, and then God responds by bestowing salvation, in response to man's faith. In this case, man is the first cause. The problem with this view is that it contradicts Scripture. It denies the sovereignty of God and denies the depravity of man. How can a dead man, who hates God and does not seek Him, suddenly, on his own initiative, turn to God in faith (see Romans 3:9-18)?

### **Objections to Divine Sovereignty**

Many are the objections to divine sovereignty. Let us raise a number of them and offer a biblical response.

#### **God's election is based on His foreknowledge, and foreknowledge is God's knowledge, in advance, of who will choose Him (texts like Romans 8:29 are used as proof texts).**

1. Foreknowledge sometimes refers to one's previous knowledge about someone. In the Scriptures it is also used of a choice made ahead of the time. And to "know" sometimes means "to choose" (Genesis 18:19, see marginal note; Jeremiah 1:5) and to "foreknow" sometimes means to "choose ahead of time." In Romans 11:2 and 1 Peter 1:20, "foreknew" cannot mean simply "knew about ahead of time." It has to mean, "chose or selected ahead of time."
2. If God's choice of those whom He would save was based upon his foreknowledge of those who would choose Him, no one would be saved because of human depravity (see John 6:37, 44; Romans 3:9-18). No one would choose God unless God first chose us, regenerated us, and gave us the faith to respond to the gospel.
3. If God's choice of us is determined by our choice of Him, then we are the initiators of salvation, and God is the responder. This contradicts Scripture (Hebrews 12:1-2; Philippians 1:6, etc.), and it is inconsistent both with the sovereignty of God and with the nature of grace.
4. The Scriptures teach that God is the initiator of faith and salvation, not men (John 6:44; Acts 13:48; 16:13; see also Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:31-34).

#### **What about those texts which call upon men to believe, and those which speak of men choosing (as it were) God?**

Men are called upon to repent and believe in Jesus Christ to be saved. Men are saved by faith. All those who come to Him, who call upon the name of the Lord, will be saved (John 6:37; Romans 10:13). But this response which men are required to express is the *result* of God's sovereign saving work, and not the *cause* of it (John 1:12).

## **Divine sovereignty rules out or excludes human responsibility.**

Not at all. Divine sovereignty is the basis for human responsibility:

“Many have most foolishly said that it is quite impossible to show where Divine sovereignty ends and creature accountability begins. *Here* is where creature responsibility begins: in the sovereign ordination of the Creator. As to His sovereignty, there is not and never will be any end to it!” A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 29.

## **“God is a gentleman, and does not force Himself on anyone.”**

This statement expresses a warped view of God’s sovereignty and of man’s depravity. If God did not intervene and overcome our lethal malady of sin and rebellion, no one would ever be saved. The gospel is impossible apart from divine intervention and enablement. When God saves us, He makes the dead alive, He removes our spiritual blindness with sight, He opens our heart to respond, and He gives us a new nature which desires God. If it is not technically correct to say God overrides our will, He most certainly does change our nature and our will.

### **Implications and Applications of Divine Sovereignty in Salvation**

The subject of God’s sovereignty in salvation is vitally important:

“Therefore, it is not irreverent, inquisitive, or trivial, but helpful and necessary for a Christian, to find out whether the [human] will does anything or nothing in matters pertaining to eternal salvation. . . . If we do not know these things, we shall know nothing at all of things Christian and shall be worse than any heathen. . . . Therefore, let anyone who does not feel this confess that he is no Christian. For if I am ignorant of what, how far, and how much I can and may do in relation to God, it will be equally uncertain and unknown to me what, how far, and how much God can and may do in me. . . . But when the works and power of God are unknown in this way, I cannot worship, praise, thank, and serve God, since I do not know how much I ought to attribute to myself and how much to God. It therefore behooves us to be very certain about the distinction between God’s power and our own, God’s work and our own, if we want to live a godly life.” Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 117, as cited by Michael Scott Horton, *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), p. 60.

Sovereignty is diametrically opposed to everything natural and fallen in us, and it is completely consistent with what the Bible teaches. Men naturally reject the sovereignty of God and only supernaturally do they receive it. Do you resist it? We should not be surprised. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is one which no one would naturally believe unless the Scriptures clearly taught it and the Spirit of God changed our hearts to embrace it. Do you wish to know the truth of the matter? Study the Scriptures, and ask God to give you understanding.

“The reason people today are opposed to it [election] is because they will have God to be anything but God. He can be a cosmic psychiatrist, a helpful shepherd, a leader, a teacher, anything at all. . . only not God. For a very simple reason—they want to be God themselves.” D. James Kennedy, *Truths That Transform* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1974), as cited by Michael Horton, *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), p. 43.

“It is a measure of our self-centeredness that we would even despise God for loving us before we loved Him.” Michael Horton, p. 45.

Rejecting or resisting the sovereignty of God in salvation is a very serious matter:

“This doctrine [the sovereignty of God] shows the unreasonableness and dreadful wickedness of your refusing heartily to own the sovereignty of God in this matter. It shows that you know not *that God is God*. If you knew this, you would be inwardly still and quiet; you would humbly and calmly lie in the dust before a sovereign God and would see sufficient reason for it.

In objecting and quarreling about the righteousness of God’s laws and threatenings and His sovereign dispensations toward you and others, you oppose His *divinity*; you show your ignorance of His divine greatness and excellency and that you cannot bear that He should have divine honor. It is from low, mean thoughts of God that you do in your minds oppose His sovereignty, that you are not sensible how dangerous your conduct is, and what an audacious thing it is for such a creature as man to strive with his Maker.” Jonathan Edwards, taken from *The Words of Jonathan Edwards* (vol.

2, 1976), published by Banner of Truth Trust, as cited by Warren Wiersbe, *Classic Sermons on the Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1994), p. 107.

In the Bible, the sovereignty of God is not a negative truth, a problem doctrine which one should avoid if possible; it is a positive doctrine which encourages, comforts, and motivates.

“Rightly did the later Mr. Spurgeon say in his sermon on Matt. 20:15, ‘There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God’s Sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that Sovereignty has ordained their affliction, that Sovereignty overrules them, and that Sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children ought more earnestly to contend than the doctrine of their Master over all creation-- the Kingship of God over all the works of His own hands--the Throne of God and His right to sit upon that Throne. On the other hand, there is no doctrine more hated by worldings, no truth of which they have made such a football, as the great, stupendous, but yet most certain doctrine of the Sovereignty of the infinite Jehovah. Men will allow God to be everywhere except on His throne. They will allow Him to be in His worship to fashion worlds and make stars. They will allow Him to be in His almonry to dispense His alms and bestow His bounties. They will allow Him to sustain the earth and bear up the pillars thereof, or light the lamps of heaven, or rule the waves of the ever-moving ocean; but when God ascends His throne, His creatures then gnash their teeth, and we proclaim an *enthroned* God, and His right to do as He wills with His own, to dispose of His creatures as *He* thinks well, without consulting them in the matter; then it is that we are hissed and execrated, and then it is that men turn a deaf ear to us, for God on His throne is not the God they love. But it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon His throne whom we trust.’ A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 27.

### **Questions to Ponder Concerning the Sovereignty of God in Salvation**

Why do you think men resist or reject the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in salvation? Why do Christians resist or reject God’s sovereignty in salvation when they grant God’s sovereignty elsewhere?

What is the relationship between God’s sovereignty in salvation and grace? Between God’s sovereignty in salvation and human depravity? Why must God’s grace be sovereign grace?

How does the sovereignty of God in salvation affect the gospel? How would the depravity of man and man’s resistance to the sovereignty of God in salvation tend to affect the gospel? [In other words, how would the natural or unsaved man rather have the gospel than the way it is?]

How do you think Paul’s conversion (as described in Acts 9, 22, 26) helped prepare him to address the subject of the sovereignty of God in salvation?

How should the biblical view of the sovereignty of God in salvation affect our prayers for the lost? Our motivation for evangelism? Our methods of evangelism? The message we proclaim in evangelism?

Does the sovereignty of God in salvation mean you might be one of the non-elect and that you could not be saved even if you wanted to be? Does it mean we cannot ever know if we really are saved, since salvation is God’s doing and not ours?

### **Quotable Quotes**

“The Scriptures give many examples of God’s freedom in selective grace. Near a pool in Jerusalem gathered ‘a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed’ (John 5:3). Yet, Christ pushes through the crowd and moves toward one man--just one person--and heals him from his paralysis. Now, you have to understand that this was a regular spot for a lot of people who hoped each new day was their day for the miracle. One would think that there would be some sort of healing line, but Jesus only intended to heal one man that day. Why didn’t He heal everybody? He could have; He had the power. But He did not choose to do so. Nevertheless, I have yet to hear a sermon on how unfair it was for Jesus to heal the man at the pool that day. Why should election be any different in the realm of our salvation?” Horton, p. 50.

“In election we come to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of the wilderness; the God of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ; the God who is anything but a frustrated deity who ‘has no hands but our hands’ and must pace heaven’s floors, ringing his hands, hoping people will ‘let Him have His way.’ This is the God who is everything *but* a co-pilot. **‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble’** (James 4:6 NASB).” Michael Horton, *Putting The Amazing Back Into Grace*, pp. 58-59.

“You may be thinking, ‘Election and evangelism--in the same breath? I’ve been told they’re mutually exclusive!’ I was told that too. But I can honestly say that evangelism never really meant what it means after having understood election. Sharing the faith with non-believers has become a burden to many and it was to me, until this truth changed my thinking. Election changes our evangelism on three levels: our message, our methods, and our motivation.” Horton, p. 66.

“But it may be objected, do we not read again and again in Scripture how that men defied God, resisted His will, broke His commandments, disregarded His warnings, and turned a deaf ear to all His exhortations? Certainly we do. And does this nullify all that we have said above? If it does, then the Bible plainly contradicts itself. But that cannot be. What the objector refers to is simply the wickedness of man against the **external** word of God, whereas what we have mentioned above is what God has *purposed in Himself*. The rule of conduct He has given us to walk by, is perfectly fulfilled by none of us; His own eternal ‘counsels’ are accomplished to their minutest details.” Pink, p. 25.

“Being infinitely elevated above the highest creature, He is the Most High, Lord of heaven and earth. Subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent; God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, none can hinder Him. So His own Word expressly declares: ‘**My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure**’ (Isa. 46:10); ‘**He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand**’ (Dan. 4:34). Divine sovereignty means that God is God in fact, as well as in name, that He is on the Throne of the universe, directing all things, working all things ‘**after the counsel of His own will**’ (Eph. 1:11).” Pink, p. 27.

“This doctrine [the sovereignty of God] shows the unreasonableness and dreadful wickedness of your refusing heartily to own the sovereignty of God in this matter. It shows that you know not *that God is God*. If you knew this, you would be inwardly still and quiet; you would humbly and calmly lie in the dust before a sovereign God and would see sufficient reason for it.

“The most insanely daring thing that any man can do, the most exceedingly foolish thing any man can do, the most desperately wicked thing that any man can do, is to reply against God, to enter into controversy with God, to criticize God, to condemn God. Yet that is what many people are doing.” Torrey, Wiersby, p. 45.

“What are we all, the very best of us? Vile--the best of us is but a loathsome sinner. We may not yet realize the fact, but it is true. Our lives have been shot through and through by sin. Yet you undertake to stand in the presence of this Holy God, in whose presence the seraphim veil their faces and their feet, and reply against Him, to suggest what God ought to do, to enter into controversy with God, to criticize God for things which He has seen fit to do, to murmur against God.” Torrey, p. 47.

“He is . . . a Being of infinite wisdom. We look up at the starry heavens above our heads, we look at these wonderful worlds of light that stud the heavens by night. We think of the overwhelming things about their immensity and the incredible speed and momentum of their movements as they rush through space, and as we look up at them, if we are wise, we say, ‘Oh, God, what a Being of infinite wisdom as well as majesty Thou art that Thou canst guide these inconceivably enormous worlds as they go whirling through space with such incredible velocity and momentum.’”

“And yet many of you here tonight do not hesitate to look up at the infinitely wise God who made these wonderful spheres of light, who guides the whole universe in its wonderful, stupendous and bewildering course, and attempt to tell Him what you think He ought to do! Thou fool, art thou mad? No inmate of Patten ever did an insaner thing. ‘Who art thou?’ The wisest man on earth is but a child; the wisest philosopher does not know much; the greatest man of science knows but very little. What he knows is almost nothing in comparison with what he does not know. What he does know, even about the material universe, is as nothing compared with what he does not know.” Torrey, p. 48.

“Suppose some child of thirteen or fourteen should take a book on philosophy setting forth the ripest product of the best philosophic thought of today and begin to criticize it, page by page. What would you think? Would you stand and look at the boy and say with unbounded admiration, ‘What a bright lad he is?’ No, you would say, ‘What a conceited idiot he is to undertake, at his age and with his limited knowledge, to criticize the best philosophic thought of the day!’ But he would not be so conceited an idiot as you or I would be were we to attempt to criticize an infinitely wise God for we are far less than children compared with the infinite God.”

“The most profound philosopher of today is but a little child compared with the Infinite God. And yet you, who do not make any pretensions of being a philosopher at all, take God’s Book, you a little child, an infant, take this Book which represents the best wisdom of God, and you sit down and turn it, page by page, and try to criticize it, and people stand and look at you and admire and say, ‘What a scholar!’ But the angels look down and say, ‘What a fool!’ And what does God say? ‘**O man, who art thou that repliest against God? He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord the Almighty and the Eternal shall have [you] in derision**’ (Ps. 2:4).” Torrey, p. 49.

“It has never dawned on some people that even God could by any possibility know more than they know. It never dawned on me for years, and in those days I was a Universalist. I thought that all men would ultimately be saved. I was



a Universalist because I had an argument for the ultimate salvation of everybody for which I could see no possible answer. I thought if I could not see an answer, why, no one could. So I challenged anybody to meet me on that argument and answer it. I went around with my head pretty high and said, 'I have found an unanswerable reason for Universalism.' I thought that I was a Universalist for all time and that anyone who was not a Universalist was not well posted."

"One day it occurred to me that an infinitely wise God might possibly know more than I did. That had never dawned on me before. It dawned upon me also that it was quite possible that a God of infinite wisdom might have a thousand good reasons for doing a thing, when I, in my finite foolishness, could not see even one. So my fondly cherished Universalism went up in smoke."

"If you get that thought, that an infinitely wise God may possibly know more than even you do, and that God in His infinite wisdom might have a thousand good reasons for doing a thing when you cannot see even one, you will have learned one of the greatest theological truths of the day--one that will solve many of your perplexing problems in the Bible."

"Men try to lay hold of infinite wisdom and fancy that they can squeeze it down into the capacity of their pint-cup minds. But because they cannot squeeze infinite wisdom into their pint-cup minds, they say, 'I don't believe that Book is the Word of God, because it has something in it that I cannot understand the philosophy of.' Why should you understand the philosophy of it? Who are you, anyhow? How much of a mind have you, anyhow? How long have you had it? How long are you going to keep it? Who gave it to you?" Torrey, p. 57.

"It is not our business to find out the philosophy of things; it is not our business to see the reason of things. It is our business to hear what God has to say, and when He says it, believe it, whether you can understand the philosophy of it or not." Torrey, p. 58.

"There is one more class that is replying against God, that is the men who instead of accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior and surrendering to Him as their Lord and Master and openly confessing Him as such before the world, are making excuses for not doing it. Jesus says in John 6:37, '**Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.**' God says in Revelation 22:17, '**Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.**' Anybody can come to Christ, and anybody who does come will be received and saved. Yet many of you, instead of coming, are making excuses for not coming. By every excuse you make you are replying against God, you are entering into controversy with God, you are condemning God, who invites you to come. You cannot frame an excuse for not coming and accepting Christ that does not condemn God. Every excuse that any mortal makes for not accepting Christ, in its ultimate analysis, condemns God." Torrey, p. 58.

**Lesson 11:**  
**The Nearness of God**  
**(Exodus 33:1-16; 34:8-10; Deuteronomy 4:1-7)**

**Introduction**

It is interesting that a number of the books written on the attributes of God have little if anything to say on the subject of God's omnipresence. A. W. Tozer comments about God's omnipresence:

Few other truths are taught in the Scriptures with as great clarity as the doctrine of the divine omnipresence. Those passages supporting this truth are so plain that it would take considerable effort to misunderstand them. They declare that God is imminent in His creation, that there is no place in heaven or earth or hell where men may hide from His presence. They teach that God is at once far off and near, and that in Him men move and live and have their being.<sup>1</sup>

What Bible-believing Christian would challenge the truth that God is omnipresent? And yet I fear that while we believe this doctrine to be true to Scripture, we do not sense it to be true to life, a truth which applies to the way we live. But it does affect our daily lives! I have approached the subject of the omnipresence of God as "The Nearness of God," for as we shall soon discover the nearness of God is one of the Christian's highest aspirations-- the greatest good. This truth greatly impacts our attitudes and actions. Consider then the nearness of God, the constant presence of God in our lives.

**The Fall of Man: Nearness Lost**  
**(Genesis 3:6-10)**

6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 And he said, "I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself" (Genesis 3:6-10).

It would seem that before the fall of Adam and Eve these two were privileged to enjoy intimate fellowship and communion with God. From verse 8, we can infer that God daily walked in the garden in the cool of the day, and that Adam and Eve enjoyed this time with Him. But when they chose to trust the devil instead of God and to disobey the command of God, they sinned. Their sin caused them to withdraw from God out of fear. They hid themselves from Him. Sin results in separation from God:

1 Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short that it cannot save; Neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. 2 But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear (Isaiah 59:1-2).

The rest of the Bible is about the plan and purpose of God to deal with man's sin so he can once again enjoy fellowship with God in His presence. In Genesis 3:15, the first promise of salvation is recorded in the Bible:

15 "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel" (Genesis 3:15).

The rest of the Bible is the story of how God fulfills this promise of salvation so that sinful men can once again draw near to a holy God.

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<sup>1</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 80.

## The Exodus and Nearness to God<sup>2</sup>

The exodus was not just a time when God freed captive Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. It was a time when God set Himself apart from all other “gods” (especially the gods of Egypt) and when He set apart the Israelites from the Egyptians (Exodus 9:4-6; 11:7). God distinguished His people Israel from the Egyptians by the plagues, but most significantly, He distinguished Israel by His presence:

15 Then he said to Him, “If Thy presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here. 16 For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Thy sight, I and Thy people? Is it not by Thy going with us, so that we, I and Thy people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?” (Exodus 33:15-16).

7 “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? (Deuteronomy 4:7).

And so it was that God was to be near His people Israel. The great dilemma was that the Israelites were a stubborn and sinful people. His presence as a holy God would prove to be dangerous because His holiness required Him to deal with sin:

1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Depart, go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your descendants I will give it.’ 2 And I will send an angel before you and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. 3 Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, lest I destroy you on the way.” 4 When the people heard this sad word, they went into mourning, and none of them put on his ornaments. 5 For the LORD had said to Moses, “Say to the sons of Israel, ‘You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I will do with you’” (Exodus 33:1-5).

God promised to see that Israel possessed the promised land of Canaan, but He declined to promise He would be present among His people. This sinful people simply could not survive in the presence of a holy God. Moses, however, would not settle for anything less than for God to dwell in the midst of His people. This distinguished Israel from the other nations.<sup>3</sup> Notice how Moses pleads with God, refusing the promise of God’s personal presence with him, and pressing for God’s presence among His people, Israel:

13 “Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight. Consider too, that this nation is Thy people.” 14 And He said, “My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest.” 15 Then he said to Him, “If Thy presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here. 16 For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Thy sight, I and Thy people? Is it not by Thy going with us, so that we, I and Thy people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?” (Exodus 33:13-16).

If the problem of God’s presence was rooted in the sinful nature of the Israelites, the solution was to be found in the character of God. God is not only holy, He is also gracious and forgiving. Here was the key that Moses was looking for, and God held it out before Him as He manifested His glory to him on the mountain:

5 And the LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. 6 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” 8 And Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship. 9 And he said, “If now I have found favor in Thy sight, O LORD, I pray, let the LORD go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate; and do Thou pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Thine own possession” (Exodus 34:5-9).

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<sup>2</sup> See especially Exodus 3:5, 12, 17:7; 19:22; 24:2; 33:1-16; 34:8-17; Numbers 1:51; 3:10, 38; 17:13; 18:3-4; Deuteronomy 4:1-7; 5:27.

<sup>3</sup> I cannot help but wonder if we would have clung as tenaciously as Moses to the petition that God be present among His people. So often, God is but a means to the end. For Moses, God was the end. Moses did not want God’s blessings without God, for in his mind, the ultimate blessing was for God’s people to dwell in God’s presence.

There was only one way a sinful people could possibly dwell in the presence of God, and that was by grace. God could dwell in the midst of a sinful people because He is a God who forgives sin. It was not yet clear exactly how this forgiveness would be accomplished, but the Mosaic covenant foreshadowed it (see Colossians 2:16-17). The Law of Moses defined what was pleasing and displeasing to God, what was clean and unclean (or defiling) to the nation. Avoiding defilement was impossible, but the Law also made provision for man's transgressions of the Law. The Mosaic covenant introduced the Tabernacle and the sacrificial system, whereby God could dwell in the midst of a sinful people by being separated by the barriers of the tabernacle. Only certain Israelites (the Levitical priests) were allowed to draw near to God in the performance of the religious rites and rituals of the nation. God's presence was manifested in the holy of holies, where the gaze of men was prevented lest they die. And men were informed that only by means of the shedding of blood could they approach their God in worship. This whole system foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah, the "**Lamb of God,**" who would bear the sins of the world and whose shed blood would cleanse men from their sins.

### **The Nearness of God in the Psalms and the Prophets**

In spite of the distance which the Israelites must keep from their God under the Law, the people of God looked forward to a future day when they would enter into an intimate communion with God. This was symbolically represented by a meal, first anticipated in Exodus, and then frequently referred to in the Psalms:

9 Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, 10 and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. 11 Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they beheld God, and they ate and drank (Exodus 24:9-11).

5 Thou dost prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; Thou hast anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever (Psalm 23:5-6).

4 One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to meditate in His temple (Psalm 27:4).

It would be wrong to conclude that enjoying the presence of God was but a future hope for the Old Testament saint. Psalm 73 speaks of God's presence in the midst of affliction. Asaph, after considerable agony over the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the saints (or so he supposed), came to understand that the ultimate blessing in life is not prosperity or the absence of pain, but the presence of God, even if that becomes real to us in poverty or in pain:

25 Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 27 For, behold, those who are far from Thee will perish; Thou hast destroyed all those who are unfaithful to Thee. 28 But as for me, *the nearness of God* is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, That I may tell of all Thy works (Psalm 73:25-28, emphasis mine).

Psalm 139 is David's expression of his enjoyment of God's presence in his life. It is one of the great psalms of the psalter and one in which we find comfort as well:

1 For the choir director. A Psalm of David. O LORD, Thou hast searched me and known me. 2 Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up; Thou dost understand my thought from afar. 3 Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down, And art intimately acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, Thou dost know it all. 5 Thou hast enclosed me behind and before, And laid Thy hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it. 7 Where can I go from Thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from Thy presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there. 9 If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, 10 Even there Thy hand will lead me, And Thy right hand will lay hold of me. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night," 12 Even the darkness is not dark to Thee, And the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to Thee. 13 For Thou didst form my inward parts; Thou didst weave me in my mother's womb. 14 I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Thy works, and my soul knows it very well. 15 My frame was not

hidden from Thee, When I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth. 16 Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Thy book they were all written, The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them. 17 How precious also are Thy thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand. When I awake, I am still with Thee. 19 O that Thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God; Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed. 20 For they speak against Thee wickedly, And Thine enemies take Thy name in vain. 21 Do I not hate those who hate Thee, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against Thee? 22 I hate them with the utmost hatred; They have become my enemies. 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way (Psalm 139:1-24).

The prophets spoke of the time when God would draw near to His people to save them from their sins and to dwell with them in intimate fellowship. The prophets exposed the hypocrisy of those Israelites who feigned nearness to God but whose hearts were distant:

13 Then the Lord said, "Because this people *draw near* with their words And honor Me with their lip service, But they remove their hearts far from Me, And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote" (Isaiah 29:13, emphasis mine).

Mere ceremonial righteousness was not enough. Men would not experience nearness to God until they understood true religion. *True religion was to possess and to practice the character of God, to live out the character of God in our conduct*, rather than to repetitiously carry out rituals or make meaningless professions:

1 "Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, And declare to My people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet they seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways, As a nation that has done righteousness, and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me for just decisions, they delight in the *nearness of God*. 3 'Why have we fasted and Thou dost not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and Thou dost not notice?' Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high. 5 Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed, And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD? 6 Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; And your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 10 And if you give yourself to the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, Then your light will rise in darkness, and your gloom will become like midday. 11 And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, And give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. 12 And those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; You will raise up the age-old foundations; And you will be called the repairer of the breach, The restorer of the streets in which to dwell (Isaiah 58:1-12, emphasis mine).

The prophets warned that if the people of God did not repent, professing and practicing true righteousness, then they would find God drawing near to judge rather than drawing near to save:

5 "Then I will *draw near* to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me," says the LORD of hosts (Malachi 3:5, emphasis mine).

God is ever near in the sense that He sees and hears what men are doing, and He will deal with men accordingly:

23 "Am I a God *who is near*," declares the LORD, "and not a God far off? 24 Can a man hide himself in hiding places, so I do not see him?" declares the LORD. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the LORD. 25 "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in My name, saying, 'I had a dream, I had a dream!' 26 How long? Is there anything in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy falsehood, even these prophets of the deception of their own heart, 27 who intend to make My people forget My name by their dreams which they relate to one another, just as their fathers forgot My name because of Baal?" (Jeremiah 23:24-27, emphasis mine).

Those who would not “**draw near**” to God by faith would be condemned:

2 She heeded no voice; She accepted no instruction. She did not trust in the LORD; She did not *draw near* to her God (Zephaniah 3:2, emphasis mine).

Those who would repent and trust in God’s coming Messiah were promised a God who would be near, dwelling in the midst of the New Jerusalem:

35 “The city shall be 18,000 cubits round about; and the name of the city from that day shall be, ‘The Lord is there’” (Ezekiel 48:35).

### The Nearness of God in the Gospels

God drew near to men in the incarnation. Our Lord drew near to save His people in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, His name was Immanuel, meaning “**God with us**” (Matthew 1:23). The New Testament writers made it clear that *Jesus was God drawn near to save* (see Matthew 1:23; John 1:1-18; 1 John 1:1-3; 4:12-13; Hebrews 1:1-3; 2:1-4). There were those who were drawn to Jesus as the Savior, but those who rejected Him as their Messiah did not want Him around (see Mark 5:17; Luke 4:28-29). At the cross of Calvary, the crowds yelled, “**Away with Him!**” They were more comfortable with a murderer than with the Prince of Life (Luke 23:18).

### The Nearness of God in the Epistles

It is the writer to the Hebrews who makes so much of the superiority of the work of Christ to the Old Testament sacrifices. The Old Testament system could not remove a man’s sin, making him fit to enter into the presence of a holy God. It is the shed blood of Jesus Christ which provides the forgiveness of sins and enables one to enter into the presence of God with confidence:

16 Let us therefore *draw near* with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16, emphasis mine).

19 (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we *draw near* to God (Hebrews 7:19, emphasis mine).

25 Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who *draw near* to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25, emphasis mine).

1 For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who *draw near* (Hebrews 10:1, emphasis mine).

19 Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us *draw near* with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19-22, emphasis mine).

Not only does the blood of Christ remedy the problem of man’s sin, allowing men to “**draw near**” to God, it also remedies the breach in men’s relationship with men, removing once and for all the barriers between those who are fellow-saints:

11 Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands--12 remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, 15 by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, 16 and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. 17 AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; 18 for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, 20 having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together is

growing into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:11-22).

Heaven is not so much a place where the saints indulge themselves in God's blessings as the place where the saints enjoy God's presence:

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them (Revelation 21:2-3).

3 And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bond-servants shall serve Him; 4 and they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. 5 And there shall no longer be any night; and they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them; and they shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:3-5).

Hell, on the other hand, is the place where men are eternally separated from the presence of God: 10 Enter the rock and hide in the dust From the terror of the LORD and from the splendor of His majesty (Isaiah 2:10).

19 And men will go into caves of the rocks, and into holes of the ground Before the terror of the LORD, and before the splendor of His majesty, When He arises to make the earth tremble. 20 In that day men will cast away to the moles and the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, 21 In order to go into the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the cliffs, Before the terror of the LORD and the splendor of His majesty, When He arises to make the earth tremble (Isaiah 2:19-21).

9 And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

15 And the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; 16 and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; 17 for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?" (Revelation 6:15-17).

11 And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. 13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. 14 And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

### Principles Concerning Omnipresence

While not an exhaustive study of the doctrine of divine omnipresence, we can summarize a number of principles taught in the Scriptures on this important and comforting doctrine.

**(1) God is omnipresent in His creation, for He is ever mindful of all that is happening anywhere.** He is constantly aware of injustice, of sin, of faithfulness. His eyes are ever watchful; His ears (speaking anthropomorphically--speaking of God in human terms) are always attentive to the cries of men, especially the oppressed and the penitent (2 Chronicles 16:9; Psalm 34:15; Proverbs 5:21; 15:3; Amos 9:8; Zechariah 4:10; 1 Peter 3:12).

**(2) God sovereignly chooses some for eternal salvation, which draws them nearer than others, and thereby distinguishes the Christian from unbelievers** (Numbers 16:5; Psalm 65:4; Exodus 33:16; Deuteronomy 4:7; Proverbs 18:24).

**(3) God's presence is not only among His people but is now in His people, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit** (Psalm 51:11; 139:7; John 14:17-18, 23; 16:7-15). I have often wondered how Jesus could tell His disciples it was better for Him to depart from them (John 16:7). I am finally beginning to understand

why. While on the earth in His physical body, our Lord was present among His people, especially the disciples. But when the Lord ascended into heaven, He sent His Holy Spirit to dwell in His people, so that He is ever-present with every believer, no matter where he or she might be. It is the Holy Spirit of God who conveys the presence of God in His people.

**(4) God is present with us through His Word.**

14 “But the word is *very near you*, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it” (Deuteronomy 30:14, emphasis mine).

151 *Thou art near*, O LORD, And all Thy commandments are truth (Psalm 119:151, emphasis mine).

**(5) God is always present with His chosen ones** (Psalm 139:7-12). He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

**(6) God is especially near to us a certain times.** He is ever near us in “**time of need**” (Hebrews 4:16).<sup>4</sup> He is near when we confess and forsake our sins (Psalm 76:7; Isaiah 59:2; 2 Corinthians 6:16-18). He is near the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18; compare Matthew 5:3ff.; 2 Corinthians 7:6). He is with us (even two or three of us) when we exercise church discipline in His name (Matthew 18:20). He is with us as we carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). He is with us when we are being disciplined by Him as a loving Father (see Hebrews 12:3-13). He is near when we call upon Him in truth (Psalm 145:18). He is near when we treat Him as holy (Leviticus 10:3). He is near to us when we “**draw near**” to Him (James 4:8).

## Conclusion

### The Practical Implications of the Nearness of God

Our study leads us to ponder several areas of application. **First**, I would like to ask you a question which I urge you to answer honestly in your own heart and soul: *Do you believe the nearness of God is your highest good?* If not, you are pursuing a goal less than the best. Moses was a man who had the most intimate fellowship with God of all the Israelites (see Exodus 33:11), and yet he was not content with this. He wanted to know God even more intimately, to be even nearer to Him (see Exodus 33:17-18). Let us examine our hearts to see if we desire to be near Him. If our desire to be near Him is lacking, it is little wonder that we have no great yearning for heaven. If we do not desire nearness to God, our desires are distorted at best and likely destructive.

**Second**, let me ask another question: Assuming you desire to have the kind of nearness to God of which the Bible speaks, *do you actually sense God’s nearness to you?* If not, the problem is really very simple--sin. Sin separates men from God. It may be that you do not enjoy a sense of God’s nearness because you are a lost sinner, doomed for eternal separation from God, apart from His grace. In Jesus Christ, God draws near to men to reveal Himself and to provide a way whereby the problem of sin can be remedied and fellowship between men and God can be restored. He, the sinless Son of God, bore the penalty for sin, the penalty for your sin. By receiving God’s gift of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ, you can become a child of God and enjoy for all eternity the blessedness of being near to the heart of God.

If you are a genuine believer in Jesus Christ and yet do not feel the “**nearness of God,**” your problem is rooted in sin as well. The solution to this dilemma is simple: repent. These words, written to the complacent and loveless church at Laodicea, express the invitation which our Lord offers to all those who have trusted in Him and grown cold, grown apart. These words are the offer of intimate fellowship--nearness to God--for all who will repent and return to Christ as their first love:

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 15 ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot.

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<sup>4</sup> Note the instances in the Book of Acts when our Lord (or an angel) appears to the apostle Paul to encourage and strengthen him (for example, Acts 27:23-26).



16 So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. 17 Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, 18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me. 21 He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 3:14-22).

Over the years, I have observed that many Christians have embraced a false set of standards for determining the presence of God in their lives. Many television preachers (and others) teach that the test of spirituality and God's presence in your life is health, wealth, and success in life. Our study should have indicated otherwise. God is near the brokenhearted, not necessarily near the beautiful people whose lives seem so "blessed."

I am reminded of the stories of Moses and Elijah, whose experiences I had never actually compared. I believe there is a lesson for us to learn from Elijah after he fled from Jezebel and sought to find God and be reassured of His presence at Mount Horeb, where Moses had such a dramatic encounter with God:

2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." 3 And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." 5 And he lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." 6 Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you." 8 So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. 9 Then he came there to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 And he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." 11 So He said, "Go forth, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. 13 And it came about when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:2-14).

Elijah had been instructed by God to simply inform the king that the drought would shortly end because it was about to rain (1 Kings 18:1). Elijah seems to have thought up the great confrontation on Mount Carmel by himself.

It was a dramatic display of the power and presence of God, but it completely failed to bring the nation Israel to repentance. Elijah was devastated. He wanted to die. He was no better than his fathers, the prophets who had gone before him.

I have spoken on this text a number of times, but somehow I have always passed over the clearly stated fact that Elijah ended up on Mount Horeb, the "**mountain of God**" (1 Kings 19:8). In the strength of the food which the angel of the Lord provided (19:5-8), Elijah made his way to Mount Horeb. Did Elijah want a rerun of the events of Exodus 19:16-20? It would seem so:

16 So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17 And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. 19 When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses

spoke and God answered him with thunder. 20 And the LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up (Exodus 19:16-20).

Moses and the Israelites had a spectacular view of God's glory as He manifested His glory from atop the holy mountain. It would seem that Elijah wanted to reproduce this experience for his own reassurance:

11 So He said, "Go forth, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. 13 And it came about when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13).

I believe Elijah thought if he could but get to that holy mountain and reproduce the experience of Moses he would be overwhelmed by the presence of the Lord in a spectacular way. But even though Elijah saw some of the same things Moses did, God was not in any of these dramatic events. God's presence was revealed in a small, still voice. Occasionally, God may reveal Himself to us as He did to Moses but most often He will disclose Himself to us as He did to David (in Psalm 119) and Asaph (in Psalm 73). He will disclose Himself to us in the difficult times of our lives and in ways that we would not necessarily anticipate. Let us learn to rejoice in the presence of God in the little ways which do not seem as dramatic and exciting as we might wish.

Finally, the (omni) presence of God should inspire us to "practice the presence of God." I must admit I have heard this expression often, but I have never truly grasped what it meant "to practice the presence of God." As I now understand Paul's teaching on this matter, practicing the presence of God is living each day as though God were present--which He is! Paul's life was lived out before God and constantly viewed as being witnessed by our Lord (not to mention others). Let us remember that our conduct, our witnessing, our service, is always conducted before Him who is ever present (see Jeremiah 17:16; John 1:48; 2 Corinthians 2;17; 4:2; 7:12; 8:21; 12:19).

And let us look forward to that day when our Lord returns to this earth to defeat and destroy His enemies and deliver us to live forever in the presence of God, as we now say continually,

28 But as for me, the nearness of God is my good . . . (Psalm 73:28a).

## **Lesson 12: The Immutability of God**

### **Introduction**

After deciding to replace their automobile, a family I know finally determined their best course of action was to buy a brand new mini-van. Although it would be expensive, they planned to take good care of the vehicle and make it last for many years. While it was still virtually new, they took a trip. The one serpentine belt, which drives everything from the power steering and alternator to the water pump, broke, and the car overheated. They wondered how much damage the overheating had done, and I was not able to give them much encouragement. The dealer assured them a new belt fixed the car entirely. On their way home from a church picnic, they were caught in a sudden storm and pelted with golf ball-sized hail just long enough to give the car a whole new, rather dimpled look. Shortly after, while driving downtown, someone ran into the back of the mini-van damaging it even further. My friend told me they had reached the point where they stopped even washing the car.

My friend's "new" car aged rapidly in a short time. Things do change all too quickly. Most often, change is an unpleasant reality of life which we would avoid if we could. I recently came across one of our earliest church directories. Wow, have some of our folks ever changed! Some no longer have what they used to, and some of us have a lot more of some things than we had back then. One look at a 20-year old world map reveals the existence of nations which were not even conceived of 20 years ago. The recent changes in the former USSR came suddenly and unexpectedly.

Technology has seen perhaps the most dramatic changes in recent times. Computers I once dreamed of owning I now see in garage sales and choose to walk away from with hardly a twinge of temptation, even though the price may be under ten dollars. The computer on which I am writing this message is 50 times as fast as the first IBM desktop I used, which cost twice as much money. Things change so fast we cannot rely on a daily newspaper for up-to-the-minute news; we must have news programs all day long. A farmer we met recently has a computer terminal on his kitchen table running constantly so he can keep up to date.

Some changes are welcome; some are not. A great comfort for the Christian living in these turbulent, troubled times is the confidence we have that God does not change. Theologians refer to this attribute of God as the "immutability of God." *God does not change.* This truth is referred to a number of times in the Scriptures and even in the hymns we sing in church. Let us reflect on this great attribute, the immutability of God, before considering applications of this truth to our lives.

### **God Does Not Change**

29 "And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind"  
(1 Samuel 15:29).

Saul had become king of Israel. As such, he was to lead the Israelites into battle with the Amalekites. He was instructed by God to utterly destroy the king and every living creature, man, woman, child, and even all the cattle (1 Samuel 15:2-3). Saul only partially obeyed God's instructions, allowing the king to live and keeping the best of the cattle (verses 7-9). Saul simply did not take God's Word seriously. As a result, God took his kingdom away from him (verses 22-26). Saul then uttered a desperate plea to Samuel, hoping that God would restore his kingdom; instead, Samuel uttered the words of verse 29. Samuel informed Saul that God, the Glory of Israel, was not a man. But as the immutable God, He could not and would not alter His word or change His mind to reverse the consequences He had just pronounced upon Saul's sin.

Saul, like all too many people today, willfully disobeyed God's Word hoping God would somehow fail to do as He said. Saul had too little regard for God's Word and did not see how serious God is concerning

disobedience to His Word. He hoped God would also take His own Word lightly by reversing the sentence He had pronounced on the sinner. *God always takes His Word most seriously.* He not only expects and requires us to obey it, He most certainly will keep His Word regarding the punishment of those who disregard it. God, because He is God, is immutable, and we can be certain He will keep His Word. Everything else in creation is subject to change except the Creator, for He, as God, will not change:

12 But Thou, O LORD dost abide forever; And Thy name to all generations. . . 25 Of old Thou didst found the earth; And the heavens are the work of Thy hands. 26 Even they will perish, but Thou dost endure; And all of them will wear out like a garment; Like clothing Thou wilt change them, and they will be changed. 27 *But Thou art the same,* And Thy years will not come to an end. 28 The children of Thy servants will continue, And their descendants will be established before Thee” (Psalm 102:12, 25-28, emphasis mine).

6 “*For I, the LORD, do not change;* therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed” (Malachi 3:6, emphasis mine).

In Malachi, the prophet is warning the nation Israel of the coming wrath of God. He speaks of the coming of both John the Baptist and of Jesus, the Messiah (3:1). The day of His coming will be a day of wrath, and yet it will also be a day of deliverance and salvation. No one can endure the day of His coming, apart from divine grace (verse 2), and yet somehow Israel will be purified, and her sacrifices and worship will thus be acceptable to God (verses 3-4). God will draw His people near for judgment (verse 6). In the midst of these words of warning and comfort, the Lord speaks of His immutability as the reason Israel is not totally consumed in divine judgment (verse 6).

What irony when we compare this text with 1 Samuel 15:29. Saul’s “hope” was in the possibility that God might change and not carry out the consequences for Saul’s sin. Malachi’s prophecy tells us the exact opposite. Like Saul, Israel has sinned, and divine judgment is certain. The immutability of God means that God will follow through with judgment. It also means God will follow through with His promise of salvation. How can one find comfort and be assured of salvation while also being assured of divine judgment? The answer is simple when viewed from the perspective of the cross of Christ. God’s certain judgment fell on His Son, Jesus Christ, and thus by faith in Him, men are saved from their sins and from God’s wrath. Our hope is not in wishful thinking that God will not follow through with punishing sin; our hope is in the certainty that, in Christ, God has judged sin in the flesh once for all so that we may be saved. The immutability of God is a significant part of our hope, for He who has promised to judge sin is the same God who has promised to save us from our sins by judging sin in the person and work of Jesus Christ, His Son.

7 Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever. 9 Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefited (Hebrews 13:7-9).

The Book of Hebrews was written to Jewish saints who were beginning to face persecution, probably from their unbelieving Jewish brethren. They were tempted to fall away by renouncing their faith in Christ and embracing Judaism once again. The author of this epistle has repeatedly demonstrated that the old Mosaic covenant was never intended to save men but to prepare them for the new covenant which was fulfilled in Christ. This new covenant is “**better,**” a key word in Hebrews, and should not be forsaken to return to the old. These saints are exhorted to persist in their faith, even in the midst of persecution. The exhortation to follow in the footsteps of the faithful men through whom they came to salvation is immediately followed by this reminder of the immutability of Jesus Christ.

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

This statement is very important, for it is a claim of deity. Only God is immutable; only He cannot and does not change. For the writer to tell us that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever is to remind us that He is God. No wonder His sacrifice is superior to any and all Old Testament sacrifices! It also is an incentive for faith. Who better to entrust our salvation and eternal well-being to than He who is not only God, but He who cannot and does not change. Our eternal destiny could not be in better hands.

17 Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow (James 1:17).

Like the writer to the Hebrews, James writes to those who are suffering for their faith. He instructs them to rejoice when they enter into trials, knowing that this is divinely intended to strengthen our faith by producing endurance (James 1:2-4; compare Romans 5:3-5). If one lacks the wisdom to know how to respond to the trials of life, he need only to ask God for wisdom. He must not waver in doubt, for such a person is unstable in all his ways (verses 6-8). Those who persevere under trial will, once he has been approved, receive the crown of life (verse 12).

While God tests us through trials and tribulations, He never tempts us to sin. Such temptation comes from another source. The world and the devil certainly seek to lead us astray, but we must also look within ourselves for the explanation for our sin. A man who is tempted and then sins does so because he has given way to his own lusts. We most certainly must not blame God (verses 13-15). God is not the source of evil, but the source of good. Every good thing comes from God as a gift. Only good things come from God. Since He is immutable, we can say this is the rule, and there are no exceptions. The God who is good, and the source of all that is good, is consistently good to those who are His own (verse 17; see also Romans 8:28).

In these four texts, two of which come from the Old Testament and two from the New, we see that the immutability of God is clearly taught in the Bible and that it is an intensely practical truth. Before considering the practical implications of God's immutability, let us first deal briefly with two circumstances in which one might wrongly conclude God is not immutable.

On several occasions, the Scriptures speak of God "repenting" or "changing His mind" (see Genesis 6:5-6; Exodus 32:14; Jonah 3:10; 2 Samuel 24:16). Do such texts undermine our confidence in the immutability of God? Most certainly not! *First*, we must clarify what immutability means. Immutability applies to the nature of God. He is always God, and He is always infinitely powerful. Never will God fail to accomplish His will due to a change in His power to accomplish His purposes. *Second*, God is immutable with regard to His character or attributes:

"... God is immutable in His attributes. Whatever the attributes of God were before the universe was called into existence, they are precisely the same now, and will remain so forever. Necessarily so; for they are the very perfections, the essential qualities of His being. *Semper idem* (always the same) is written across every one of them. His power is unabated, His wisdom undiminished, His holiness unsullied. The attributes of God can no more change than deity can cease to be. His veracity is immutable, for His Word is '**forever settled in heaven**' (Ps 119:89).

His love is eternal: '**I have loved thee with an everlasting love**' (Jer 31:3) and, '**Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end**' (Jn 13:1).

His mercy ceases not, for it is '**everlasting**' (Ps 100:5)."<sup>1</sup>

When Jonah protested against God's dealings with the Ninevites, he made it clear God was not acting inconsistently with His character but rather He was acting predictably. Jonah sought to flee from the presence of God in a futile attempt to thwart God from acting consistently with His character:

1 But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry. 2 And he prayed to the LORD and said, "Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jonah 4:1-2).

When God "**relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon**" the Ninevites, God was not only acting consistently with His character; He was acting consistently with His Word:

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in the Godhead* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), pp. 35-36.

7 “At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; 8 if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it” (Jeremiah 18:7-8).

This very hope prompted the king of Ninevah to repent, along with the rest of the city (Jonah 3:5-9). God’s actions are predictable because He is immutable. This was the hope of the repentant king of Ninevah and the dread of the pagan-hearted prophet, Jonah.

*Third*, God’s purposes and promises are immutable (see Romans 11:29).<sup>2</sup> God finishes what He starts. This was the basis for Moses’ appeal to God in Exodus 32 (verses 11-14). Here, God’s actions in response to Moses’ appeal were not a contradiction to His immutability but an outworking of that immutability.

The various dispensations evident in the Bible<sup>3</sup> are not a contradiction to God’s immutability. God’s immutability does not preclude Him from incorporating different economies into His overall plan of redemption. In Romans 9-11, the apostle Paul shows how all of history is a part of God’s one eternal plan. The failure of the nation Israel and the salvation of the Gentiles were a part of this plan. The Old Testament Scriptures frequently spoke of such matters, although the Jews were not open to listen or to learn. Early in His earthly ministry, Jesus reminded His Jewish brethren of God’s purpose to bless Gentiles as well as Jews, consistent with the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1-3) and with many other texts (see Luke 4:16-27; Romans 9-11).

### Peter and the Immutability of God

As I have considered the subject of God’s immutability, I have become impressed with Peter’s emphasis of this reality. The immutability of God permeates his thinking and is the basis for much of what Peter teaches. We first find this doctrine referred to in Peter’s sermon at Pentecost recorded in Acts 2. Peter was proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, not only as a historical fact to which the apostles were witnesses, but also as fulfillment of the Scriptures (see Acts 2:22-35). He was also arguing that the resurrection of our Lord was a theological and practical necessity, stemming from the doctrine of the immutability of God:

22 “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know--23 this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. 24 And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. 25 For David says of Him, ‘I WAS ALWAYS BEHOLDING THE LORD IN MY PRESENCE; FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, THAT I MAY NOT BE SHAKEN. 26 THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED; MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL ABIDE IN HOPE; 27 BECAUSE THOU WILT NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW THY HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY” (Acts 2:22-27).

Peter maintains that “**it was impossible**” for our Lord not to rise from the dead (verse 24). Why is this so? Peter then quotes from Psalm 16, verses 8-11, where the prophecy states, “**NOR ALLOW THY HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.**” Decay is a change in state, a downward change. Since Jesus Christ is God and God cannot change, God cannot decay. It was not impossible for Jesus to rise from the dead as some might contend. Rather, it was impossible for Him not to rise since He is immutable, and corruption is change. There may have been the stench of death in the tomb of Lazarus after three days (see John

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<sup>2</sup> Some of God’s purposes are temporal and temporary. The Mosaic covenant, for example, was a temporary provision which did not in any way alter or set aside His eternal covenant with Abraham (see Galatians 3:17).

<sup>3</sup> It should be said that even non-dispensationalists believe in dispensations, that is in certain distinctions in God’s program over the course of biblical history. Disagreement arises not over the fact of such differences but over the interpretation of these differences. As a rule, dispensationalists tend to emphasize the differences while covenant theologians emphasize the unity of the whole plan which encompasses the various dispensations.

11:39), but there was no stench in the grave where they laid Jesus. It was impossible for Him to undergo corruption. The resurrection of our Lord was a theological necessity.

In Peter's first epistle, the immutability of God and His works are prominent. In 1 Peter 1:3-9, Peter speaks of our salvation as that which is imperishable rather than that which is perishable. He speaks of our inheritance as imperishable (verse 4) and also our faith (verse 7). In verses 18-19, Peter speaks of the shed blood of our Lord as precious because it is imperishable. The atonement by which our salvation was accomplished was by means of an imperishable sacrifice so that our salvation is likewise imperishable. In verses 22-25, Peter goes on to speak of God's Word as imperishable. It is this Word which served as the imperishable seed by which we were begotten. Since our birth is through an imperishable seed, not only is the Word imperishable, but also our life and our love which is born of the Word. Finally, in 1 Peter 5:4, Peter speaks to elders of their imperishable reward, the "**unfading crown of glory.**" Our salvation is secure because it is imperishable. Thus our salvation, like God, is immutable.

### Conclusion

The immutability of God is far from just a theological observation or a hypothetical truth. It is a life-transforming truth from which we can draw a number of implications for our lives.

#### First, the immutability of God has tremendous implications regarding the Bible, the Word of God.

J. I. Packer, in his excellent book, *Knowing God*, includes a chapter on the immutability of God, where he emphasizes the relevance of this attribute to our lives as Christians:

"Where is the sense of distance and difference, then, between believers in Bible time and ourselves? It is excluded. On what grounds? On the grounds that God does not change. Fellowship with Him, trust in His word, living by faith, 'standing on the promises of God', are essentially the same realities for us today as they were for Old and New Testament believers. This thought brings comfort as we enter into the perplexities of each day: amid all the changes and uncertainties of life in a nuclear age, God and His Christ remain the same-- almighty to save. But the thought brings a searching challenge too. If our God is the same as the God of New Testament believers, how can we justify ourselves in resting content with an experience of communion with Him, and a level of Christian conduct, that falls so far below theirs? *If God is the same, this is not an issue that any one of us can evade.*"<sup>4</sup>

The immutability of God is closely related to the immutability of the Word of God (Matthew 24:35; 1 Peter 1:22-25), which means His Word is never out of date, never irrelevant to our lives or our times.

#### Second, the immutability of God is an assurance for Christians

Assurance provides stability and confidence in times of uncertainty and circumstances that appear threatening. Because our God is unchanging, His promises and His purposes are certain; they cannot, and they will not fail. We have an incorruptible sacrifice, the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has accomplished eternal redemption for all who receive it (1 Peter 1:3-9, 17-21; Hebrews 9:12). We have a "**kingdom which cannot be shaken**" (Hebrews 12:28). We have a God who deals with us consistently with His character and His Word (see James 1:12-18). We have a Great High Priest who "**abides forever and holds His priesthood permanently**" (Hebrews 7:24). Our hope and confidence is not in the "**uncertainty of riches**" but rather in "**God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy**" (1 Timothy 6:17). The prophet Isaiah contrasted the "**changing creation with the unchanging Creator**" as an encouragement to endurance and faithfulness, even in the dark days of history (Isaiah 50:7-51:16).

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<sup>4</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 72.

### **Third, the immutability of God is a standard for Christians.**

As the **“sons of God,”** we are to emulate God, to reflect Him in our daily lives (see Matthew 5:43-48). While there is much need for change in our lives (of which we will speak in a moment), there is also the need for us not to change. We are not to allow the world to change us by conforming us to its ungodly mold (Romans 12:1-2). We are not to change by losing heart and abandoning our confession of faith (see Hebrews 6:11-20; 10:19-25, 32-39). We are not to change by forsaking our commitments when fulfilling them is costly to us (Psalm 15:4).

### **Fourth, the immutability of God is also an awesome warning that God will fulfill His Word regarding judgment for sin.**

God’s immutability is not only a comforting assurance concerning the blessings which God has promised, but also an awesome warning that God will fulfill His Word regarding judgment for sin. When God spoke to Judah concerning the judgment about to come upon this nation for their sins, He spoke of a judgment that was certain, which would not change because He would not change His mind:

27 This is what the LORD says: “The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely. 28 Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark, because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back.” Jeremiah 4:27-28

In Jeremiah 18:7-8, God promised He would relent of the disaster He pronounced against a wicked nation if they would repent. Here in Jeremiah 4, God indicates the judgment of which He speaks is irreversible. There is a time for repentance, and during that time men may repent with the assurance that God will forgive their sins and turn from the judgment He threatened. But the time for repentance ends, and then men must face the consequences of their sins. In Jeremiah 4, God urges Judah to repent (see verse 14), but this plea will be ignored, and so judgment will come. Once the time for repentance has passed, God’s wrath is sure to follow. From this point, God will not turn from the judgment He has announced through His prophets. Such was the case in the days of Noah. The gospel was proclaimed for over 100 years, but once God shut the door of the ark, the time for repentance was past and the time for judgment had arrived. God will most certainly not **“change”** regarding judgment, once the time for repentance has passed. Do not err by looking upon God’s grace and mercy in giving a time for repentance as an evidence of divine apathy and assurance that God will not judge men for their sins. *Judgment is certain and sure for sinners who rebel against God.*

“Here is terror for the wicked. Those who defy Him, break His laws, have no concern for His glory, but live their lives as though He did not exist, must not suppose that, when at the last they shall cry to Him for mercy, He will alter His will, revoke His word, and rescind His awful threatenings. No, He has declared, **‘Therefore will I also deal in fury: mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity: and though they cry in mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them’** (Eze 8:18). God will not deny Himself to gratify their lusts. God is holy, unchangingly so. Therefore God hates sin, eternally hates it. Hence the eternity of the punishment of all who die in their sins.

The divine immutability, like the cloud which interposed between the Israelites and the Egyptian army, has a dark as well as a light side. It insures the execution of His threatenings, as well as the performance of His promises; and destroys the hope which the guilty fondly cherish, that He will be all lenity to His frail and erring creatures, and that they will be much more lightly dealt with than the declarations of His own Word would lead us to expect. We oppose to these deceitful and presumptuous speculations the solemn truth, that God is unchanging in veracity and purpose, in faithfulness and justice (J. Dick, 1850).”<sup>5</sup>

### **Fifth, the wicked frequently misapply the immutability of God, making it a pretext for living in sin without fear of retribution.**

Sinful men and women often abuse the doctrine of the immutability of God. The immutable God is the One who is the sustainer of all things. Of course, all things continue as they have from the foundation of

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in the Godhead* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 37.



the world (Col 1:16-17; see also 2 Peter 3:3-4). The constancy of the world in which we live is a matter of common grace, and it is one which testifies of His goodness and grace. Unbelievers misinterpret the consistency of the order of creation, making of it a “proof” that God is not going to judge the world for sin (2 Peter 3:3-4). How then can we be certain of His judgment? (1) Because God’s Word warns us of judgment, and God’s Word, like God, does not change. (2) Because Bible history is filled with examples of God’s intervention into human history to judge sin. This judgment sometimes takes a spectacular form, such as seen in the flood (Genesis 6-7) or in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). At other times, judgment is delayed so that men might repent and be saved. And sometimes God’s judgment comes in a form not readily recognized as divine judgment. This is the case in Romans 1:18-32. God’s wrath is evident in allowing men to suffer the downward degradation and corruption of sin so that they are defiled both in mind and body. He judges sinners by allowing them to persist in their sin without divine interruption, thus reaping the whirlwind of consequences for sin. Today in our culture many look at immorality, perversion, and twisted thinking as progress, as a blessing. But we should see it for what it is--divine judgment--a small sampling of what is to come.

Sixth, the unchanging God is the only means by which sinful men can be changed so as to enter into God’s eternal blessings.

While God does not change, sinful men must change in order to enter into the kingdom of God. This “change” is from one who is a vile sinner, deserving of God’s eternal wrath, to a forgiven sinner, who now stands clothed in the righteousness of God, through faith in Christ. *It is God who provides the means whereby sinners can be changed, transformed to new creations, forgiven, justified, having an imperishable hope. What is required of men is to repent, to cease thinking and acting as they once did, acknowledge their sins, and trust in Jesus Christ.*

This is not a good work which men do in order to gain God’s favor. Rather, it is a good work which God accomplishes in our lives, the result of His goodness and grace. The only change God will accept is the change which He produces in and through us, through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. There is no greater dread than knowing we are sinners, and that God not only hates sin but He will certainly judge sinners. *There is no comfort to be found in the immutability of God for the sinner.* But for those who have trusted in God’s provision for sinners, *there is no greater comfort than to know that the God who chose us, called us, and promised us eternal salvation changes not.*

## Lesson 13: The Joy of God

### Introduction

I must confess I have never been big on the “smiley face” found on bumper stickers and personal letters. In particular, I have never cared for the “smiley face” as a Christian logo or symbol. Sadly, if the truth were known, most people do think of God in terms of a frowning face. God does hate sin, and if I understand the Scriptures correctly, He even hates sinners. He is a God of wrath who is angry toward sinners. But this is only one of God’s emotions, only one aspect of His character. God is also a God who finds great pleasure in His creatures and creation. Our God is both joyful and the source of our joy. How grateful we should be for this attribute of our great God.

As one looks through many of the works on the attributes of God, the topic of the “**joy of the Lord**” is not often found. For some reason, the “**joy of the Lord**” seems to be a neglected aspect of God’s nature and character. Years ago, one of my seminary professors called this to our attention when he referred to 1 Timothy 1:

9 realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers 10 and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, 11 according to the glorious gospel of the *blessed* God, with which I have been entrusted (1 Timothy 1:9-11, emphasis mine).

The word *blessed* used here by Paul is the same term our Lord employed in the Sermon on the Mount, which is rendered “**blessed**” in the King James Version, the New King James Version, the NIV and the NASB. J. B. Phillips and a few others render the term “happy.” My professor indicated that one could render the expression in 1 Timothy 1:11, the “happy God,” a suggestion which took me by surprise. The term employed could be used in this sense, and biblical theology does not prohibit it. For some reason, we seem to seldom think of God as being happy.

Unfortunately, the word “happy” has been redefined and so trivialized in our culture that it is little wonder we hesitate to use it in reference to Christians or to our God. Yet I believe we should redefine and seek to reclaim the term. For the present, however, we may be safer to use the term joy, a term more frequently used of God and of Christians. In Nehemiah, we find this familiar statement:

18 “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

I always thought of the joy referred to here as *the joy which God gives*, and so it is. I now realize this does not say quite enough. It is also *the joy which God possesses and experiences*. God gives us joy because He is joyful. He is the source of joy, just as He is the source of love, of truth, of mercy, and so on. Joy is both a description of God and a description of what He gives.

We will begin by surveying the Scriptures in search of evidences of God’s delight and pleasure (His joy). We shall next consider the joy of our Lord Jesus Christ, as portrayed in the Old Testament prophecies and in the New Testament. Finally, we will attempt to show how the “**joy of the Lord**” can impact the lives of men, especially those who are true believers in Jesus Christ. May this lesson be a reflection of God’s joy and a source of true joy for each of us.

### The Joy of God the Father

Some may say I am overreaching here, but it seems as though God took pleasure--He found joy--in His creation. Repeatedly in Genesis 1 we find the expression, “**and God saw that it was good**” (see verses 4, 10, 12, 17, 21, 25, 31). I believe Moses was indicating God’s pleasure by repeatedly telling us that God saw His creation to be good. When someone serves us a piece of homemade pie and we exclaim, “This is

good!” we are expressing not just our approval, but our pleasure. Often, when I “create” something in my garage, I find myself going back to it several times in the next few days taking pleasure in what I have made. The Father seems to have joy in what His hands have made. When men sin, God’s joy turns to sorrow:

5 The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. 6 The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. 7 So the Lord said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth--men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air--for I am grieved that I have made them” (Genesis 6:5-7).

God’s creation enters into the joy of its Creator:

8 And they who dwell in the ends of the earth stand in awe of Thy signs; Thou dost make the dawn and the sunset shout for joy (Psalm 65:8). 13 The meadows are clothed with flocks, And the valleys are covered with grain; They shout for joy, yes, they sing (Psalm 65:13).

12 Let the field exult, and all that is in it. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy (Psalm 96:12). 8 Let the rivers clap their hands; Let the mountains sing together for joy (Psalm 98:8).

God the Father takes pleasure in choosing or selecting. God delighted over the nation Israel, selecting this people as the object of His blessings, just as He would also delight over Israel as the object of His wrath (Deuteronomy 28:63), not because God takes pleasure in the death of men, even wicked men (Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11), but because God disciplines His “**son**” in order to bring him to godliness (see Proverbs 3:12; Hebrews 12:3-10).

God likewise took pleasure in making David king over Israel and then in rescuing him from danger.

20 “He also brought me forth into a broad place; He rescued me, because He delighted in me” (2 Samuel 22:20).

9 “Blessed be the Lord your God who delighted in you to set you on the throne of Israel; because the Lord loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness” (1 Kings 10:9).

### **The Joy of Jesus, the Promised Messiah**

According to the prophet Isaiah, the promised Messiah is the One in whom the Father delights (42:1). He is described as the One who will “**delight in the fear of the Lord**” (11:3). And, He is the One who will be characterized by joy, a joy which surpasses that of all of His brethren:

6 Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Thy kingdom. 7 Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated wickedness; Therefore God, Thy God, has anointed Thee With the oil of joy above Thy fellows (Psalm 45:6-7).

The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the Lord Jesus as being motivated to carry out His work on the cross of Calvary by the joy into which He would enter by His sacrificial atonement:

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Jesus told His disciples they would have great joy. The joy they would experience was first and foremost His joy, a joy into which they would also enter.

11 “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11).

13 “But now I come to Thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy made full in themselves” (John 17:13).

In Matthew 25, Jesus told a parable which has much to teach us about joy.

14 “For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves, and entrusted his possessions to them. 15 And to one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went

on his journey. 16 Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. 17 In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. 18 But he who received the one talent went away and dug in the ground, and hid his master's money. 19 Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 And the one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me; see, I have gained five more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, *enter into the joy of your master.*' 22 'The one also who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted to me two talents; see, I have gained two more talents.' 23 'His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; *enter into the joy of your master.*' 24 'And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed. 25 And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground; see, you have what is yours.' 26 But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I scattered no seed. 27 Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. 28 Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' 29 For to everyone who has shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 30 And cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:14-30, emphasis mine).

This parable has much to teach us about Christian service. We must conclude that of these three servants, only the first two were true believers. The third "**slave**" was cast into outer darkness, a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (verse 30). The first two "**slaves**" were good and faithful, and the third was unfaithful and wicked. I find it interesting and instructive to consider this story from the perspective of joy.

The first two slaves were faithful, and their reward was to "**enter into the joy**" of their master. Do these words not indicate that their master was joyful and that these slaves were blessed by entering into his joy with him? The master was (or would be) joyful, and his faithful slaves would enter into this joy as well. The "**master**" in this story most surely represents our Lord and the faithful "**servants,**" His followers. The blessings of the master and his slaves are summed up by the word "**joy.**"

This third slave fascinates me. In the past, I have always focused on what this wicked, lazy slave did not do. This time, I am especially interested in why this slave failed to do as he should have done. Was this slave lazy because he did not work to gain a profit for his master? Of course. But was he not evil in thinking wrongly of his master? He thought of his master as one who expected a profit where he made no provisions.

24 "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed" (Matthew 25:24).

This slave's assessment of his master was wrong. It is true that Jesus judges this man on the basis of his view of his master, but it is nevertheless a wrong perception. God is not a cruel master, who expects us to gain a profit where He has given us no provision. He deals with us in grace. He gives us the means to do that which He expects and requires. We can fulfill our responsibilities to Him only by His grace. This is why we can only boast in Him and not in what we have done. This slave was wicked because he did not see his master as gracious and (may I be so bold as to say) happy. The reward of the faithful slaves was to enter into their master's joy. The master was joyful. The faithful servants were to enter into this joy. And the wicked man had no grasp of God's joy at all. How many of us have this same distorted view of God as a grouchy, demanding slave master rather than a joyful master into whose joy we too may enter? And the service He requires of us even now is to be done joyfully rather than sullenly.

Luke 15 is yet another example of the joyful disposition of our God. God's joy (at the repentance and salvation of sinners) is contrasted with the sullenness of the scribes and Pharisees and their grumbling over our Lord's association with tax-gatherers and sinners (15:1-2). In response, Jesus tells two parables, both of which make a point of God's joy over the fact that one who was lost has been found:

3 And He told them this parable, saying, 4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? 5 And when he

has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, *‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’* 7 I tell you that in the same way, *there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 *“Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’ 10 “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents”* (Luke 15:3-10, emphasis mine).

In both stories, something was lost, sought after, and found. When the lost object was recovered, the one who searched for it rejoiced and invited others to join in the celebration in the joy of this recovery. The lost items--a sheep and a coin--were found because the owner who had lost them sought for them.

Jesus makes it clear that these two stories are understood as illustrative of His seeking after lost sinners and then rejoicing over their salvation. One of the **“joys set before Him”** (Hebrews 12:2) was the salvation of lost sinners. Others were expected to rejoice with our Lord over the fact that lost sinners were coming to faith in Him and were “found” in Him. The scribes and Pharisees could not enter into this joy because they were still lost and did not wish to be found. They were angry that Jesus was manifesting grace toward these unworthy sinners. They did not want such folks in “their” kingdom.

The words spoken here by our Lord are very familiar to me, but somehow I have failed to take them seriously enough. I always thought Jesus was saying it was the angels who rejoiced at the salvation of lost sinners. No doubt the angels do rejoice, but this is not the emphasis of the text. In the first story, Jesus said there was **“joy in heaven”** over the one who repented (verse 7). In the second story, Jesus declared there was **“joy in the presence of the angels.”** The angels are not alone in their rejoicing; the angels are rejoicing along with God. God is rejoicing in heaven and in the presence of the angels. The implication of our Lord’s words is that because God rejoices over the salvation of one lost sinner, the angels do likewise. In the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, they **“enter into the joy of their Master.”** The fact that the scribes and Pharisees were not rejoicing is therefore a serious problem. They are not in harmony with heaven and, most of all, with God. Why? Because they do not believe they are sinners, and they do not want God’s grace. They do not want to think of themselves as citizens who have entered into the kingdom of God in the same way as these tax-gatherers and sinners. In fact, they are not saved at all. Like the wicked slave of Matthew 25, they are unbelievers, who think badly of the Master and who have no share in His kingdom or in His joy.

The last half of Luke 15 is the story of the prodigal son, which continues to emphasize the dramatic contrast between God and the host of heaven and the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees. The prodigal son repents and returns to his father. The father rejoices and calls for a time of celebration and rejoicing. Does the older brother rejoice that the lost son has returned? Most certainly not! He is angry with the brother and with his father as well. He cannot understand why he has not been allowed to celebrate. He oozes self-righteousness rather than gratitude and joy, which should characterize a sinner’s response to the grace of God in both his life and the lives of others. The father of the prodigal once again portrays the joy of the Heavenly Father at the repentance and conversion of lost sinners.

### The Holy Spirit and Joy

Lest we think joy or “happiness” is an attribute only of the Father and the Son, let me call your attention to these verses which link the joy of the believer with the Holy Spirit:

52 And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52).

17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).

13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

The Holy Spirit is the means by which the joy of our Lord, the joy of our Master, is conveyed to the believer. The presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit produces joy in the life of the Christian. We must imply from these verses that those who are not Christians, in whom the Holy Spirit does not dwell, do not and cannot experience God's joy. This was certainly true of the scribes and Pharisees described in Luke 15 and elsewhere in the Gospels.

### Conclusion

God is a God of joy, a "happy God," if you would. He rejoices in His creation, and He especially rejoices in the salvation of lost sinners. If we are God's children, then we are in tune with the heart and character of God and should thus be characterized by joy as well. This joy comes from God and is mediated through the Holy Spirit to every Christian. **"The joy of the Lord"** should characterize our service and our worship. It is a joy that will be even greater in heaven, a joy we will enter into in heaven. For the Christian, joy is not an option, for we are commanded to experience and to express joy as Christians:

12 "Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:12).

20 "Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

36 "Already he who reaps is receiving wages, and is gathering fruit for life eternal; that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together" (John 4:36).

20 "Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned to joy" (John 16:20).

22 "Therefore you too now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy away from you" (John 16:22).

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

10 And again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people" (Romans 15:10).

26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it (1 Corinthians 12:26).

6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth (1 Corinthians 13:6).

11 Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you (2 Corinthians 13:11).

27 For it is written, "Rejoice, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; For more are the children of the desolate Than of the one who has a husband" (Galatians 4:27).

18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice (Philippians 1:18).

17 But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. 18 And you too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me (Philippians 2:17-18).

1 Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you (Philippians 3:1).

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! (Philip. 4:4).

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions. (Col. 1:24).

9 For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account (1 Thessalonians 3:9).

16 Rejoice always (1 Thessalonians 5:16).

6 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials (1 Peter 1:6).

8 and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8).

13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation (1 Peter 4:13).

7 “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7).

You might think that lacking joy is one of the lesser evils, but this is not the case. God spoke of Israel’s sin as being evident by her lack of joy:

45 “So all these curses shall come on you and pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you would not obey the Lord your God by keeping His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you. 46 And they shall become a sign and a wonder on you and your descendants forever. 47 Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and a glad heart, for the abundance of all things; 48 therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord shall send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in the lack of all things; and He will put an iron yoke on your neck until He has destroyed you” (Deuteronomy 28:45-48).

The lack of a glad heart was the source of Israel’s sin and divine judgment. Lack of joy leads to sin. And, conversely, sin leads to a lack of joy:

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me away from Thy presence, And do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, And sustain me with a willing spirit. 13 Then I will teach transgressors Thy ways, And sinners will be converted to Thee (Psalm 51:10-13)

In addition, we see that joy is the motivation for Christian witness and service. All too often we try to motivate Christians to witness by making them feel guilty. This text indicates that the “**joy of Thy salvation**” acts as the motivator of our service, not guilt or fear. “**The joy of the Lord is our strength**” (Nehemiah 8:10). The Spirit of God and the Word of God are two primary means by which the joy of the Lord is conveyed to men (see Psalm 119:111; Jeremiah 15:16; verses on the Holy Spirit and joy above).

We do a great disservice to God and others when we portray God in a way that matches the false perception of the wicked slave of Matthew 25. The wicked slave feared his master, but rather than prompting him to serve his master, his fear produced just the opposite response. God takes great pleasure and finds great joy in His creations, including the new creation of believers in Jesus Christ. He also delights in the growth and godliness of His people.

Joy serves as a tremendous source of guidance concerning the “will of God.” Many think and speak of the “will of God” as some great mystery, difficult to discern and even harder to defend. But the Bible does not speak of God’s will this way. In Romans 7, Paul did not say the will of God was hard to know; he said that it was impossible to do. He knew what was right, he just did not do it. He knew what was wrong, yet he persisted in doing it. It is not the knowing of God’s will, but the doing of it, which is hard.

If you want to know the will of God, approach the decisions you must make in life by this standard: What pleases God, what gives Him joy, and what grieves God? This is the way Paul approached life:

9 Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him (2 Corinthians 5:9).

10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord (Ephesians 5:10).

20 Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, 21 equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20-21).

The Bible leaves no doubt about what pleases and displeases God. God delights in His people (Psalm 149:4). He finds joy in uprightness (1 Chronicles 29:17) and loyalty (Hosea 6:6) and undying love (Micah 7:18). He is pleased with lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness (Jeremiah 9:24). He delights in the “**sons**” whom He disciplines (Proverbs 3:12; see Hebrews 12:3-13). He loves just weights (Proverbs 11:1) and the blameless (Proverbs 11:20). He has pleasure in those who deal faithfully (Proverbs 12:22). God

does not delight in mere religious rituals, divorced from godly living (Psalm 51:16-17; see also verses 18 and 19). Those things which impress us God takes no pleasure in, such as the strength of a horse or the legs of a man (Psalm 147:10-11). He finds no joy in fools (Ecclesiastes 5:4) or in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11).

Note carefully that the world's form of "joy" is not the same joy which the Christian possesses. The two "joys" are very different. In fact, the Christian can be distinguished from the unbeliever by those things which are the source of our joy. Evil men delight in their abominations (Isaiah 66:3) and choose that in which God does not delight (Isaiah 65:12; 66:4). They do not delight in the Word of God (Jeremiah 6:10). They are pleased with a thief, and with adulterers (Psalm 50:18), and in wickedness (2 Thessalonians 2:12).

The child of God has a very different source of pleasure or delight. His joy is in the Lord (Psalm 37:4; 43:4), from His Word (Psalm 1:2; 112:1; 119:16, 24, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174). He has joy in doing God's will (Psalm 40:8) and in praising God (Psalm 147:1). He chooses that which is pleasing to God (Isaiah 56:4). He rejoices in justice (Proverbs 21:15). His delight is not in personal, selfish, sensual pleasures, but he finds pleasure in God:

13 "If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, And shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, From seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, 14 Then you will take delight in the Lord, And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 58:13-14).

So many non-Christians seem to think that becoming a Christian spells the end of pleasure and the commencement of a dull and joyless life. The term "puritan" or "puritanical" is far from a compliment to anyone today, because the Puritans are thought of as a pleasureless people of the past. Such characterization of the Puritans is simply not true.<sup>1</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. *There is no joy like that of knowing God and serving Him, no joy like that of knowing that our sins are forgiven and we are right with God through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.* There is no joy that endures pain and suffering and persecution like the joy of the Christian, whose hope and joy are in the Lord, and not in our circumstances.

Author John Piper has recently taken up the theme of pleasure in a refreshing way which I recommend to the reader. His first book entitled, *Desiring God: The Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, was followed with *The Pleasures of God*, which focuses on the attributes of God. More recently, he has authored a book entitled, *Let The Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*. Piper sometimes tends to contrast pleasure or joy with duty, when the two should be viewed together. Our duty should be our delight. Nevertheless, I strongly recommend his writings as a source of edification and a stimulus to the pursuit of joy.

Piper says something very important about joy or pleasure. He insists that it is not wrong for a Christian to have pleasure or to seek pleasure; it is only wrong to seek pleasure in the wrong place. Let us seek joy in God and in serving and worshipping Him. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

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<sup>1</sup> I recommend for your understanding of the Puritans J. I. Packer's excellent book, *A Quest For Godliness*, a study of the Puritans which corrects many contemporary misconceptions (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990). I also recommend *Worldly Saints*, subtitled "The Puritans As They Really Were," by Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986).



**Lesson 14:**  
**The Invisibility of God**  
**(Genesis 32:22-30; Exodus 24:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:17)**

**Introduction**

One finds little on the subject of God's invisibility among the books on the attributes of God. Some may reason that God's invisibility is obvious. Because we cannot see God, why attempt to prove He is invisible? Another might look upon God's invisibility as a problem, an embarrassment, perhaps even a hindrance to faith and godly living. But this simply is not so. We should remind ourselves of Jesus' words concerning His departure from this earth, and thus His invisibility, as we begin our study:

18 "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 After a little while the world will behold Me no more; but you will behold Me; because I live, you shall live also. 20 In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. 21 He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him" (John 14:18-21).

7 "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. 8 And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; 10 and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me; 11 and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged" (John 16:7-11).

16 "A little while, and you will no longer behold Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me" (John 16:16).

We might wrongly suppose Jesus is saying to His disciples that they see Him now, but shortly He will be invisible for three days, and then visible once again after His resurrection. I do not believe He is saying this at all. Jesus is saying that His disciples see Him physically at the moment, but after His death, burial, ascension, and the coming of the promised Holy Spirit, they will "see" Him in a much clearer way. He will speak to them clearly and openly, and they will understand (something not true of His teaching while on the earth with them--see Matthew 15:17; 16:11; Luke 2:50; 9:45; John 10:6; 20:9). And while He will be invisible to the world after His ascension, He will be very evident to those who believe in Him. They will sense His presence more surely, and He will no longer dwell *among* them but *in* them. The "invisible" presence of our Lord is better than His visible presence was. We are privileged to know God more intimately now after our Lord's death, resurrection, and ascension, than men ever knew Him before.

Some may believe the Bible is self-contradicting regarding God's invisibility. Some texts clearly indicate that God is invisible, that He cannot be seen:

18 No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him (John 1:18).

17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:17).

But there are also texts where men claim to have seen God:

30 So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved" (Genesis 32:30).

11 Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent (Exodus 33:11).

14 and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that Thou, O Lord, art in the midst of this people, for Thou, O Lord, art seen eye to eye, while Thy cloud stands over them; and Thou dost go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night (Numbers 14:14).

Should the Christian throw up his hands in despair? Is the Bible "full of errors and inconsistencies," as some skeptics have alleged? We will begin by addressing these seeming contradictions. Then we will

consider the invisibility of God and the visible incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, we will address some of the numerous implications of the doctrine of the invisibility of God.

### **Considering Apparent Contradictions**

In light of the statements of some texts that God is invisible and others that God has been seen by men, let us lay down applicable biblical truths to help us resolve these apparent contradictions.

#### **(1) God has no physical form.**

12 “Then the Lord spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form--only a voice” (Deuteronomy 4:12).

37 “And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form” (John 5:37).

Both the Old Testament and the New indicate to us that God has no form, that is, God has no physical body.

#### **(2) God is spirit.**

The reason for this is explained by our Lord in His words to the woman at the well:

24 “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

This woman made reference to the dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans over the place where God was to be worshipped. The Jews were to worship God at Jerusalem, and Jesus could have corrected her by pointing this out. But He did not do so. Jesus informed her that because of His incarnation, worship would never be the same. Specifically, worship would no longer be restricted to any one place. Men were to have worshipped God in Jerusalem because that is where God chose for His presence to dwell. But when God took on humanity at the incarnation (the coming of Christ to the earth), God chose to dwell not only *among* His people, but *in* His people. When Jesus ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit came to indwell the church, the church can worship God anywhere because God’s presence among men is spiritual, not physical. God is spirit, so that He is not restricted to one place nor is worship any longer restricted to one place. God is invisible because He is spirit, not flesh.

#### **(3) When God appears to men, He appears in a variety of “forms.”**

One might think this statement contradicts what has previously been said, but it does not. God has no physical form, but in the Bible, He does appear to men in various forms. These “forms” are both vague and various.

When God does appear to men, the descriptions of His appearance are sometimes vague. In Genesis 32, we read the account of a very strange wrestling match. From the description of the “**man**” with whom Jacob wrestled, we would not expect this was other than a man:

24 Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 And when he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” 27 So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” 28 And he said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” 29 Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there. 30 So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (Genesis 32:24-30).

What changed Jacob’s mind to cause him to realize this “**man**” was none other than God Himself? It does not seem to be from anything unusual about this person’s appearance. It certainly does not seem due to

this person's infinite power. The only indication that this being is God is contained in the words he spoke to Jacob:

28 "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed."  
29 Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there (Genesis 32:28,29).

I can almost see the wheels of Jacob's mind beginning to spin: "When did I ever strive with God? And how can this 'person' bless me but not even give me his name?" Suddenly he knew. He had been struggling with God. Here was something he would ponder for a long time. Just how had he been struggling with God?

Since we are studying the invisibility of God, the important thing to observe here is that when God appeared to Jacob, as He did, His appearance was as a man. No mention is made of glowing white garments or brilliant light. We would not have known it was God by mere appearance. But from the words God spoke, His identity becomes evident.

Other appearances or manifestations of God to men are more spectacular and show more indication of His majesty and glory. Nevertheless, the "descriptions" of God as He appeared are far from detailed:

9 Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, 10 and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. 11 Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they beheld God, and they ate and drank. (Exodus 24:9-11).

This is indeed a most unusual incident hidden away in the middle of the Book of Exodus. Seventy-four men beheld God and ate a festive meal in His presence. There is no question that this is God and that these men all looked upon Him in some fashion. The wonder is that they lived to tell about it. But if one were to describe God solely on the basis of this description of a most unusual encounter with God, how much would you know about the way God looks? The only thing this text tells us is that when they saw God, they saw feet (verse 10). We are told more about what was under God's feet than anything else. This is surely a most vague description. God may have been visible here, but certainly not fully so.

One of the great texts of the Old Testament describing an appearance of God to men is found in the early chapters of the Book of Isaiah:

1 In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs (Isaiah 6:1-6).

Isaiah most certainly saw the God of Israel, and it had a tremendous impact on him. But what do we know about how God looks from this passage? How would you describe God based upon Isaiah's description of Him? Isaiah himself has more to say about the appearance of the angels than about the appearance of God. God was seated on a throne, and He wore a robe. The angels did not proclaim what God looked like, but what He was like. They proclaimed the character of God. They spoke of His holiness and of His glory. The impact on Isaiah was an enhanced awareness of his own wretchedness as a sinner. This revelation of God's character caused Isaiah to see how woefully short of God's glory he fell. As Isaiah grew in his knowledge of the character of God, he grew in his knowledge of himself. The picture Isaiah saw of himself was not pretty.

#### (4) To see God's "face" would be fatal.

In those instances where men are said to have seen God, surprise is expressed that they lived to tell about it. Jacob marveled that his life had been preserved (Genesis 32:30). Moses noted that God "**did not stretch out His hand**" against the 74 men who are said to have seen the God of Israel (Exodus 24:10-11). God informed Moses that He could not see Him and live (Exodus 33:20). When Gideon realized he had seen the "**angel of the Lord face to face**" (Judges 6:22), he was encouraged with the assurance that he would not die (verse 23). Manoah and his wife, soon to become the parents of Samson, were amazed they did not die for having seen God as the "**angel of the Lord**" (Judges 13:21-23). Paul seems to be saying that men cannot see God and live when he declares that God dwells in "**unapproachable light**" (1 Timothy 6:16). Getting close to God is like drawing near to a blast furnace. It is dangerous to one's health (see also Exodus 33:2-5).

#### (5) There is a difference between seeing God "face to face" and "seeing God's face."

The expression, "*face to face*" is a figure of speech. It is clear in the Scriptures that seeing God "*face to face*" is not the same thing as seeing God's face. Consider the example of Moses, where, in the early portion of Exodus 33, Moses is said to have spoken to God "**face to face:**"

9 And it came about, whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the Lord would speak with Moses. 10 When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent. 11 Thus *the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend*. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent (Exodus 33:9-11, emphasis mine).

The point of these words is not that Moses actually saw the face of God but that he spoke *intimately* with God. This becomes particularly clear in the verses that follow:

18 Then Moses said, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!" 19 And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." 20 But He said, "*You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!*" 21 Then the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; 22 and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, *but My face shall not be seen*" (Exodus 33:18-23, emphasis mine).

God spoke to Moses "**face to face,**" but He would not allow Moses to "**see His face.**" Therefore, seeing God "**face to face**" is not the same thing as seeing God's face. Speaking "**face to face**" means speaking with someone on a personal, intimate basis as a friend speaks to a friend. A similar figure of speech is found in Numbers 14:

13 But Moses said to the Lord, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Thy strength Thou didst bring up this people from their midst, 14 and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that Thou, O Lord, art in the midst of this people, *for Thou, O Lord, art seen eye to eye, while Thy cloud stands over them; and Thou dost go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night*" (Numbers 14:13-14).

God was "**seen eye to eye**" by the Israelites. In the context, this means that God made His presence known to the Israelites by the cloud which led them and which became a pillar of fire at night. It does not mean God has physical eyes and that the Israelites saw these eyes. God's presence was with His people, and He made that presence known. But nowhere did anyone see the face of God, because God has no face. God is Spirit and is not made of flesh. He is invisible to men because He has no body, and He becomes visible to men by various means. He appeared as a mere man, which was the angel of the Lord. He made Himself known by means of a cloud and through various other appearances, but none of these were the full revelation of God. And none were an occasion where men saw God's face.

## The Invisibility and Appearance of Jesus Christ

The same tensions found in the Old Testament regarding the invisibility of God and the appearances of God to men arise again in the New Testament with the appearance of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only One who has seen the Father and who now speaks for Him:

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. 3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:1-3a).

1 For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, 4 God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will (Hebrews 2:1-4).

18 No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him (John 1:18).

46 “Not that any man has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father” (John 6:46).

38 “I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father” (John 8:38).

Jesus was with the Father from the very beginning (John 1:1-2). He alone has truly seen the Father (6:46), and He spoke the things He saw when He was with the Father (8:38). He is God’s final and full revelation to men (Hebrews 1:1-3a). We would do well to take heed to what He has spoken and to what has been recorded by those who saw Him, whose reliability as witnesses was confirmed by the signs and wonders God performed through them (Hebrews 2:1-4).

Jesus did take on human flesh, yet without diminishing His deity:

14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

14 Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; 15 and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives (Hebrews 2:14-15).

This body of flesh, which the Lord in all His deity put on, was not made so physically attractive that men and women would be attracted to Him in a fleshly way, as Isaiah made clear:

1 Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? 2 For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him (Isaiah 53:1-2).

When the disciples finally concluded that Jesus was indeed God’s promised Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus said Simon Peter, the spokesman for the disciples, was blessed because he had not come to this conclusion through “**flesh and blood:**”

17 And Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17).

Jesus was spiritually recognized through spiritual means. It was not human deduction but divine revelation which enabled the disciples to “see” that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament, for whom the Jews looked but did not see.

Even though God appeared to men in human flesh, men did not and could not “see” Him as such apart from a divine work in their hearts:

36 “But I said to you, that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe” (John 6:36).

38 that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke, “Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” 39 For this cause they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, 40 “He has blinded their eyes, and He HARDENED THEIR HEART; lest they see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and be converted, and I heal them.” 41 These things Isaiah said, because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. 42 Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue (John 12:38-42).

44 “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. 45 “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be TAUGHT OF God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. 46 “Not that any man has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father. 47 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (John 6:44-47).

65 And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father” (John 6:65).

For the unbelieving, seeing was not believing. They saw numerous signs and wonders, but this did not convince them that Jesus was the Messiah. Instead, they asked for more and more signs:

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” 39 But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; 40 for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:38-40).

It was not for lack of evidence that men refused to believe in Jesus as God’s Messiah. Their hearts were so hardened they even denied evidence that was irrefutable (John 9:18). When Lazarus had been raised from the dead, the Jews could not deny it, and so they sought to kill him (John 11:47-53; 12:9-10). Their rejection of the evidence made them all the more guilty:

24 “If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well” (John 15:24).

Even those who believed in Jesus did not see His full glory. That glory was veiled in His incarnation (Philippians 2:6-7). Only occasionally were glimpses of this greater glory revealed to a few of His followers. At the transfiguration, some of our Lord’s future glory was unveiled for a moment before the eyes of Peter, James, and John:

1 And six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him (Matthew 17:1-3).

But this glory seems to fall short of the greater glory which is yet to be revealed to our Lord’s followers in the kingdom of God. In His high priestly prayer, Jesus prayed that His disciples would see this glory:

24 “Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me; for Thou didst love Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

We must realize that while our Lord came to manifest God’s presence among men, He has not been seen in His fullness. Seeing Him fully, seeing His “face” as it were, is something to which we still look forward:

12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known (1 Corinthians 13:12).

2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is (1 John 3:2).

One final observation must be made concerning the “visibility” of God in the person of Jesus Christ. He was visible in the flesh for but a very short period of time. Since the time of His resurrection and ascension, Jesus has no longer been visible to men. Jesus told His disciples of His return to the Father,

and that this would mean that they would see Him no longer. This invisibility of the Lord Jesus held the promise of numerous benefits, however:

15 “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; 17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 After a little while the world will behold Me no more; but you will behold Me; because I live, you shall live also. 20 In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:15-20).

7 “But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. 8 And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; 10 and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me; 11 and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. 12 I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. 14 He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you. 15 All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said, that He takes of Mine, and will disclose it to you. 16 A little while, and you will no longer behold Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me.” 17 Some of His disciples therefore said to one another, “What is this thing He is telling us, ‘A little while, and you will not behold Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’; and, ‘because I go to the Father?’” 18 And so they were saying, “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is talking about.” 19 Jesus knew that they wished to question Him, and He said to them, “Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, ‘A little while, and you will not behold Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me’? 20 Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned to joy. 21 Whenever a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she remembers the anguish no more, for joy that a child has been born into the world” (John 16:7-21).

The benefits of Jesus’ physical absence, and His coming and presence through the Holy Spirit (as described in the verses above), can be summed up in these statements:

**(1) Jesus’ physical absence results in the sending of the Holy Spirit, who will be our Helper and will abide with us forever (14:16).**

**(2) The world cannot see or know the Holy Spirit, but we can (14:17).**

**(3) While Jesus dwelt among men during His earthly life, He now dwells within every believer through the Holy Spirit (14:17).**

**(4) The Holy Spirit will bring about an intimacy with God greater than anything previously experienced by men (14:20).**

**(5) The Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of truth” (14:17).** He will not only convey the presence of Christ in the saints and reveal to His church all that we need to know about God (16:12-15), He will convict sinners of the truths which are essential to their salvation (16:8-11).

**(6) Although the world will no longer “see” Jesus in His physical body, He will be “seen” by His saints.** This “seeing” is not physical or literal, but spiritual. We “see” Jesus by faith, being assured that He is with us and in us (14:19; 16:16).<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

The God who is Spirit, and who is thus invisible, has graciously chosen to manifest Himself to men in various forms throughout history. God disclosed Himself finally and fully in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-3a; 2:1-4). We worship a God whom we cannot see, a God who is invisible. This truth may seem like a

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<sup>1</sup> Someone might argue that the “seeing” of Jesus is physical when He returns in glory for His church. I think not. One reason this does not seem acceptable is that when Jesus does return to this earth, every eye will see Him, and every knee will bow to Him. Jesus said that we would “see” Him when the rest of the world could not. The only time this can be true is now, when we see Him through the eyes of faith.

theological “gnat,” a truth overshadowed by many more practical theological “camels.” But the doctrine of God’s invisibility is a truth with many very significant implications and applications. As we conclude, I would like to point out some of the practical ramifications of the invisibility of God.

### **The invisibility of God is inseparably linked to our faith, our hope, and our love.**

Faith, hope, and love are the three prominent themes of the Bible. Paul speaks of these in 1 Corinthians 13:13. Notice how the New Testament writers link each of these three crucial elements of our Christian faith and life to the invisibility of God.

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the men of old gained approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible (Hebrews 11:1-3).

24 For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it (Romans 8:24-25).

8 And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8).

### **The invisibility of God, one of the attributes of God, is a fundamental attribute to many of the blessings we possess as Christians.**

While we have already stressed this truth in this message, it certainly bears repeating. The invisibility of God is not a liability which we should seek to deny or to overcome. In Jesus’ own words, “**It is to your advantage that I go . . .**” (John 16:7). He is not less present among us because He is gone and not physically visible. He is more present, through His Spirit, whom He has sent to us. The Holy Spirit conveys the presence of Christ. The Holy Spirit indwells the believer and thus the church. The Holy Spirit inspired the apostles to remember and then record the words and teachings of our Lord. The Holy Spirit regenerates and converts unbelievers and He illuminates and empowers believers. We are not spiritually poorer but richer for His invisibility.

### **The invisibility of God can also be a problem for the saints.**

Unfortunately, Christians do not always appreciate the benefits we have because of the invisible presence of our Lord with us through the Holy Spirit. There are times when we want to be assured that He is with us. When we lose sight (pardon the pun) of the benefits of the invisibility of God, we begin to seek Him through visible means. We may be inclined to “**look at things as they are outwardly**” (2 Corinthians 10:7), rather than focusing on the unseen things, the invisible things, which are eternal:

16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we 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 (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Worse yet, we might be tempted to put God to the test, demanding that God prove His presence by performing some visible miracle, as the Israelites did in the wilderness (Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 14:1-25). This is exactly what Moses cautioned the Israelites not to do (Deuteronomy 6:16). This is also what Satan sought to tempt our Lord to do (Matthew 4:5-7). And it is what Paul urged the Corinthians not to do (1 Corinthians 10:9).

### **The invisibility of God indicates to us that we look to things other than those which are seen.**

I have friends who are blind. Because they are blind, they must not rely on sight; instead, they must rely more keenly on their other senses. The invisibility of God (and of much that makes up our spiritual walk



and warfare) means that we must rely on senses other than our physical sight. We must, in the words of Paul, “**walk by faith and not by sight**” (2 Corinthians 5:7). The writer to the Hebrews spells out the relationship between faith and the unseen:

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the men of old gained approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible (Hebrews 11:1-3).

7 By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith (Hebrews 11:7).

13 All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth (Hebrews 11:13).

What then do we base our faith upon if it is not by sight? *We base our faith on the Word of God.* This is the way it was always meant to be. It was God’s word that Adam and Eve chose to disobey. They trusted in a serpent, rather than in God, and ate the forbidden fruit because it looked good. As a result, their eyes were opened, but what they “**saw**” was not good (Genesis 3:1-7).

The spectacular visible evidences of God’s presence at Mount Sinai were not a revelation of God’s form. The Israelites wanted to “see” their God, and so they made a golden image, representing God in the form of a golden calf. God, however, wanted to represent Himself through His Word. It was God’s Word that was embedded in stone, not His physical image. It was the possession of God’s Word that distinguished the Israelites above all the other nations, and God confirmed His Words with the mighty works which He accomplished in their sight (Deuteronomy 4:1-8). The things which the Israelites witnessed at Mount Sinai were done so that this people would trust and obey God’s Word (Deuteronomy 4:9-18). God punished the Israelites for disobeying His Word in spite of the visible evidences of His presence and power and the truth of His Word (Numbers 14:22).

Interestingly enough, it was not just the visual revelation of God which demonstrated God’s power and presence. It was not just getting too close or seeing too much of God’s glory that would kill one who drew too near. It was also the *hearing* of God’s Word. God manifested Himself through His Word, and the Israelites feared His Word--and rightly so according to God’s own words:

16 “This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’” 17 And the Lord said to me, “They have spoken well!” (Deuteronomy. 18:16-17).

In the context of these two verses, God is warning His people about the danger of false prophets, and He is also promising the appearance of one who, like Moses, will reveal God’s word to men. This person is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. He is “**the Word**” (John 1:1-2), God’s full and final revelation to men to whom we should pay attention (Hebrews 1:1-3a; 2:1-4). When the three disciples Peter, James, and John, saw a demonstration of our Lord’s glory at the transfiguration, it was for a purpose, a purpose which God clearly indicated to them:

1 And six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 And Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5 While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; *listen to Him!*” (Matthew 17:1-5, emphasis mine).

The glory of God was revealed at Mount Sinai so that the Israelites would take God’s Word seriously. The glory of our Lord was revealed to Peter, James, and John, so that they would take Jesus’ words seriously. And so they did:

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 17 For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such

an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased”-- 18 and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. 19 And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. 20 But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, 21 for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Peter 1:16-21).

When the Lord Jesus neared the time of His death, resurrection, and ascension, He began to speak more openly to His disciples about those things which were crucial to them in the days of His physical absence and invisibility. We see this especially in the Upper Room Discourse and high priestly prayer of our Lord in John 14-17. The Lord Jesus constantly speaks of His Word and His Holy Spirit. Through these, our Lord will abide in His saints. And his saints will abide in Him as they abide in His Word. God has revealed Himself in His inspired and infallible Word. Here is the basis for our faith. Here is the means by which men will be saved. Here is the means by which believers will grow. Here is the standard for our conduct and the light which will guide our path. *Through His Word and through His Spirit, God is present and knowable in this world where men do not see Him.*

It is God’s Word that prompts us to look not to the things which are seen, but to the things which are unseen (2 Corinthians 17-18). When we perform acts of service and worship, we are not to perform for men, to seek their approval or applause; we are rather to serve Him who is invisible:

2 “When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing 4 that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. 5 And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (Matthew 6:2-6).

The invisible God, the God **“who is in secret,”** urges us to perform our acts of righteousness in a way consistent with His invisibility. We are not to seek a public platform from which to serve God; we are to go about our acts of worship and service as secretly as possible, knowing that the God who is **“in secret”** sees what we are doing and will reward us in His time.

Our spiritual warfare involves much more than that which is seen (Ephesians 6:10-12). Likewise, God’s provision for our protection is also unseen, unless our eyes are miraculously opened to behold the invisible:

8 Now the king of Aram was warring against Israel; and he counseled with his servants saying, “In such and such a place shall be my camp.” 9 And the man of God sent word to the king of Israel saying, “Beware that you do not pass this place, for the Arameans are coming down there.” 10 And the king of Israel sent to the place about which the man of God had told him; thus he warned him, so that he guarded himself there, more than once or twice. 11 Now the heart of the king of Aram was enraged over this thing; and he called his servants and said to them, “Will you tell me which of us is for the king of Israel?” 12 And one of his servants said, “No, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom.” 13 So he said, “Go and see where he is, that I may send and take him.” And it was told him, saying, “Behold, he is in Dothan.” 14 And he sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city.

15 Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” 16 So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” 17 Then Elisha prayed and said, “O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” And the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. 18 And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed to the Lord and said, “Strike this people with blindness, I pray.” So He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha. 19 Then Elisha said to them, “This is not the way, nor is this the city; follow me and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.” And he brought them to Samaria.

20 And it came about when they had come into Samaria, that Elisha said, “O Lord, open the eyes of these men, that they may see.” So the Lord opened their eyes, and they saw; and behold, they were in the midst of Samaria. 21 Then the king of Israel when he saw them, said to Elisha, “My father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?” 22 And he

answered, "You shall not kill them. Would you kill those you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow? Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master." 23 So he prepared a great feast for them; and when they had eaten and drunk he sent them away, and they went to their master. And the marauding bands of Arameans did not come again into the land of Israel (2 Kings 6:8-23).

Our worship must take note of those unseen angels who are present and watching and learning (1 Corinthians 11:10). Women are cautioned against placing too much emphasis on their outward appearance; rather, they are to give priority to their hidden inner being:

1 In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, 2 as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. 3 And let not your adornment be merely external-- braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; 4 but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. 5 For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands (1 Peter 3:1-5).

The unseen plays a most significant part in the life of the Christian, whose God is unseen by the human eye but seen with the eye of faith.

### **God is made visible through His church and His saints.**

How is God, who is invisible, manifested to those who do not believe? In Romans 1, Paul tells us that God is revealed through His creation:

20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

God is also made visible to men through the church, the body of Christ. What God began to do and to teach through His Son, He continues to do and to teach through His church (Acts 1:1ff.). The church is His body, and His means for working and bearing witness to men in this world:

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a HOLY NATION, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

It is our calling and our privilege to manifest the excellencies of God to a lost and dying world.

### **The invisibility of God is one of the insurmountable barriers which stands between the unbeliever and faith in God.**

Many suppose that seeing is believing. They, like doubting Thomas, refuse to believe in what they cannot see (see John 20:25). The fact is that seeing is never sufficient basis for faith, for faith is rooted in a conviction concerning what is not seen (Hebrews 11:1-2). The Jews saw Jesus, who manifested God to men--God incarnate. The more signs they saw, the more they demanded (Matthew 12:38-45). Only when God opens the spiritual eyes of unbelievers will they be able to "see" Him who is unseen.

As I considered the subject of the invisibility of God and its implications for the lost, my mind turned to Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John 3:

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; 2 this man came to Him by night, and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for *no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.*" 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, *unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" 4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 *Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'* 8 *The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" 9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness. 12 If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 And no

one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life. (John 3:1-15).

As a Jew, Nicodemus was a man whose life operated on the basis of what he saw. Judaism was obsessed with externals and rituals and visible acts of righteousness. They did not give due importance to matters of the heart, matters not seen (see Luke 16:15). On the basis of Jesus' signs and wonders, Nicodemus had to admit that Jesus was in touch with God. But Jesus pressed this teacher of the Jews to go beyond the visible to the invisible. Salvation is not about what is seen but what is not seen. The conception of a child is not seen, but in time the results of that event are evident in the birth of the child. So it is with salvation. *Salvation is not the result of man's striving and effort, but the result of God's invisible work* (see John 1:12-13).

Salvation is the unseen work of the Holy Spirit, a work accomplished in the heart of man. If Nicodemus was ever to “**see the kingdom of God**” (John 3:3; see also verse 5), God must accomplish the new birth in his heart, an event not visible to men and most certainly not the work of men.

Jesus likened this miraculous but unseen work of God to the effects of the wind. No one ever sees the wind, but neither does anyone question its existence. We know the wind is present because we can behold its effects. So it is with the Holy Spirit. We cannot see the Holy Spirit, but we can see the evidences of His work in the lives of men, men like Peter and Paul, and--if you are a born again child of God--you. This teacher of the Scriptures should have known from his study of the Scriptures that the outward works of men do not save them, but the inner renewal of the Holy Spirit, an unseen work, the effects of which will soon be evident.

We may be thinking this prominent teacher of Israel should have known better, but before we become too smug, let us consider the matter in light of our own thinking and practice. Are we guilty of implying (if not stating it) that people are saved by filling out a card, raising their hand, going to the front, or being baptized? Let us be very clear that the work of salvation is the invisible work of the invisible God, the effects of which are visible.

I often hear Christians talk as if their unbelieving friends and loved ones would believe if only God would reveal Himself to them in some spectacular way. This simply is not so. What more could the Lord Jesus have done to prove He was the Messiah, the Son of God? As Jesus said, only those whom the Father draws to Himself will believe. For those of us who have an undue confidence in our apologetical skills, our ability to convince men and women of the truth, I would remind you that it is the Word of God and it is the Spirit of God who convinces and converts men. Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that if we but make the gospel clear or compelling enough men will believe. This ignores the doctrine of the depravity of men, the invisibility of God, and the inability of any to “see” God apart from divine enlightenment.

Speaking is our responsibility as Christians, and seeing is God's work:

15 For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your love for all the saints, 16 do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. 22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians. 1:15-23).

May God open our spiritual eyes to behold the wondrous things He has in store for us:

6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined

before the ages to our glory; 8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; 9 but just as it is written, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which have not entered the heart of man, All that God has prepared for those who love Him." 10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God (1 Corinthians 2:6-10).

## Lesson 15: The Forgiving God

### Introduction

One of the fascinating passages of Scripture in the New Testament is the description of our Lord's post-resurrection appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. On that journey, our Lord taught these men what must have been the most exciting Bible study of all time. In the course of that journey, our Lord spoke these words to these two men:

25 And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:25-27).

A little later, Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples:

44 Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:44-48).

How we would love to have been there when our Lord taught this lesson. At least we would like to have had this study recorded in the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> Even from the few words Luke has recorded, there are some important truths to be gained. *First*, we are told that Jesus' suffering and glory are a subject repeatedly addressed in the Old Testament, which Peter indicates elsewhere (see 1 Peter 1:10-12). *Second*, we learn that Jesus taught His disciples about His suffering and glory from the beginning of the Bible to the events of His death, burial, and resurrection. *Third*, notice that what Jesus taught the disciples is, in essence, the gospel. The basis for the "**repentance for forgiveness of sins,**" which was to be proclaimed (as the gospel) "**to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem**" (verse 47) is the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord.

Our subject for this lesson is the forgiveness of God, or in terms of an attribute of God, "the forgiving God." We shall seek to follow the pattern of our Lord when considering the forgiveness of God. We will first show that God is characterized by being a forgiving God. Then, beginning in the first Book of the Bible, we will show how God's purpose of forgiving sins has been accomplished in Christ.

In this lesson, more Scripture is cited with less commentary and interpretation because the Bible is very clear on the subject of the forgiveness of sins (as it is on many other matters), and I want to allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves on our subject. *I urge you to read the Scriptures carefully to glean the beautiful story of our forgiving God, who has accomplished the "forgiveness of sins," by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.*

### God is a Forgiving God

Repeatedly in the Scriptures God is represented as the God who forgives sins.

5 And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. 6 Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:5-7).

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is recorded in Scripture, but it comes from the pens of the inspired authors of the New Testament. We find a great deal of our Lord's material in Peter's preaching in the Book of Acts and much further insight from the writings of men like Paul.

17 “And they refused to listen, And did not remember Thy wondrous deeds which Thou hadst performed among them; So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But Thou art a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness; And Thou didst not forsake them” (Nehemiah 9:17).

5 For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon Thee (Psalm 86:5).

4 But there is forgiveness with Thee, That Thou mayest be feared (Psalm 130:4).

9 “To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him” (Daniel 9:9).

### **Sin is a Serious Problem For Everyone**

Forgiveness of sins is so important because everyone is a sinner, and the consequences of sin are devastating:

15 Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; 17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:15-17).

22 Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”-- 23 therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. 24 So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every direction, to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24).

4 “The soul who sins will die” (Ezekiel 18:4b).

23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

12 Therefore, just as through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned--(Romans 5:12, parenthetical comment mine).

23 For the wages of sin is death, . . . Romans 6:23).

14 For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. . . . 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? (Romans 7:14, 24)

12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. 13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. 14 And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:12-15).

### **God: Man’s Only Hope For Forgiveness**

From the first sin of mankind--the sin of Adam and Eve--it has become increasingly clear that only God can forgive sins. The words of the curse spoken by God in the Garden of Eden implied that He would remedy the problem of man’s sin through the offspring of Eve, who would defeat Satan:

15 And I will put enmity Between you [Satan] and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He [the woman’s seed, who will be the Messiah] shall bruise you on the head [a fatal wound], And you shall bruise him on the heel [a non-fatal wound]” (Genesis 3:15).

This is the first prophecy concerning man’s salvation by means of the forgiveness of sins and the defeat of Satan. It speaks of the coming Messiah, who will be of the woman’s seed (human), and who will defeat Satan while incurring injury to Himself.

God later clarified that the “**seed**” of the woman would be Abraham’s seed, and that through this “**seed**” all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). Through Abraham’s grandson, Jacob (later named Israel), the nation Israel was formed. The Israelites went to Egypt during Joseph’s life and stayed

on some 400 years, until God led the Israelites out of their slavery to the Egyptians and brought them into the promised land of Canaan. God made a covenant with the nation Israel, giving them the Law on Mount Sinai. During Moses' absence, the Israelites committed a great sin against God, making a golden calf and worshipping it as their **"god"** (Exodus 32). Only after the intercession of Moses did God consent to continue to be in the midst of this people as they entered into the promised land. When Moses sought to know God more intimately by seeing His glory, God revealed this about Himself to Moses:

18 Then Moses said, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!" 19 And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exodus 33:18-19).

6 Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:6-7).

Several important facts emerge from these verses. *First*, forgiveness is the outworking of God's compassion and grace. The God who **"forgives iniquity"** (34:7) is the God who is **"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth"** (34:6). Forgiveness is a matter of divine grace. *Second*, because God's forgiveness is a matter of grace, it is a gift of God's sovereign grace. God bestows forgiveness on those whom He chooses to forgive. None are worthy of this grace, and thus no one has any claim on God's grace as manifested in the forgiveness of sins. God said to Moses, **"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion"** (33:19). God forgives those whom He chooses to forgive. Forgiveness is something which we, as guilty sinners, have no right to expect or demand.

*Third*, the grace of God in forgiving sinners in no way sets aside the justice of God which requires the punishment of guilty sinners.

7 Who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; *yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished*, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:7, emphasis mine).

Some think they are being gracious when they overlook sin--when they simply refuse to deal with it. Many parents think they are gracious when they do not punish their children for disobedience. *God's grace does not set aside punishment for sins; it substituted the One who was punished for sin.* Even at this very early point in the history of God's dealings with His people, God makes it very clear that His grace does not mean He takes a soft view toward sin. God deals severely with sin. When He forgives men for sin, He still punishes that sin. The punishment for sin, as we shall see, is borne by the Lord Jesus Christ in the sinner's place.

*Finally*, note that the forgiveness of sins in no way removes any obligation from the object of God's grace to obey God. Based upon God's self-revelation of His glory, and the declaration of His grace and compassion by which He forgives sin, Moses appeals to God for the Israelites :

9 And he said, "If now I have found favor in Thy sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate; and do Thou pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Thine own possession" (Exodus 34:9).

Moses pleads for divine forgiveness for his people and receives the assurance that God will be present with His people as He leads them into the land of Canaan. But immediately we see that the outgrowth of forgiveness is an obligation to live in accordance with the covenant God has established with His people:

10 Then God said, "Behold, I am going to make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform miracles which have not been produced in all the earth, nor among any of the nations; and all the people among whom you live will see the working of the Lord, for it is a fearful thing that I am going to perform with you. 11 Be sure to observe what I am commanding you this day: behold, I am going to drive out the Amorite before you, and the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. 12 Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, lest it become a snare in your midst. 13 But rather, you are to tear down their altars and



smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim 14 for you shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God-- 15 lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they play the harlot with their gods, and sacrifice to their gods, and someone invite you to eat of his sacrifice; 16 and you take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods, and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods. 17 You shall make for yourself no molten gods” (Exodus 34:10-17, see also verses 18-26).

To be God’s people, and to have God dwell in your midst, requires a solution for sin. It also sets a standard of righteousness, which serves to define just what sin is. Thus, we find the declaration of the terms of the Mosaic covenant given immediately after Moses’ petition for grace and forgiveness for his people. They are the very commandments God sets down in Exodus 34:10-26, which are summed up in the ten commandments, and which the Israelites quickly begin to disregard and rebel against, as we shall soon see.

If sin cannot be overlooked but must be punished, how can this be accomplished? Under the Old Testament Law, men could offer sacrifices to God for their sins. In particular, the annual Day of Atonement was the occasion when the sins of the nation Israel were dealt with for the past year:

29 “And this shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls, and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; 30 for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you shall be clean from all your sins before the Lord. 31 It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute. 32 So the priest who is anointed and ordained to serve as priest in his father’s place shall make atonement: he shall thus put on the linen garments, the holy garments, 33 and make atonement for the holy sanctuary; and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar. He shall also make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. 34 Now you shall have this as a permanent statute, to make atonement for the sons of Israel for all their sins once every year.” And just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so he did (Leviticus 16:29-34).

The annual Day of Atonement did not really put away sin; it simply put off divine judgment. Were we to liken the sins of Israel to a financial debt, the sacrifice offered on the Day of Atonement did not pay off the principle; it only paid off the interest for the past year. Sin was not put away; it was put off for another year. Year after year, the debt increased. Someday, somehow, there must be payment for the sin. And so there would be.

The nation Israel very quickly began to sin against God by disobeying His covenant. Over and over again the Israelites sinned, and over and over God graciously put up with this willful and disobedient people (see Deuteronomy 1-3; Nehemiah 9:6-38; Psalm 78; Daniel 9:4-15). Finally, the first generation was forbidden to enter into the promised land. They died in the wilderness, and their sons and daughters were about to enter that land as the Book of Deuteronomy begins. The Mosaic Covenant is once again reiterated, the ten commandments being repeated in Deuteronomy 5. But there is no note of optimism here. The problem underlying Israel’s rebellion is the *condition of the hearts* of the Israelites:

29 ‘Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever! (Deuteronomy 5:29).

4 “Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear” (Deuteronomy 29:4).

In Deuteronomy, it is clear that the Israelites will not keep God’s covenant with them and that the nation will experience the “**cursings**” spelled out in the book, especially in chapter 28. In spite of their disobedience, there is still hope for the nation because God is a forgiving God, and His forgiveness is not based upon man’s worth or merit. Consequently, Moses tells the people that after they have been driven out of the promised land and lived in captivity among the nations, God will fulfill His promises and bless this nation:

1 “So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the Lord your God has banished you, 2 and you return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, 3 then the Lord your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. 4 If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. 5 And the Lord your God will bring you into the

land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers” (Deuteronomy 30:1-5).

God promises to bring about His promises to His people when they have repented and returned to Him. He goes on to indicate that the repentance of the Israelites is the result of His work in their hearts, giving them a new heart and soul, which seeks to please Him and which loves to keep His commandments:

6 “Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. 7 And the Lord your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you. 8 And you shall again obey the Lord, and observe all His commandments which I command you today. 9 Then the Lord your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your cattle and in the produce of your ground, for the Lord will again rejoice over you for good, just as He rejoiced over your fathers; 10 if you obey the Lord your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul” (Deuteronomy 30:6-10).

The words which follow these verses seem difficult to square with the Law and what it requires:

11 **“For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach.** 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ 14 But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it” (Deuteronomy 30:1-14, emphasis mine).

How can Moses possibly say the Law is **“not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach”** (verse 11), especially when compared to the final words of Joshua written some time later:

14 “Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

16 And the people answered and said, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 17 for the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did these great signs in our sight and preserved us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. 18 And the Lord drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God.”

19 Then Joshua said to the people, **“You will not be able to serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins. 20 If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you.”** 21 And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the Lord.” 22 And Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the Lord, to serve Him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” 23 “Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” 24 And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the Lord our God and we will obey His voice.” 25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. 26 And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. 27 And Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, lest you deny your God” (Joshua 24:14-27, emphasis mine).

It seems strange for Joshua to urge the Israelites to choose to serve the Lord and then, when they do, tell them that doing so is impossible. How strange to urge the Israelites to submit to the Mosaic Covenant and then tell them doing so is not possible. His words to the people of Israel make it sound as if choosing to follow God is suicide. How can we square the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 30:11-14 with the words of Joshua in Joshua 24:19-27?

We need look only a little further in the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>2</sup> We have already seen from Deuteronomy 5:29 and 29:4 that the problem is one of the heart. The Israelites need a heart inclined

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<sup>2</sup> If we were to abandon our progressive study of the Scriptures, we could go straight to Romans 10, where Paul cites from Deuteronomy 30. But we shall look to Deuteronomy itself for the answer.

toward God, a heart that loves His commandments and delights to obey them. The Israelites need a heart to see beyond the commands to the principles which underlie them and to grasp what the Law is all about.<sup>3</sup> In Deuteronomy 30, God looks to a distant time far down the corridor of history, a time when the nation has experienced the cursings of the Law, when they have been driven from the land and made captives in another distant land:

64 “Moreover, the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, which you or your fathers have not known. 65 And among those nations you shall find no rest, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot; but there the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing of eyes, and despair of soul. 66 So your life shall hang in doubt before you; and you shall be in dread night and day, and shall have no assurance of your life. 67 In the morning you shall say, ‘Would that it were evening!’ And at evening you shall say, ‘Would that it were morning!’ because of the dread of your heart which you dread, and for the sight of your eyes which you shall see. 68 And the Lord will bring you back to Egypt in ships, by the way about which I spoke to you, ‘You will never see it again!’ And there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer” (Deuteronomy 28:64-68).

It is a time when the people of Israel repent and return to the Lord their God (Deuteronomy 30:1-2). Israel’s repentance does not originate with this “**stiffnecked and stubborn people**” (compare Exodus 32:9). Rather, it is *the result of God’s working in them, giving them a new heart and soul to seek and to serve Him*:

6 “Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

When we look carefully at the words of Deuteronomy 30:11, we should make a very crucial observation:

11 “For *this commandment* which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. 12 “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ 14 But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it” (Deuteronomy 30:1-14, emphasis mine).

The commandment is one commandment--not ten or more. This one commandment is being commanded, and this one commandment is not too difficult. What is this (one) command? It is, in effect, to “**turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul**” (Deuteronomy 30:10). If the Law were to be summed up in one commandment, what would it be? We know the answer from Scripture:

34 But when the Pharisees heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. 35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 36 “Teacher, *which is the great commandment in the Law?*” 37 And He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 “*This is the great and foremost commandment*” (Matthew 22:34-38, emphasis mine).

The commandments of the Law are impossible for men to keep to avoid sin or to bring about the forgiveness of sins. This is what Joshua tells the Israelites whom he is leaving behind at his death. History has shown that God’s people cannot keep the Law. If they suppose their law-keeping will bring about God’s blessings and assure them of God’s forgiveness, they are wrong. Law-keeping only proves men to be guilty sinners, worthy of death:

19 Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; 20 because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:19-20).

*The one commandment God has for men is that they love God with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.* Why is this commandment not difficult? It is not because men are capable of doing so on their own. It is because it is impossible, and thus God will accomplish this work Himself:

6 “Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

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<sup>3</sup> This is what the psalmist seeks, as evident in Psalm 119.

Paul emphasizes this in Romans 10:

4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. 5 For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. 6 But the righteousness based on faith speaks thus, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), 7 or 'Who will descend into the ABYSS?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"-- that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; 10 for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation (Romans 10:4-10).

The reason this commandment is easy is because God has accomplished forgiveness of sins for us; He is the One who enables men to love Him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. It is easy because all we need is to believe in Him, by faith, and even that faith comes from God!

Because the forgiveness of sins was not something men could bring about, men of God looked forward to the time when God would accomplish this task, as we see in the Psalms:

1 A Song of Ascents. Out of the depths I have cried to Thee, O Lord. 2 Lord, hear my voice! Let Thine ears be attentive To the voice of my supplications. 3 If Thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with Thee, That Thou mayest be feared. 5 I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait, And in His word do I hope. 6 My soul waits for the Lord More than the watchmen for the morning; Indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning. 7 O Israel, hope in the Lord; For with the Lord there is lovingkindness, And with Him is abundant redemption. 8 And He will redeem Israel From all his iniquities (Psalm 130:1-8; see also Psalm 86).

In the Book of Deuteronomy, God foretold the consequences for turning from God and failing to keep covenant with Him. God foretold the defeat of the Israelites and that their enemies would drive them from their land and take them captive in a far away land (Deuteronomy 28:58-68). God then spoke of the future deliverance of the Israelites after He had given them a new heart (Deuteronomy 30:1-6). When the Jews were in captivity in Babylon, the prophets prayed and prophesied concerning the day when God would fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant. It soon became clear that this would not take place at the end of Judah's 70 years of bondage in Babylon. It was revealed in prophecy:

31 "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the Lord, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The forgiveness of sins was promised by God, not by means of the Mosaic Covenant, but by means of a "**new covenant.**" The exact nature of this "**new covenant**" was not yet disclosed, but more details would be disclosed through the prophet Daniel:

3 So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. 4 And I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed and said, "Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, 5 we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly, and rebelled, even turning aside from Thy commandments and ordinances (Daniel 9:3-5).

8 "Open shame belongs to us, O Lord, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against Thee. 9 To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him" (Daniel 9:8-9).

15 "And now, O Lord our God, who hast brought Thy people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and hast made a name for Thyself, as it is this day-- we have sinned, we have been wicked. 16 O Lord, in accordance with all Thy righteous acts, let now Thine anger and Thy wrath turn away from Thy city Jerusalem, Thy holy mountain; for because of our sins and the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Thy people have become a reproach to all those around us. 17 So now, our God, listen to the prayer of Thy servant and to his supplications, and for Thy sake, O Lord, let Thy face shine on Thy desolate sanctuary. 18 O my God, incline Thine ear and hear! Open Thine eyes and see our desolations and the city which is called by Thy name; for we are not presenting our supplications before Thee on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Thy great compassion. 19 O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord,

listen and take action! For Thine own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Thy city and Thy people are called by Thy name” (Daniel 9:15-19).

24 “Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place. 25 So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. 26 Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined. 27 And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate.” (Daniel 9:24-27).

Daniel confesses his sins, and the sins of his people, and asks God to forgive his people and bring them back into the promised land, to Israel and Jerusalem, based upon His covenant promises and upon the prophecy of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:1-2; Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10). In response to Daniel’s prayer (9:3-19), the angel Gabriel appears after some delay (9:20-23) and explains how the promise is to be fulfilled (9:24-27). It was becoming more and more clear that some time was yet to pass before the forgiveness of sins was to be accomplished. Israel’s release from her Babylonian captivity and her return to the promised land was not synonymous with the fulfillment of God’s promise of Deuteronomy 30:6.

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the return of the former captives to Jerusalem and the promised land. Nehemiah 8 and 9 record the response of the Jews to the Law, and their acknowledgment of their sin and of God’s faithfulness. In spite of all this, the people of God took little time to return to their old ways, the ways of their fathers. The closing chapters of Nehemiah, and the writings of the later prophets, indicate that the work of God in creating a “**new heart**” in men has not yet been accomplished. The day of salvation is still future. The prophet Isaiah told of the coming of Messiah. It was He, in His sacrificial death, who would accomplish the forgiveness of sins:

4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him (Isaiah 53:4-6).

The closing words of the Old Testament, recorded in Malachi 4, are words of warning concerning the wrath of God on sinners and words of hope, of renewed hearts.

### **The Forgiveness of Sins-- Through the Blood of Jesus Christ**

At the very outset, it was clear that the Lord Jesus Christ came to fulfill God’s promise to forgive men’s sins and to create a new heart within. At the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah, Zacharias, the father of John, said by the Holy Spirit:

76 “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; For you will go on before the Lord to PREPARE His ways; 77 To give to His people the knowledge of salvation By the forgiveness of their sins, 78 Because of the tender mercy of our God, With which the Sunrise from on high shall visit us” (Luke 1:76-78).

When John the Baptist commenced his public ministry, his message was simple:

3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight. 5 ‘Every ravine shall be filled up, And every mountain and hill shall be brought low; And the crooked shall become straight, And the rough roads smooth; 6 And all flesh shall SEE THE SALVATION OF God”” (Luke 3:3-6).

When John the Baptist saw Jesus, who presented Himself as the promised Messiah, he said:

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me'" (John 1:29-30).

In saying this, John the Baptist was identifying Jesus as the promised Messiah prophesied in type by the passover lamb and numerous other aspects of the Mosaic Covenant (see Colossians 2:16-17), and especially as spoken of in Isaiah 52:13--53:12.

When Jesus began His public ministry, it did not take long for Him to make it clear that His mission was to forgive sinners:

17 And it came about one day that He was teaching; and there were some Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem; and the power of the Lord was present for Him to perform healing. 18 And behold, some men were carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed; and they were trying to bring him in, and to set him down in front of Him. 19 And not finding any way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his stretcher, right in the center, in front of Jesus. 20 And seeing their faith, He said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." 21 And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" 22 But Jesus, aware of their reasonings, answered and said to them, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts? 23 Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? 24 But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,"-- He said to the paralytic-- "I say to you, rise, and take up your stretcher and go home." 25 And at once he rose up before them, and took up what he had been lying on, and went home, glorifying God. 26 And they were all seized with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen remarkable things today" (Luke 5:17-26).

29 And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax-gatherers and other people who were reclining at the table with them. 30 And the Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax-gatherers and sinners?" 31 And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:29-32).

47 "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 And He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." 49 And those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" (Luke 7:47-49).

1 Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 And He told them this parable, saying, 4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:1-7).

Our Lord's actions and words in Luke 5:17-26 are truly remarkable. Jesus boggled the minds of those who understood the implications of what He was doing. If we have learned anything from the Old Testament, it is that *God alone can forgive sins. God's solution for sinners was the coming of Messiah, who would bear the sins of men.* When Jesus was confronted with a paralytic, lowered through the roof, He did not deal with his physical malady first, but with his greater spiritual dilemma--his sins. When Jesus told this man that his sins were forgiven, Jesus claimed far more than people expected. A mere man might be able to cast out demons or to perform miracles of healing. But only God can forgive sins. When Jesus healed this man and forgave him of his sins, Jesus boldly proclaimed that He was Messiah, the One who had come to accomplish the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. It is He who can and will change the hearts of men to love God and men.

As the time came for our Lord to be crucified for our sins, He spoke these words to His disciples as He instituted the Lord's Supper:

26 And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." 27 And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying,

“Drink from it, all of you; 28 for **this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins**” (Matthew 26:26-28, emphasis mine).

The writer to the Hebrews shows how the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus is superior to the Old Testament sacrifices. The Old Testament sacrifices put off God’s judgment of sin, *the New Testament (new covenant) sacrifice of the Lord Jesus was the judgment of God on sin, thus accomplishing the eternal forgiveness of sins, for all who are in Christ by faith in His work at the cross of Calvary:*

1 For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. 5 Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, “Sacrifice and offering Thou hast not desired, But A BODY Thou hast prepared for Me; 6 In whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin Thou hast taken no pleasure. 7 “Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come (In THE ROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF Me) To do Thy will, O God.’ “ 8 After saying above, “Sacrifices and offerings and WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices for sin Thou hast not desired, nor hast Thou taken pleasure in them” (which are offered according to the Law), 9 then He said, “Behold, I have come to do Thy will.” He takes away the first in order to establish the second. 10 By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. 11 And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 16 “This is the covenant that I will make with them After those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws upon their heart, And upon their mind I will write them,” He then says, 17 “And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.” 18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin (Hebrews 10:1-18).

*The forgiveness of sins has been accomplished, once and for all, by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. He was sinless, yet He bore our sins, so that we might be forgiven. God did not overlook our sins, but punished them in Christ. The good news of the gospel is that those who believe in Jesus Christ can have their sins forgiven:*

45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:45-48).

The apostles were to proclaim, both to Jews and to Gentiles, that God had provided forgiveness for sins through His Son, Jesus Christ. And this was the message they consistently preached:

31 “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31).

43 “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43).

38 “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (Acts 13:38).

7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7; see also Colossians 1:14).

The forgiveness of sins is not man’s work, but God’s. In Acts 5:31, Peter announced that God not only granted forgiveness of sins, but also repentance. Men are to repent, but it is God who brings men to repentance. Salvation is the work of God and not of men. Forgiveness of sins is entirely God’s work, and all we must do to receive it is to believe in Jesus Christ, to trust in His sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection. Forgiveness of sins is impossible for men to accomplish, but God has accomplished the impossible through His Son, Jesus Christ. In order to receive this forgiveness, we need to confess our sins, to acknowledge our rebellion against God and the fact that we are deserving of His eternal wrath.

9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

We receive the forgiveness of our sins by faith (Luke 7:48-50), by believing in the work of Christ on the cross of Calvary as the full and final payment for our sins (Acts 10:43; Hebrews 9 & 10). We are to confess our sins (Psalm 32:5-6; 1 John 1:9) and to repent of them (Psalm 32:1-7; 51 (all); Jeremiah 36:3; Luke 3:3; 17:3-4; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:32; 8:22). We then simply ask God to forgive us (Psalm 79:9), know that He is a forgiving God, who is ready to forgive (Psalm 86:5).

### Conclusion

Salvation is about the forgiveness of our sins. How often the gospel is obscured on this very crucial point. "Sin and its consequences are such a negative, unpleasant, subject," some seem to reason, "that I won't dwell on them." The word "saved" implies that those thus "saved" are in peril and are rescued from it. *Unless men grasp the magnitude of their sin, and the even greater magnitude of its consequences, men will not sense the need for salvation.* This is why the Holy Spirit was sent to convict men of "**sin, righteousness, and judgement**" (John 16:8-11). If the Spirit is to convict of these things, then surely our gospel must speak of them.

What a disservice (I may be speaking far too kindly here--Paul would likely call it another gospel, heresy--see Galatians 1:6-10) we do to men in this therapeutic age when we speak of the great problems of life as sicknesses and phobias and addictions, rather than as damnable sins. How dare we speak in terms of long-term therapy (at a very high price), and not of instant forgiveness. How can we encourage people to "look within" for the power to escape sin, rather than to look to Christ.

The problem with men in this culture is not that they are too "sinful," but that they are too "sick" or, worse yet, too self-righteous. *There is a solution for sin. The cross of God is that solution. There is forgiveness for sins, a forgiveness which God has provided in Christ.* You are never too sinful to be saved, you can only be too self-righteous. *Have you confessed your sins and trusted in Jesus Christ as God's provision for your forgiveness?* Will you? There is no more comforting truth in all the world than this: Christ Jesus came into the world to forgive sinners. As the hymn writer put it, "Tis music to the sinners ears, tis life and health and peace."

David said it even better:

1 How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! (Psalm 32:1).

### For Your Further Consideration

#### The Basis For God's Forgiveness

1. God's sovereignty--freedom to choose (Exodus 33:19)
2. God's compassion and grace (Exodus 34:6-7); God is ready to forgive (Psalm 86:5; 130:4)
3. God's covenant (Exodus 32:13; Ezekiel 16:60-63)
4. God's faithfulness, as evident in history of Israel (Numbers 14:19)
5. God's reputation (Exodus 32:11-12), His name's sake (Psalm 79:9; Daniel 9:19; 1 John 2:12)
6. God's promise to forgive (Deuteronomy 30; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Jeremiah 18:5-8)
7. God's provision for forgiveness in Jesus Christ
8. Jesus is God (Mark 2:3-12) [7]
9. Jesus shed His blood--He made atonement for our sins (Matthew 26:28; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; 2:13--in marginal note of Isaiah 22:14, "forgiven" is literally, "atoned for")
10. God's gift in Christ is repentance and forgiveness (Acts 5:31)



11. The gospel is the offer of forgiveness (Luke 24:47-48; Acts 2:38; 10:43)

### **Man's Responsibility and Forgiveness**

1. Faith (Luke 7:48-50); Belief (Acts 10:43)
2. Confess (Psalm 32:5-6; 1 John 1:9)
3. Repent (Psalm 32:1-7; Jeremiah 36:3; Luke 3:3; 17:3-4; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:32; 8:22)
4. Ask (Psalm 79:9)

### **Those Whom God Will Not Forgive**

1. Those whose "repentance" is false--Exodus 10:16-17
2. Those who sin willfully--Deuteronomy 29:17-21; Hebrews 10:26-31
3. Those who reject God's forgiveness and strive on their own--Joshua 24:19-20
4. Those who persistently rebel against God, who refuse to believe in His Word, and who reject the inspired warnings God gives through His prophets--2 Kings 24:1-4
5. Those who evidence that they have not experienced God's forgiveness by their own lack of forgiveness--Matthew 6:12-15
6. Those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit, who is God's instrument for convicting men of sin and of saving them through faith in Christ--Matthew 12:22-37
7. Those whose sins have been "retained" by the church, acting on God's behalf (in effect, those who refuse to repent when confronted and rebuked for their sin)--John 20:22-23

## Lesson 16: The Truth of God

### Introduction

Just before giving in to the pressure of the crowd and ordering the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ, Pilate asked one of the most tragic questions of the Bible:

37 Pilate therefore said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." 38 Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him" (John 18:37-38).

Because Pilate's question is a response to the words of our Lord, it is even more disturbing. When Pilate asked Jesus if He were a king, Jesus said He was. He could not answer otherwise because of His nature. Jesus was "**the truth**" (see John 14:6), and He could not answer Pilate's question untruthfully. But Jesus went on to indicate that His claims, while true, would not be accepted by those who were not "**of the truth.**" Those who were "**of the truth**" would hear His voice and receive Him as their King.

Pilate's response is distressing. He was serving as the judge who was to pass judgment on our Lord. Was Jesus a dangerous revolutionary who intended to overthrow Roman rule and establish His own kingdom? Judgment must be according to truth:

16 "These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates" (Zechariah 8:16).

How sad to hear the judge himself disdain the truth. Worse yet, although he discerned Jesus' innocence as the truth, he allowed the mob to crucify our Lord. His judgment was most surely not according to truth.

Pilate's words show that he was not "**of the truth.**" Notice he does not ask, "What is *the* truth?" Asking this question would have indicated a desire to know the truth and to act accordingly. Instead, his question, "**What is truth?**" indicates his cynicism. Pilate seems to doubt that one can know the truth or even that truth exists. Truth for Pilate was whatever one wished to believe is true. Jesus believed He was a King; the scribes and Pharisees claimed He was a fraud and a traitor, a menace both to Judaism and to Rome. Pilate doubted that the truth could be known or that it really matters.

One wishes Pilate's view of "truth" was only his own, or at least limited to the people of his day and culture. Sadly, we must acknowledge that it is also the viewpoint of our own age. Recently I have been reading on the subject of "truth," and my findings are far from encouraging. David Wells has authored an excellent book, *No Place For Truth* subtitled, *Whatever Happened To Evangelical Theology*. Another excellent work is Michael Scott Horton's *Made In America: The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism*,<sup>1</sup> from which I have cited several distressing quotations. Horton reminds us that the secular world has come to trust more in science than in the Scriptures when discerning truth, but that science can never fulfill the task of answering the deepest questions for which men need to learn the truth:

Sir John Eccles, a Nobel Prize-winning pioneer in brain research, observes that science, in trying to answer questions beyond its competence, becomes reduced to superstition. 'Science,' he says, 'cannot explain the existence of each of us as a unique self, nor can it answer such fundamental questions as: Who am I? Why am I here? How did I come to be at a certain place and time? What happens after death? These are all mysteries beyond science.' With the Enlightenment, science displaced Christianity as the intellectual authority, but when science failed to provide ultimate answers itself, relativism replaced science.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *Made In America: The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Horton, pp. 143-144.

Relativism has now replaced the absolutism which was rooted in confidence concerning our ability to know the truth from the Scriptures. This relativism is especially evident in the realm of education:

‘The purpose of education’ nowadays, says Bloom, ‘is not to make scholars, but to provide them with a moral virtue: openness. There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of,’ according to Bloom: ‘almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.’ Students ‘have causes without content. Reason has been replaced by mindless commitment, consciousness-raising and trashy sentimentality.’ Can we not say the same of contemporary evangelical subculture?<sup>3</sup>

‘On the portal of the university,’ writes Bloom, ‘is written in many ways, and in many tongues, “There is no truth—at least here.”’ In a culture of narcissism, ‘truth has given way to credibility, fact to statements that sound authoritative without conveying any authoritative information.’<sup>4</sup>

E. D. Hirsch, Jr. refers to current public education as ‘cafeteria-style education.’ There is no longer a generally accepted core of knowledge or belief. In skimming current catalogues for evangelical seminaries and colleges, one discovers a striking similarity to ‘cafeteria-style education.’ If evangelicals cannot come up with a common core of convictions, and defend them, how can we criticize the world for the same? Remember Marty’s remark about evangelicals who ‘pick and choose truths as if on a cafeteria line.’<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising that the secular world has reached a point of despair in knowing the truth, or even whether there is such a thing as universal, unchanging truth. But Horton points out the tragic truth that even evangelicalism has succumbed to cultural pressures and now views truth in the same relativistic way as the secular world:

Francis A. Schaeffer noted, ‘T. H. Huxley spoke as a prophet . . . when he said there would come a day when faith would be separated from all fact, and faith would go on triumphant forever.’ After all, this is what Immanuel Kant proposed and Soren Kierkegaard acted out--the famous leap of faith. ‘This is where,’ Schaeffer cautioned, ‘not only the liberal theologians are, but also the evangelical, orthodox theologians who begin to tone down on the truth, the propositional truth of Scripture, which God has given us.’<sup>6</sup>

The majority of evangelical college and seminary students--more than half, according to James Davison Hunter--believe that ‘the Bible is the inspired Word of God, not mistaken in its teachings, but is not always to be taken literally in its statements concerning matters of science, historical reporting, etc.’ Furthermore, ‘One cannot speak of ultimate truth *per se*, only ultimate truth for each believer. In other words, most of the students at evangelical institutions have already accepted the relativism of their culture, and with that, the liberal and neo-orthodox concession that faith in Christ is a spiritual matter, not dependent on external, objective facts of history.’<sup>7</sup>

The Reformation occurred because a few good men were firmly convicted that the Word of God is the truth, and that the views of individuals, of cultures, and even the church cannot and must not profess or practice any “truth” other than that which can be defended from the Scriptures. The weak-kneed, emasculated preaching so typical of our own time was also the norm in the days just before the Reformation. Horton’s paraphrasing of Luther and Calvin, and his reference to Calvin’s assessment of the preaching of his day, are amusing:

Martin Luther and John Calvin, paraphrased, put it in these words: ‘The Bible itself isn’t ambiguous about these subjects we’re addressing--the church is!’ Reluctant to be vulnerable to the dangerous teaching of Scripture, the church refused to take theological stands--until the Reformation left it with no option. In fact, on the eve of the Reformation, there were twelve theological schools of thought competing for control at the University of Paris. Calvin said, ‘Seldom did a minister mount the pulpit to teach. . . . Nay, what one sermon was there from which old wives might not carry off more whimsies than they could devise at their own fireside in a month?’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Horton, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Horton, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> Horton, pp. 146-147.

<sup>6</sup> Horton, pp. 141-142.

<sup>7</sup> Horton, p. 151, citing James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicals: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Horton, pp. 148-149.

We need another Reformation. We need a renewed commitment to the truth as found in the Scriptures and as summarized in theological and doctrinal propositions. *Truth finds its origin in God, its incarnation in Jesus Christ, and its present manifestation in the written Word of God, the Bible.* Our lesson will consider the fact that truth comes only from God, because God is truth and the source of all truth.

### The Truth of God and the Fall of Man

I have always thought the fundamental issue underlying the fall of man in the Garden of Eden was authority. Authority does play a significant role in the fall, and both creation (1 Corinthians 11:7-10) and the fall (1 Timothy 2:9-15) do serve as the basis for God's principles of authority in the New Testament. God's "chain of command" was clearly reversed in the fall, for the creature (the serpent) led the woman, and the woman led the man. Nevertheless, I now see that the *foundational issue in the fall of man in the Garden of Eden (for Eve at least)*<sup>9</sup> *was the issue of truth.* Who spoke the truth, God or Satan? Who was to be believed? Who was to be obeyed? The answers to these questions depend upon who was thought to be speaking the truth.

How incredible that Eve would believe a serpent and not God! In the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, the account of creation is given with the repeated expressions, "**And God said. . .**," followed by, "**and it was so**" (or similar words):

<sup>9</sup> Then God said, "Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear"; and it was so (Genesis 1:9).

Satan took the form of a serpent, a created being. He began by questioning God's command regarding the eating of the fruit of the trees of the garden. He distorted the command, and in so doing implied that God was withholding much that was desirable. By inference, He raised a question concerning the goodness of God. "How could God be good and withhold so much that is good?" Finally, he virtually calls God a liar by assuring Eve, "**You shall surely not die!**" (Genesis 3:4). And so Eve must choose who to believe-- who is telling the truth. Eve made the wrong choice. *God is the source of truth; Satan is the source of lies and deception.*

We find at the very beginning of the Bible a lesson to be learned. *God is true, and He always speaks the truth. Satan is a liar, who can be relied upon to lie.* Satan is the great deceiver, who from the Garden of Eden onward has been seeking to lead men and women astray, turning them away from the truth, and deceiving them into believing his lies.

### The Old Testament Law and the Truth of God

In the Old Testament, God seldom spoke to men audibly and personally. When He did speak, time proved that His promises were true and reliable. Abraham and Sarah did have a child in their old age, just as God had said (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:16; 15:1-6; 17:1-8; 18:9-15; 21:1-5). Israel did spend 400 years in Egyptian bondage, just as God had indicated to Abram (Genesis 15:13-14; Exodus 12:40-41).

Shortly after their passing through the Red Sea, God gave the nation Israel the Law. This Law was revealed to men as God's truth. Man's response to this truth was a matter of life and death (see Deuteronomy 30:15, 19). When God revealed His glory to Moses, He proclaimed that He was the abundant source of truth:

<sup>6</sup> Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth" (Exodus 34:6).

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<sup>9</sup> It is necessary to make a distinction here between Adam and Eve. Eve was deceived, while Adam was not (1 Timothy 2:14). Eve was deceived into believing that Satan told the truth, rather than God. Adam, on the other hand, was not deceived. His appears to be a more willful disobedience, in that he believed God but disobeyed anyway.

Thus, when the Law was given through Moses, it was given as truth from God, and this is the way godly Jews viewed it:

142 Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, And Thy law is truth. 151 Thou art near, O Lord, And all Thy commandments are truth. 160 The sum of Thy word is truth, And every one of Thy righteous ordinances is everlasting (Psalm 119:142, 151,160).

13 “As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come on us; yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our iniquity and giving attention to Thy truth” (Daniel 9:13).

God’s Law is His truth, revealed to His people. The prophets were sent from God, not just to give further revelation concerning future events, but to interpret the Law and to show men how the Law was to be applied. Satan, the great deceiver, also had his spokesmen, the false prophets, who sought to turn God’s people away from the truth by perverting God’s Word. Moses warned the Israelites about such false prophets. Indeed, he indicated that the response of the Israelites to false prophets was a test of their love for God:

1 “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you” (Deuteronomy 13:1-5).

It was assumed that some false prophets would have the ability to perform false signs and wonders. One might conclude from this that the prophet must be a spokesman sent from God, but Moses indicates this is not necessarily so. Not only must a prophet be able to fulfill the things which he promises, his revelation must conform to the Law which God had already revealed. Prophets may indeed give new revelation, but it must always conform to the old, that which God had already revealed. In fact, the Law provides the broad outline for God’s program in history, and the later prophets simply filled in further details. If a prophet’s word contradicted the Law, he was a false prophet and must be put to death. No prophet who turns men from loving and serving God is a true prophet, and no true Israelite dare fail to see that a false prophet be put to death. Those who truly love God with all their heart and soul will hate falsehood, and all those who proclaim it in an effort to lead the people of God astray from Him. Love for God means a hatred of evil (see Romans 12:9).

A little later in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses has more to say about prophets. God had revealed truth through Moses, the great prophet through whom the Law was given, but God was to reveal even greater things through the Messiah, a prophet like Moses, who was yet to come:

14 “For those nations, which you shall dispossess, **listen** to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do so. 15 The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, **you shall listen to him**. 16 This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’ 17 And the Lord said to me, ‘They have spoken well. 18 I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. 19 And it shall come about that **whoever will not listen** to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. 20 But the prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’ 21 And you may say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?’ 22 When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him” (Deuteronomy 18:14-22).

*Listen* is a key word in this passage. The pagans *listen* to their false prophets, and they are led astray. The people of God are not to *listen* to false messengers. And how are God’s people to know the difference between the false and the true? In verses 21-22, Moses says the test of a prophet is whether his words

come true. Those whose prophecies do not come true are false prophets. If a prophet's words come true, this does not prove he is a true prophet, for his words must also prove consistent with the revelation of God's truth in the Law (Deuteronomy 13:1-5).

The central person of this passage is our Lord Jesus Christ. His coming is foretold by likening Him to Moses, His predecessor. Just as Moses was the one through whom God revealed His Law and through whom He established His (Mosaic) Covenant, God will speak through the Messiah, who will introduce and implement the New Covenant. He is the One who is even greater than Moses. When He appears, raised up by God, people are to *listen* to Him.

This Deuteronomy 18 passage is fascinating. Moses reminds the Israelites of what their father had requested at the base of Mount Sinai. They were not only afraid to *see* the glory of God (as manifested in the great fire, 18:16), they were even afraid to *hear* God, lest they die. God's words were indeed powerful and awesome to this people! They requested that they not hear God speak and that Moses be their intercessor. Let Moses speak to God face to face and then tell them what he had heard. I am amazed that God commended the people for making this request (see 18:17) and then proceeds to tell of the coming of one like Moses, who will speak in His name and to whom men are to listen (Deuteronomy 18:15, 19).

The broader context of Deuteronomy helps explain the prophecy of verses 15-19. In Deuteronomy 18:15-19, Moses is referring back to the events described in Exodus 20:18-19, the things in Israel's history of which Moses reminded the second generation of Israelites in Deuteronomy 5:23-27. But in both of these earlier texts, nothing is said of a "**prophet like Moses,**" whom God will raise up. And yet Moses indicates that God had spoken of Him at that time (Deuteronomy 18:16-19). Here is yet another example of progressive revelation, even within the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). Moses' words in chapter 18 shed much light on what we read in Deuteronomy 5:29, and later, in chapter 30, verses 1-6. It is the Lord Jesus Christ, the "**prophet like Moses,**" who will "**circumcise the hearts**" of God's people, and who will give them a heart to fear Him and obey His commandments. This we shall now see fulfilled as we pass over the rest of the Old Testament and focus our attention on the coming of Jesus as the promised Messiah in the New Testament.

### **Jesus Christ, The Truth of God Incarnate**

As we approach the formal presentation of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels, let us bear in mind several specifics concerning Messiah, which Moses and other Old Testament prophets indicated would describe the One whom God was to raise up as a "**prophet like Moses.**"

1. He was to be a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15).
2. He was to be a prophet like Moses (18:15)
3. Raised up by God from among you (Deuteronomy 18:15).
4. He would be a mediator between men and God, speaking to men of God of what he heard when in the presence of God (18:16-18).
5. He would give the people of God a new heart, to love and obey God (Deuteronomy 5:29; 29:4; 30:1-6).
6. He would not abolish the Law, but rather would write the Law on men's hearts (5:29; 29:4; 30:1-6; Jeremiah 31:31-34).
7. He would introduce and implement a covenant with God (Exodus 34:10ff.; Jeremiah 31:31-34).
8. Men would recognize Him by the fact that what He said would come true--by signs and wonders accomplished by His hand (Deuteronomy 18:21-22)
9. He was One to whom men must listen (18:15, 19).

The Lord Jesus perfectly fulfilled all of these prophetic requirements. Consider some of the parallels which the New Testament draws between the Lord Jesus Christ and Moses:

1. Moses was divinely delivered from death in his infancy, as was the Lord Jesus (Exodus 2:1-10; Matthew 2:1-15).
2. Both were brought forth from Egypt (Exodus 12-14; Matthew 2:13-15).
3. Moses also went up on a mountain and received the Law and then taught the people its meaning (Exodus 18:19-20); Jesus also went up on a mountain and taught the meaning of the Law (Matthew 5-7).
4. Through Moses, God gave the Israelites bread to eat; Jesus spoke of both bread and water, which would give eternal life, and performed the sign of feeding the 5,000 (Exodus 15-17; John 4:1-14; 6:1-14).<sup>10</sup> When Moses came down from the mountain, his face glowed with the glory of God (Exodus 34:29-35); when Jesus was on the mount of transfiguration, His entire body was glowing with the glory of God (Matthew 17:2). On the mount of transfiguration, who should appear there, with Jesus, but Moses and Elijah? (Matthew 17:3).

Consider in somewhat greater detail other ways in which the Lord Jesus clearly fulfilled the prophecy of Deuteronomy 18. Moses told the people that when the prophet like him appeared, He would be raised up by God. The accounts of the miraculous virgin birth of our Lord make it clear that Jesus was raised up by God. The apostle John wants us to know that Jesus is the truth, who was sent from God:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. 6 There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light. 9 There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. 11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 John bore witness of Him, and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" 16 For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. 17 For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. 18 No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him (John 1:1-18).

Jesus is the Word of God, the Word who existed with God from eternity past, and who then was sent to men by God. He is the Creator of all things. He is the source of life. He is the "**light**." I take it that "**light**" is a symbol for truth. John the Baptist was not the "**light**," but a witness to the fact that Jesus Christ was the "**light**" of the world. Men did not receive Jesus as the truth because His "**light**" (His truth) revealed their character. Sinners love the darkness (error, falsehood), because they suppose it conceals their sin. Though He made the world, the world does not recognize Him because men are evil and despise the light of the truth, which reveals our sin. It was the Lord Jesus, John testifies, who personified "**grace and truth**." Though no man has seen God at any time, God appeared in human flesh, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. It is He who explains or reveals the Father to men.

When Jesus went out of His way to pass through Samaria (John 4:3-4), He met a Samaritan woman at the well where He stopped to rest and refresh Himself. He spoke to her about "**living water**," but she really did not understand nor grasp who He was. And then Jesus spoke these words:

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<sup>10</sup> When the people witnessed the sign of Jesus feeding the 5,000, they understood it signified that Jesus was indeed "the prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14). Surely they are thinking of "the prophet" of Deuteronomy 18:15-18.

16 He said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." 17 The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly." 19 The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet" (John 4:16-19).

What made this woman look differently at Jesus? Why did she now perceive that He was a prophet? It was because Jesus had told her something which He, as a stranger, could not possibly know. He knew the truth about her, the whole ugly, sordid truth. Prophets spoke the truth, and Jesus spoke the truth about her. Jesus, she rightly reasoned, was a prophet. And so He was, the Prophet.

A little later in His conversation with this "woman at the well" Jesus spoke about truth:

23 "But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24).

Jesus told this woman that God was seeking "**true worshipers.**" True worshipers must worship the Father "**in spirit and in truth.**" God is Spirit, and He is truth. God requires that men's worship be compatible with His nature. Thus, men must worship God in the Holy Spirit and in accordance with truth. And since Jesus is the Son of God, since He is divine, He, as God, is also the truth:

6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6).

No one can come to the Father--for salvation or for worship--except through Jesus Christ, who is the Truth of God Incarnate.

As Moses spoke to the Israelites, communicating to them what he had heard from God while in His presence, our Lord Jesus is the only One who has been with God, in His presence, and He speaks to men for God of what He has heard from the Father:

25 And so they were saying to Him, "Who are You?" Jesus said to them, "What have I been saying to you from the beginning? 26 I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world." 27 They did not realize that He had been speaking to them about the Father. 28 Jesus therefore said, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me. 29 And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him." 30 As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. 31 Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." 33 They answered Him, "We are Abraham's offspring, and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You shall become free'?" 34 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. 35 And the slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. 36 If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed. 37 I know that you are Abraham's offspring; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. 38 I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father." 39 They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. 40 But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. 41 You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God." 42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me; for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. 43 Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. 44 You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies. 45 But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. 46 Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? 47 He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God" (John 8:25-47).

Central to the message of these verses is the concept of truth. Jesus is a child of His Father. He is, by nature, truth, and thus He speaks only truth. His opponents have the devil as their father. The devil is a liar, and no truth abides in him, so they are predisposed to lies and not the truth. They oppose Jesus because He speaks the truth, and they disdain the truth. Jesus' works accredit His words, which are the words of His Father and words completely consistent with the Law. He did not come to set the Law aside or to annul the Law, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17).



As Moses gave men commands from God, so the Lord Jesus gives commandments as well:

34 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

12 “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you” (John 15:12; compare Matthew 28:20).

Jesus told His disciples that after He departed from them He would come to them through His Spirit, the Spirit whom He identified as the “**Spirit of truth**” (see John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). By means of His Word and His Spirit, men will be converted and brought to maturity in Christ.

The New Testament writers, without hesitation, declare Jesus to be the source of truth; thus the gospel is the truth, the truth to which men must listen or neglect, to their eternal peril:

25 But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth (Acts 26:25).

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18).

25 For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:25).

7 to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; 8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation (Romans 2:7-8).

11 I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit (Romans 9:1).

8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers (Romans 15:8).

10 As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be stopped in the regions of Achaia (2 Corinthians 11:10).

5 But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you (Galatians 2:5).

13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation-- having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise (Ephesians 1:13).

21 If indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus (Ephesians 4:21).

5 Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, 6 which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth (Colossians 1:5-6).

12 In order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. 13 But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:12-13).

## Conclusion

God is the source of all truth. His Son, Jesus Christ, Personified the truth. What does this have to do with us? Moses told us long ago:

15 “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, *you shall listen to him*. 16 This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’ 17 And the Lord said to me, ‘They have spoken well. 18 I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. 19 *And it shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him*” (Deuteronomy 18:15-19).

God did raise up a prophet, like Moses. This “**prophet**” is the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. The implications of this are clear and simple: *we are to listen to him*. And if we do not listen, we shall reap the consequences which God will require of us.

When the Lord Jesus was transfigured, God clearly stated to the three disciples who witnessed this event what it meant for them:

2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 And Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5 While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; *listen to Him!*” (Matthew 17:1-5, emphasis mine).

When Jesus was preparing His disciples for His absence, He gave them a commandment concerning His Word:

31 Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine” (John 8:31).

15 “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

21 “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him” (John 14:21).

23 Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him. (John 14:23).

10 “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love. (John 15:10).

The writer to the Hebrews stresses the importance of heeding the Word of God, along with Peter and John:

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. 3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:1-3a).

*1 For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, 4 God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will (Hebrews 2:1-4, emphasis mine).*

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 17 For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased”-- 18 and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. 19 And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, *to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts (2 Peter 1:16-19, emphasis mine).*

6 We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6).

*We are to listen to God as He has spoken through His Son and continues to speak through His Word, the Bible. We are to listen because God has instructed us to listen. But we should also listen because we realize that God’s Word, His truth, is vitally important to every aspect of our daily Christian walk. Consider some of the ways the truth of God’s Word impacts our daily lives.*

1. The truth of God's Word is the message which we must believe to be saved (See Psalm 31:5; 57:3; 61:7; 69:13; Proverbs 16:6;<sup>11</sup> Colossians 1:5-6; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Timothy 2:15; Hebrews 10:26; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:22).
2. The truth of God's Word is the basis for our faith (see Romans 10:8; Hebrews 11).
3. The truth of God's Word (of the gospel) is the message we proclaim to lost sinners in order that they might be saved (Romans 1:16; Galatians 2:5; Ephesians 1:13; 1 Peter 1:22-25).
4. The truth of God's Word is also the basis for the condemnation of those unbelievers who reject the truth of the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:12-13).
5. The truth of God's Word is essential to our sanctification (John 17:17; Ephesians 4:14-24; 2 Peter 1:4).

### Abiding in God's Word

Abiding in God's Word is essential to discipleship, and it results in knowing the truth, which sets us free. We must elaborate on this vitally important principle. Jesus said, "**And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free**" (John 8:32). The truth will make us free; it tells us how we may be free from the power of sin and the penalty of death. But how do we "**know the truth**"? Allow me to point out a rather obvious but often neglected fact: John 8:32 begins with the word "**and**," which indicates to us that John 8:32 is a *continuation and conclusion* to John 8:31. Let us look at these verses together:

31 Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 *and* you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32).

*How do we know the truth? By abiding in the Word of our Lord, by abiding in the words of Scripture.* In so doing, we are truly His disciples, and we are free. Peter says virtually the same thing:

4 For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust (2 Peter 1:4).

And Paul says virtually the same thing:

17 This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the *futility of their mind*, 18 being *darkened in their understanding*, excluded from the life of God, because of the *ignorance* that is in them, because of the *hardness of their heart*; 19 and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. 20 But *you did not learn Christ in this way*, 21 if indeed you have *heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus*, 22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of *the truth* (Ephesians 4:17-24, emphasis mine).

1. The truth of God's Word describes life as it really is (see Proverbs 20:14).
2. The truth of God's Word is the content which edifies the saints (Zechariah 8:16; Ephesians 4:15, 24-25).
3. The truth of God's Word is the basis for worship and praise (John 4:23-24; 1 Corinthians 5:8).
4. The truth of God's Word is the source of wisdom (Psalm 119:98-100, 130).
5. The truth of God's Word is the primary means by which God guides us (Psalm 25:5, 10; 26:3; 43:3; 86:11; 119:105).
6. The truth of God's Word is a primary weapon in the spiritual warfare (Psalm 40:10-11; 2 Corinthians 6:7; Ephesians 6:14).

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<sup>11</sup> Is this text not speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah who is to come, in whom lovingkindness and truth are joined? And thus it is in Him that our sins are atoned for.

7. Truth is what God desires to find in us (Psalm 51:6).
8. The Christian life is called “the way of truth” (2 Peter 2:2). We are to “walk in the truth” (2 John 1:4; 3 John 1:3-4).
9. We are not to lie; we are to speak the truth (Ephesians 4:15).
10. The Holy Spirit, who indwells us, is the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), and lying or deceiving the saints is “lying to the Holy Spirit”--a most serious offense (Acts 5:1-11).
11. Arrogance is called “lying against the truth”--it is not living according to reality (James 3:14).
12. Godliness is closely associated with a knowledge of the truth (Titus 1:1-2).
13. The truth is the one basis for the unity of all believers--”one faith” (Ephesians 4:5).
14. Knowing the truth frees us from legalistic prohibitions and enables us to enjoy life more fully (1 Timothy 4:3).
15. The church is the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:5).

With this, we can see that the truth of God’s Word is our lifeline; it is vital to our salvation and to our daily walk. It is the bread of life to those who will eat of it.

Finally, let us consider several important characteristics of the truth and their implications for us.

### **Truth is Eternal**

2 For His lovingkindness is great toward us, And the truth of the Lord is everlasting. Praise the Lord! (Psalm 117:2).

35 “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

Truth does not go out of fashion; it does not change with time. Dispensationalists in particular must be careful not to think of the Old Testament, including the Law, as something obsolete, no longer applicable. The New Testament writers make a great deal of use of the Old Testament, including the Law (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 9:8-11; 10:1-13; 14:34; Romans 15:4). It was Paul who told Timothy that “**all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable . . .**” (2 Timothy 3:16). God’s truth is never out of date. It is as applicable to us in the twentieth century as it was to men centuries ago.

### **Truth is Universal**

17 For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church (1 Corinthians 4:17).

Some would have us think that when Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the role of women in the church, he was speaking only to those saints in that culture at that time and place. This is not what Paul indicates in chapter 4, verse 17. He tells the Corinthians his teaching conforms to his practice, and that this is consistent no matter where he goes.<sup>12</sup>

Having traveled a bit over the years with the opportunity to observe a few churches in Europe, Asia, and Africa, it was not at all surprising to see New Testament teaching, principles, and practices everywhere I visited. *Truth is universal; it is applicable anywhere, at any time, and in any group of people.* When I hear teaching or methods which work only in certain places and among certain people, I know I am not dealing with truth, but with a passing fad. A book which will not sell on the streets of India, but only in places like North Dallas, is a book which contains human ideas. *The Bible works everywhere, any time,*

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<sup>12</sup> Some quick-thinking person may turn to 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23. Let me remind you Paul is speaking there of his personal practice with respect to Christian liberties. But when it comes to apostolic teaching and conduct, Paul is consistent.

and among any people, because the Bible is truth. We spend too much time and money on books which do not deal enough in truth.<sup>13</sup>

### Truth Comes From God

The only absolute truth comes from God and is conveyed through the Bible, the Word of God.

We are told, “All truth is God’s truth.” There is a sense in which this is true. There is no truth which is contrary to God or for which God is not the author. Having acknowledged this, *the only truth I know for certain to be truth is the truth God has revealed in the Bible*. All other “truths” are *apparent* truths, and I must conclude that because they are not found in the Bible, they are not essential to “**life and godliness**” (2 Peter 1:3; see also 2 Timothy 3:16-17). These truths are therefore secondary and subordinate to biblical truths. Why then do so many Christian leaders speak of “integrating certain secular theories with biblical revelation”? Especially popular is the concept of “integrating psychology and theology.” I will have no part of such talk. Who would dare to call psychological theories “truth”? And who would dare to speak of these theories as though they were on a par with Scripture? It is time to subordinate all non-biblical truth to God’s truth, the Word of God.

### Truth Needs to be Integrated with Our Lives

The Bible calls upon us to integrate theology (God’s truth) and morality. There is a very close link between truth and morality. *Immorality blinds us to the truth. Truth binds us to morality*. Truth and righteousness are closely intertwined. Those truths which do not have practical, moral implications are somewhat suspect, for God did not reveal His truth to fill our notebooks, or even our minds, but to transform our lives (see Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:17-24).

### The Truth is Infinite

10 For Thy lovingkindness is great to the heavens, And Thy truth to the clouds (Psalm 57:10).

4 For Thy lovingkindness is great above the heavens; And Thy truth reaches to the skies (Psalm 108:4).

This means the pursuit of truth is never ending. It means that we will never know all the truth in this life. We only scratch the surface of the vast ocean of truth, which is yet unknown and unrevealed. But let us know that the truths we need to know have been revealed, and beware of all else. These are the truths we should seek to learn and to implement.

29 “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

We are to seek to learn that which God has clearly, emphatically, and repeatedly revealed in His Word, and not to become side-tracked by speculative and theoretical pursuits:

5 But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6 For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, 7 wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions (1 Timothy 1:5-7).

7 But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness (1 Timothy 4:7).

4 And will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths (2 Timothy 4:4).

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<sup>13</sup> I do not wish to be understood as saying we should only read the Bible, although most of us could spend much more time doing so. I am saying the books we buy and read should deal with biblical terms, biblical truths, and even biblical texts. A book on Christian marriage with only two or three Bible references is hardly a book on Christian marriage. Where can we learn the truth about marriage if not from the Bible?

14 Not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth (Titus 1:14).

### The Truth is Centered in Christ

When we stray from Christ, we stray from the truth.

21 If indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus (Ephesians 4:21).

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive argument. 5 For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, 7 having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ (Colossians 2:1-8).

### The Truth is Exclusive

Here is one significant difference between Christianity and polytheistic or pluralistic cultures. Other religious systems have no problem with incompatibility of truth. They will often embrace different "gods" and allow the individual to embrace whatever truth system he or she prefers. *Biblical truth, God's truth, is exclusive. It is incompatible with any alleged truth which contradicts Scripture.* Christians may be labeled "intolerant" for such a conviction, but there is not more than one truth system.

### The Truth is Doctrinal and Propositional

*If God's Word is truth, then truth can be put into words and should originate from the Word.* We dare not learn our truth existentially, apart from the written Word of God. And we dare not disdain doctrine nor theology. Truth is a system; it is not just a compilation of random facts.

Consider this illustration from a contemporary event. Recently, the O.J. Simpson case has been aired daily. People really want to know the truth; they want to know what happened. The police have gathered a great quantity of evidence, some of which will be accepted by the judge and some of which will be rejected. But all of these pieces of evidence do not explain what happened to these two human beings. The prosecution will present its case, which they will represent as the "truth" to the jury. The defense will take the same evidence and give an entirely different explanation, an entirely different attempt to explain the truth of what happened. Ideally, one side or the other conveys the truth. Practically speaking, neither side will have the full truth. The task of the jury is to determine, as best they can, what the truth is.

The Bible is like this. It is not just a listing of facts about God and men. There are a number of propositional statements, but these must be harmonized, put together, so that we gain an overall sense of what the Bible teaches. The truth of Scripture therefore results in some kind of doctrine. There are different doctrinal positions (each of which likes to think it is the closest approximation of the truth), and we may differ with the conclusions of others. But you cannot think or speak of truth apart from doctrine.

We sometimes hear someone say, "We don't worship doctrine, we worship Jesus." Which Jesus do you worship? Remember, you must worship God "**in Spirit and in truth**" (John 4:24). The discussion between Jesus and the woman at the well was over doctrinal differences, and Jesus made it clear that this woman's doctrine (the Samaritan's doctrine) was wrong. Paul says that one may come, preaching "**another Jesus**" (2 Corinthians 11:4). Doctrine describes and defines the "Jesus of the Bible" so that we may worship in Spirit and in truth. *You cannot have truth apart from doctrine. To disdain doctrine is not only foolish, it is dangerous.*

14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming (Ephesians 4:14).

6 In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following (1 Timothy 4:6).

1 Let all who are under the yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine may not be spoken against (1 Timothy 6:1).

3 If anyone advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness (1 Timothy 6:3).

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires (2 Timothy 4:3).

9 Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9).

1 But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine (Titus 2:1).

7 In all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified (Titus 2:7).

10 Not pilfering, but showing all good faith that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect (Titus 2:10).

*The truth of God, revealed in Christ and in the written Word of God, the Bible, should be a priority in our lives. Let us seek, by His grace, to be people of the Word, people who love truth and who search the Scriptures to find it. And let us be those who incarnate the truth, putting it into practice in our daily lives, to His glory.*

## Lesson 17: The Love of God

### Introduction

For those who believe there is a God, we all agree on one thing: God is love.<sup>1</sup> And the love of God is a biblical truth (1 John 4:8). But why is everyone so eager to embrace this attribute, unlike many other of God's attributes? Arthur W. Pink tells us:

There are many who talk about the love of God, who are total strangers to the God of love. The divine love is commonly regarded as a species of amiable weakness, a sort of good-natured indulgence; it is reduced to a mere sickly sentiment, patterned after human emotion. The truth is that on this, as on everything else, our thoughts need to be formed and regulated by what is revealed in Scripture. That there is urgent need for this is apparent not only from the ignorance which so generally prevails, but also from the low state of spirituality which is now so sadly evident everywhere among professing Christians. How little real love there is for God. One chief reason for this is because our hearts are so little occupied with His wondrous love for His people. The better we are acquainted with His love--its character, fullness, blessedness--the more our hearts will be drawn out in love to Him.<sup>2</sup>

The need to study and to grasp the love of God is vital for a number of reasons (and even more!).

**(1) The love of God is widely accepted, but wrongly understood.** As indicated, many people believe in a "God of love," who operates according to their definition of love. Those people will be shocked to find themselves spending eternity in hell if they believe "a loving God would not condemn anyone to hell." But the error is not just among unbelievers, for many Christians also have a very distorted concept of God's love.

**(2) The love of God is the basis for God's great acts in history.** In Psalm 136, we find the love ("lovingkindness" --NASB) of God repeated after each new line of the Psalm. The Psalm praises God for His lovingkindness for two major acts in history, the creation of the world and the deliverance of Israel from their Egyptian slavery. The prophets of the Old Testament emphasized the love of God during the dark days of Israel's captivity (Isaiah 49:8-16; 63:7; Jeremiah 31:3; Hosea 11:1), and the New Testament speaks of the love of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ (1 John 4:9).

**(3) The love of God is the cause, the basis and the standard for the love we are expected to demonstrate in our lives as Christians** (Matthew 5:43-48; John 15:7-12; 1 John 2:4-11; 3:10-11; 13-24; 4:7-11).

**(4) The entire Old Testament law can be summed up in terms of love.** The commands of the Law, given to the people of God, can be summed up as: *love God, and love your neighbor.*

34 But when the Pharisees heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. 35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 37 And He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the great and foremost commandment. 39 The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:34-40).

8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. 9 For this, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8-10).

**(5) Love is to be a principle goal of our lives as Christians** (1 Corinthians 12:31; 13:13; 14:1; see 2 Peter 1:7, where love is the pinnacle of Christian virtues to be pursued).

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<sup>1</sup> Packer defines the love of God this way: God's love is an exercise of His goodness towards individual sinners whereby, having identified Himself with their welfare, He has given His Son to be their Saviour, and now brings them to know and enjoy Him in a covenant relation. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur. W. Pink, *Gleanings in the Godhead* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 72.



**(6) It is the love of Christ which controls us** (2 Corinthians 5:14).

**(7) What we love is what we will tend to be like, to imitate** (see Hosea 9:10).

**(8) Love is one of the prominent terms and concepts in the New Testament.** When our Lord was soon to be arrested and crucified, He spoke to His disciples in what has become known as the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17) concerning the things important for them to know in light of His coming death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. “Love” is one of the prominent terms in this section.

Love is also prominent in the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, being mentioned in each chapter. In chapter 1, verse 4, love is first mentioned as the motivation of God as He chose us for salvation in eternity past. In chapter 2, Paul reminds his readers they were once dead in their trespasses and sins, and that God provided salvation for us because of His mercy and His great love with which He loved us (2:4). In chapter 3, Paul prays that his readers might be “**rooted and grounded in love**” (3:17), and “**know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge**” (3:19). In chapter 4, Christian unity is urged, as believers show “**forbearance to one another in love**” (verse 2). In the same chapter, Paul says that the church, the body of Christ, builds up itself in love as Christians speak the truth in love (verses 15-16). In chapter 5, Paul urges believers to “**walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma**” (verse 2). Husbands are instructed to “**love their wives, just as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself up for her**” (verse 25). In his concluding words to the Ephesians, Paul writes,

23 Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with a *love* incorruptible (Ephesians 6:23-24).

**(9) Love for others is evidence of a true faith in Christ, and the absence of love is an indication of a false profession.** These statements, written by the apostle John, are challenging to the Christian, and a sobering warning to those who merely think or profess to be saved:

9 The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. 10 The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. 11 But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes (1 John 2:9-11).

14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. 15 Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. 16 We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:14-17).

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. . . 20 If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also (1 John 4:7-10, 20-21).

If the New Testament abounds with references to the love of God and the believer’s responsibility to demonstrate this same kind of love, the Old Testament references are less frequent. This is not to suggest that the Old Testament avoids the subject of God’s love, but rather that the matter comes to full bloom with the coming of Christ. Another reason for the relative rarity of love in the Old Testament is a failure on the part of Bible translators. The Hebrew word, *hesed*, is often employed in the Old Testament, rendered “**lovingkindness**” 176 times, and “**unchanging love**” but twice. Nevertheless, *hesed* is the key word in describing the love of God toward man. Thus, “love” is much more frequently the subject in the Old Testament, even though it may not be the English word “love” that is employed.

## Characteristics of Divine Love

### God's Love is Infinite, Limitless, Unfathomable

11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him (Psalm 103:11).

7 I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, According to all that the Lord has granted us, And the great goodness toward the house of Israel, Which He has granted them according to His compassion, And according to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses (Isaiah 63:7).

17 So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:18-19; see also 2:4).

For all of eternity we shall ponder the love of God, and never will we fully be able to comprehend it, for His love is infinite.

### God's Love is Eternal

1 Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; For His lovingkindness is everlasting. 2 Give thanks to the God of gods, For His lovingkindness is everlasting (Psalm 136:1-2, so also verses 3-26).

3 The LORD appeared to him from afar, saying, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness" (Jeremiah 31:3).

The value of an article is due largely to how long it endures. Gold and precious stones, for example, are more precious than wood or paper, which do not last. God's love, or lovingkindness, as the term *hesed* is rendered in Psalm 136, is everlasting. It is eternal.

### God's Love is Immutable, Changeless

How quickly human "love" can turn to hate in the divorce court. God's love is not like this. His love is unchanging. As God is immutable, so is His love.

6 "Put me like a seal over your heart, Like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, Jealousy is as severe as Sheol; Its flashes are flashes of fire, The very flame of the LORD. 7 Many waters cannot quench love, Nor will rivers overflow it; If a man were to give all the riches of his house for love, It would be utterly despised" (Song of Solomon 8:6-7).

18 Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in unchanging love (Micah 7:18).

20 Thou wilt give truth to Jacob And unchanging love to Abraham, Which Thou didst swear to our forefathers From the days of old (Micah 7:20).

17 Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow (James 1:17).

### God's Love is Holy

Like God, God's love is holy. It is communicated to us through the *Holy Spirit*:

5 And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:5).

God's love is always an expression of God's holiness. It is also directed toward producing holiness in us. God's love seeks to make us holy.

4 Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love (Ephesians 1:4).

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; 26 that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word (Ephesians 5:25-26).

5 And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; 6 FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." 7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness (Hebrews 12:5-10).

Many people think God's love is such that He "accepts me just as I am." This is not true. We come to Him in the words of the hymn writer, "Just as I am, without one plea." But He cannot accept us this way. He accepts us "**in Christ**," just as Christ is. *God cannot and will not accept our sin.* And so, in love, God disciplines us, moving us in love toward holiness. The love of God is not a guarantee that we will not suffer; it is the assurance that whatever suffering we endure is directed toward making us holy by a God who loves us. If it was necessary for Christ to suffer in order to demonstrate God's love toward us, why would we think our suffering is incompatible with God's love toward us?

### God's Love is Sacrificial

God's love is not self-serving but sacrificial. Love comes at a high cost, and the one who loves is the one who willingly pays the price.

16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

13 "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20).

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25).

9 By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).

Love always has a price tag, and the "lover" is gladly willing to pay the price. From eternity past, God set His love on us and purposed to save us through the sacrificial death of His Son.

### God's Love is Sovereignly Bestowed By Grace

God's love is selective. When a man wants to marry, he chooses the woman he wants to be his wife. He chooses her apart from, and above, all others. He makes a selection. God's love is likewise selective. He chooses some and not others:

"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13; Malachi 1:2-3).

"Yet on your fathers did the Lord set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day (Deuteronomy 10:15).

"You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you" (John 15:16).

*God's love is not given to men because they are lovely.* He has chosen to love us in spite of our miserable condition.

7 "The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, 8 but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your

forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

We must conclude then that love is a choice--God’s choice. God chose to love us above others, not because of anything which we have done, or will do, but simply as a choice of His sovereign grace:

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; 7 neither are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: “through Isaac your descendants will be named.” 8 That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. 9 For this is a word of promise: “At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.” 10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; 11 for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, 12 it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger.” 13 Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” 14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! 15 For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” 16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy (Romans 9:6-16).

There is nothing whatever in the objects of His love to call it forth; nothing in man could attract or prompt it. Love among men is awakened by something in the beloved, but the love of God is free, spontaneous, unevoked, uncaused. God loves men because He has chosen to love them--as Charles Wesley put it, ‘He hath loved us, He hath loved us, because he would love’ (an echo of Deut. 7:8)--and no reason for His love can be given save His own sovereign good pleasure. The Greek and Roman world of New Testament times had never dreamed of such love; its gods were often credited with lusting after women, but never with loving sinners; and the New Testament writers had to introduce what was virtually a new Greek word *agape* to express the love of God as they knew it.<sup>3</sup>

## The Love of God is Personal and Individual

God’s love is an exercise of His goodness towards *individual* sinners. It is not a vague, diffused good-will towards everyone in general and nobody in particular; rather, as being a function of omniscient almightiness, its nature is to particularize both its objects and its effects. God’s purpose of love, formed before creation (cf. Eph. 1:4), involved, first, the choice and selection of those whom He would bless and, second, the appointment of the benefits to be given them and the means whereby these benefits would be procured and enjoyed. All this was made sure from the start. So Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians, ‘we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, *beloved by the Lord*, because God chose you (selection) from the beginning (before creation) to be saved (the appointed end) through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth (the appointed means)’ (2 Thess. 2:12, RSV).<sup>4</sup>

## God’s Love is One Attribute Among Many

The love of God is one attribute of God, one of many. God’s love is not the complete truth about God as far as the Bible is concerned; it is one attribute among many. God’s love is related to His other attributes:

It is not an abstract definition which stands alone, but a summing up, from the believer’s standpoint, of what the whole revelation set forth in Scripture tells us about its Author. This statement [God is love] presupposes all the rest of the biblical witness to God. The God of whom John is speaking is the God who made the world, who judged it by the Flood, who called Abraham and made of him a nation, who chastened His Old Testament people by conquest, captivity, and exile, who sent His Son to save the world, who cast off unbelieving Israel and shortly before John wrote had destroyed Jerusalem, and who would one day judge the world in righteousness. It is this God, says John, who is love. It is not possible to argue that a God who is love cannot also be a God who condemns and punishes the disobedient; for it is precisely of the God who does these very things that John is speaking.<sup>5</sup>

Here is precisely where many go wrong. Men often reason like this:

1. God is a God of love.

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

2. God is all-powerful.
3. God therefore cannot allow suffering and pain if He is both loving and powerful.

The logic fails because it omits other critical elements of the equation. God is also holy. He hates sin. Men are sinful, hostile to God, to His Word, and to the way of righteousness. Human suffering tells us as much about men as it does about God. In love, God allows sickness and suffering to notify us that something is wrong. But what is wrong is not God; it is sinful man and the world man has corrupted by sin.

### **God's Love is the Source of Human Love**

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:7-11).

We love, because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

### **God's Love is Expressed and Experienced in Christ**

In love, God provided a cure, a salvation not only for fallen men but for a fallen creation as well. In love, God sent His Son to die on the cross of Calvary, bearing man's sins and offering to fallen men the righteousness of God. Those who receive the gift of salvation in Christ become the special objects of divine love, and then they begin to manifest this love toward others, who live in a sick, pain-filled, fallen world.

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).

God's love to sinners was expressed by *the gift of His Son to be their Saviour*. The measure of love is how much it gives, and the measure of the love of God is the gift of His only Son to be made man, and to die for sins, and so to become the one mediator who can bring us to God. No wonder Paul speaks of God's love as 'great', and passing knowledge! (Eph. 2:4, 3:19.) Was there ever such costly munificence?<sup>6</sup>

### **God's Love Evidenced in the Forgiveness of Sins**

God's love is evidenced in the forgiveness of sins, but not incompatible with punishing sinners. Some wrongly think of love as antithetical to punishment. They believe they love their children by not punishing them. They expect God to bless them and make them happy, and then they become angry and frustrated when God allows suffering or pain. This evidences an inadequate definition of love.

Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:6-7).

In Exodus 34:6-7, the lovingkindness, compassion, and grace of God are evident in the forgiveness of sins, which He brought about through the punishment of our sins. Full and final forgiveness of our sins was accomplished by our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. But how was this forgiveness brought about? It was accomplished when God punished us for our sins in Christ.

4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him (Isaiah 53:4-6).

21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

24 And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. 25 For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:24-25).

“How,” some ask, “can a loving God send anyone to hell?” The truth is that our loving God sent His Son to hell for our sins, so that we might have our sins forgiven and enjoy the blessings of heaven rather than endure our just punishment in hell. Those who reject God’s punishment of His Son in our place must endure the punishment themselves. That men go to hell is not so much a reflection on God’s love as a reflection of our animosity toward the God of love who provided a way of escape, a way which some reject.

### Conclusion

The first and foremost question I must ask you is this: “Have you accepted God’s gift of love in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ?” Jesus Christ is the “**beloved Son**” of God, in whom God is well pleased (Matthew 3:17). Because of this, we should “**listen to Him**” (Matthew 17:5). *To accept the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary as God’s gift of salvation to you is to enter into His love. To reject Jesus Christ and attempt to stand before God in your own righteousness is to shun the love of God and to deservedly await eternal punishment. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ can experience and express the love of God.* Those who reject the gift of His love in Christ have no claim on His love. The fact is that none of us have any claim on His love, but those who are saved gratefully receive it, and give glory and praise to Him for His grace.

In our witness to a sinful, lost, and dying world, we dare not distort the love of God. God is the One who defines love, not men. We must accept God’s love as God has defined and expressed it. We dare not rely on God conforming to the distorted perceptions of love to which fallen men ignorantly cling. We must be careful not to compartmentalize God’s love and separate it from His other attributes, or try to evangelize men by appealing only to the love of God. Our Lord did not indicate that we should depend upon the “attraction” of His love, as much as He has indicated that lost men should be compelled by a sense of His righteousness, our sin, and the judgment which awaits sinners (John 16:7-11). *The sinner ought not to be comforted by assurances of the love of God (apart from Christ), but should be reminded that God hates sinners:*

The boastful shall not stand before Thine eyes; Thou dost hate all who do iniquity (Psalm 5:5).

The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, And the one who loves violence His soul hates (Psalm 11:5).

I hate the assembly of evildoers, And I will not sit with the wicked (Psalm 26:5).

If we are to enjoy the benefits of God’s love, we not only need to embrace it through faith in Jesus Christ, we need to actively enter into it in an ongoing way as a lifestyle:

“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love” (John 15:9-10).

May God grant that we may enter more and more into His love, and that we may therefore become instruments of His love to a lost and loveless world.

## Lesson 18: The Glory of God

### Introduction

One of the saddest events in the Old Testament is associated with the name Ichabod. Ichabod was born when his mother heard that her husband and father-in-law had died, which immediately caused her to give birth and subsequently die. This sad event occurred because of the tragedy which took place in Israel, resulting indirectly in Eli's death when he was informed of the defeat of the Israelites by the Philistines, the capture of the ark of the covenant, and the death of his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas:

19 Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was pregnant and about to give birth; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was taken and that her father-in-law and her husband had died, she kneeled down and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. 20 And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have given birth to a son." But she did not answer or pay attention. 21 And she called the boy Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God was taken and because of her father-in-law and her husband. 22 And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God was taken" (1 Samuel 4:19-22).

The tragic irony of this event was that the Israelites were greatly encouraged by the presence of the ark, but the Philistines were terrified by it:

2 And the Philistines drew up in battle array to meet Israel. When the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines who killed about four thousand men on the battlefield. 3 When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the Lord, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies." 4 So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

5 And it happened as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, that all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth resounded. 6 And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, "What does the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" Then they understood that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp. 7 And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. 8 "Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. 9 "Take courage and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight." 10 So the Philistines fought and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent, and the slaughter was very great; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. 11 And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died (1 Samuel 4:2-11).

Earlier in Israel's history, Samson had lost his God-given power, which he did not even realize at first:

18 When Delilah saw that he had told her all that was in his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, "Come up once more, for he has told me all that is in his heart." Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and brought the money in their hands. 19 And she made him sleep on her knees, and called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his hair. Then she began to afflict him, and his strength left him. 20 And she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him. 21 Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison (Judges 16:18-21).

We find the same thing described in the New Testament, where men have a false confidence of God's presence and power among them when it simply is not true:

2 For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, 4 treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; 5 holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these (2 Timothy 3:2-5).

1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. 2 'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. 3 'Remember

therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you” (Revelation 3:1-3).

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 15 ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. 16 ‘So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. 17 ‘Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, 18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. 19 ‘Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent” (Revelation 3:14-19).

There are those who believe that the glory of God has long since left the church of our Lord in our nation, and we, like men of old, hardly seem to notice it. A. W. Tozer is one of those who saw the downward decline of American Christianity and spoke up about it, as he wrote:

The message of this book does not grow out of these times but it is appropriate to them. It is called forth by a condition which has existed in the Church for some years and is steadily growing worse. I refer to the loss of the concept of majesty from the popular religious mind. The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshiping men. This she has done not deliberately, but little by little and without her knowledge; and her very unawareness only makes her situation all the more tragic.

The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us. A whole new philosophy of the Christian life has resulted from this one basic error in our religious thinking.

With our loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence. Modern Christianity is simply not producing the kind of Christian who can appreciate or experience the life in the Spirit. The words, ‘**Be still, and know that I am God,**’ mean next to nothing to the self-confident, bustling worshiper in this middle period of the twentieth century.

The loss of the concept of majesty has come just when the forces of religion are making dramatic gains and the churches are more prosperous than at any time within the past several hundred years. But the alarming thing is that our gains are mostly external and our losses wholly internal; and since it is the *quality* of our religion that is affected by internal conditions, it may be that our supposed gains are but losses spread over a wider field.

The only way to recoup our spiritual losses is to go back to the cause of them and make such corrections as the truth warrants. The decline of the knowledge of the holy has brought on our troubles. A rediscovery of the majesty of God will go a long way toward curing them. It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is.<sup>1</sup>

J. I. Packer agrees as he writes in the introduction of his classic book, *Knowing God*,

Ninety years ago C. H. Spurgeon described the wobblings he then saw among the Baptists on Scripture, atonement and human destiny as ‘the down-grade’; could he survey Protestant thinking about God at the present time, I guess he would speak of ‘the nose-dive’!<sup>2</sup>

Tozer has some helpful comments concerning what we can do to bring back the departed glory. Listen to him:

What can we plain Christians do to bring back the departed glory? Is there some secret we may learn? Is there a formula for personal revival we can apply to the present situation, to our own situation? The answer to these questions is *yes*.

Yet the answer may easily disappoint some persons, for it is anything but profound. I bring no esoteric cryptogram, no mystic code to be painfully deciphered. I appeal to no hidden law of the unconscious, no occult knowledge meant only for the few. The secret is an open one which the wayfaring man may read. It is simply the old and ever-new counsel:

<sup>1</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 7.



*Acquaint thyself with God.* To regain her lost power the Church must see heaven opened and have a transforming vision of God.

But the God we must see is not the utilitarian God who is having such a run of popularity today, whose chief claim to men's attention is His ability to bring them success in their various undertakings and who for that reason is being cajoled and flattered by everyone who wants a favor. The God we must learn to know is the Majesty in the heavens, God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, the only wise God and Saviour. He it is that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, who stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in, who bringeth out His starry host by number and calleth them all by name through the greatness of His power, who seeth the works of man as vanity, who putteth no confidence in princes and asks no counsel of kings.<sup>3</sup>

As we conclude this series, I will attempt to find one label which will serve as a biblical summation of the attributes of God.<sup>4</sup> We will then consider the relevance and importance of this subject matter to men and women today.

### Summing Up the Attributes of God

A biblical expression which may encompass all of God's attributes is found in the description of Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 33 and 34:

17 And the Lord said to Moses, "I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight, and I have known you by name." 18 Then Moses said, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!" 19 And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exodus 33:17-19).

5 And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. 6 Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:5-7).

Moses requested of God that He show him His glory (33:18). After making it clear that He will not reveal His full glory to Moses, and that He is sovereign in bestowing His saving grace upon men, God manifests Himself to Moses. There is absolutely no description about how anything looked to Moses; we find here only the recorded words of God to Moses, words which declared His attributes. *God's attributes are the manifestation of the "glory of God."*

A similar linking of God's attributes and God's glory is found in the first chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans:

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. 21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures (Romans 1:18-23).

God revealed Himself in nature. In nature the invisible attributes of God are displayed (specifically, God's eternal power and divine nature, verse 20). Men exchanged the "**glory of the incorruptible God**" for the image of corruptible men and other earthly creatures (verse 23). The attributes of God are God's glory, and men are therefore obligated to glorify God in response to the revelation of such attributes.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>4</sup> The reader should note that the expression, "The attributes of God," is a theological label and not a biblical expression. We should therefore seek to find a biblical term or expression which refers to the attributes of God.

<sup>5</sup> See also John 1:14, where the glory of God is further explained in terms of the two attributes, grace and truth.

Sinful men do not glorify God, and consequently they prove themselves to be guilty sinners, rightly under divine condemnation. I wish to emphasize that the attributes of God and the glory of God are very closely associated, so much so that we might say *God's glory is the sum total of who God is, and who God is is defined by His attributes.*

### **The Relevance of God's Glory (Attributes) to Men**

Even in Christian circles, the study of the attributes of God is looked upon as the kind of thing theologians do with little or no relevance to everyday people in their everyday lives. How wrong! *Nothing is more relevant to the Christian than the glory of God.* We shall first consider the glory of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, we will turn to the glory of God and the unbeliever. Finally, we will give thought to the glory of God and the Christian.

### **The Glory of God in Jesus Christ**

The glory of God was to appear in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. The prophet Isaiah foresaw this and spoke of it:

37 But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him; 38 that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke, "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" 39 For this cause they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, 40 "He has blinded their eyes, and He HARDENED THEIR HEART; lest they see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and be converted, and I heal them." 41 These things Isaiah said, because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him (John 12:37-41).<sup>6</sup>

At the birth of our Lord Jesus, we find references to the glory of God:

14 "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased" (Luke 2:14).

32 A light of revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Thy people Israel" (Luke 2:32).

Both John and the author to the Hebrews emphasize that Jesus is the manifestation of God's glory:

14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:3).

When Jesus performed His first sign by turning the water into wine, John saw this as a manifestation of the glory of God in our Lord Jesus Christ:

11 This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him (John 2:11).

Why would we be surprised to find that the temptation of our Lord involved Satan's offer of an inferior "glory"?

8 Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; 9 and he said to Him, "All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me" (Matthew 4:8-9).

The disciples had a distorted perception of the glory of God, and they wanted to be a part of it (see Mark 10:37). Only later would they understand the glory of God and the fact that we must suffer with Him in order to enter into His glory.

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<sup>6</sup> The significance of this statement by John is that the blindness of the Jews is explained by the reference in Isaiah 6:9-10. John goes on to inform us that Isaiah's vision of God, described in Isaiah 6:1-5, was not just a vision of the glory of God the Father, but a vision of the glory of God the Son. As Jesus told His disciples, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

There were a few events in the life of Christ which gave men a glimpse of our Lord's full glory. The first happened before a crowd:

27 "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'?" But for this purpose I came to this hour. 28 "Father, glorify Thy name." There came therefore a voice out of heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." 29 The multitude therefore, who stood by and heard it, were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, "An angel has spoken to Him" (John 12:27-29).

The other incident was the transfiguration of our Lord witnessed only by Peter, James, and John:

29 And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. 30 And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, 31 who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him (Luke 9:29-32).

In His high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus prays that the Father would glorify Him (17:5), indicates that He has given His followers the glory which the Father gave to Him (verse 22), and asks that they may be with Him in order to behold His glory (verse 24). When Jesus was raised from the dead, it was *by* (not just *for*) the glory of God:

4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

His return to the earth, to defeat His foes and establish His kingdom, will be in glory (see Matthew 16:27; 24:30; 25:31).

### **The Glory of God and the Unbeliever**

The unbeliever's problem is sin and its consequences. The glory of God is the standard by which sin is defined, and because all men fall short of God's glory, they also are under divine sentence of condemnation:

23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

Although the creation reveals the glory of God (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:19-20), unbelieving men reject this knowledge, choosing instead to exchange God's glory for the false glory of created things, including man himself (Romans 1:21-23). As a result, man comes under divine condemnation<sup>7</sup> and comes to glory in things which are really a shame to man (Romans 1:24-27; Philippians 3:19).

To be saved, men must acknowledge their sin, the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and the sentence of death which awaits them (see John 16:8-12). They must trust in Jesus Christ as God's provision for sinners. He, the sinless Son of God, died in the sinner's place, bearing the penalty for our sins. His righteousness is available to all who believe in Him for salvation (John 1:12; 3:16, 36; Romans 3:21-26; 10:9-11). But Satan has blinded the hearts and minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the glory of God in Christ through the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4). In the final analysis, only the Spirit of God can open the eyes of the blind to see the light of the glorious gospel and come to faith (see Luke 4:18-19; John 6:65; 8:43-47; Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 1:18).

In the days of the Great Tribulation, men will experience the wrath of God and be given another opportunity to give glory to God and avoid judgment, but they will refuse (Revelation 14:6-7; 16:9). All men will ultimately acknowledge Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God (Philippians 2:11), but not as adoring believers. In the end, they will spend eternity separated from the glory of God (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

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<sup>7</sup> Herod is a most dramatic illustration of the judgment which falls upon those who do not give glory to God but seek to glorify themselves (see Acts 12:20-23).

## The Glory of God and the Christian

The church plays a vital role in bringing glory to God:

21 To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen (Ephesians 3:21).

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; 26 that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:24-29).

When God purposed the salvation of individual believers, He did so for His own glory:

22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? 23 And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, 24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles (Romans 9:22-24).

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:3-6, see also verses 12, 14).

5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; 6 that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. 8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers (Romans 15:5-8).

Christians understand that their privilege and calling is to bring glory to God. Man is not the center of the spiritual universe, and God is not our servant, at our beck and call to make us feel good and to keep us from pain. *God is the center of the universe, and He causes all things to work together for our good and for His glory* (Romans 8:28). “**All things**” includes persecution and suffering and difficulties.<sup>8</sup> The Christian sees that God causes good things to come from our suffering and trials:

10 “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. 12 “Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:10-12).

18 “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. 21 “But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me” (John 15:18-21).

3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:3-5).

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body (Romans 8:18-23).

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance (James 1:2-3).

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<sup>8</sup> For example, one need only consider the life of the apostle Paul to see that spiritual people face adversity and suffering (2 Corinthians 4:7-12; 6:4-10; 11:22-29).

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory<sup>9</sup> and of God rests upon you (1 Peter 4:12-14).

Whatever suffering and sorrow we may experience in this life cannot hold a candle to the glory which awaits us:

16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we 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 (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

The glory of God should be the goal for all that we do and the standard by which we determine what we should or should not do:

31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

In this passage, Paul is writing concerning the exercise of our individual, personal convictions as Christians. He is not speaking about things that are clearly commanded, but about things which are permissible. The standard by which we determine whether we exercise a particular liberty is not whether we can, or even whether we want to, but whether it glorifies God. Thus, while Paul has the right to be financially supported as an apostle, he chose not to on numerous occasions for the promotion of the gospel and thus the glory of God (see 1 Corinthians 9:1-23).

Many people agonize over “knowing the will of God,” and many books have been written on the subject. But the answer is intensely simple at the core. Does God command or forbid something? Then you know the will of God. It is imperative that we read our Bibles, pray, witness, and gather to worship with other believers. It is God’s will that we abstain from immorality, and do not lie. But in allegedly gray areas, those areas where God has not give a command or a prohibition, we need only ask one question: *Does it glorify God?*

When we pray, the goal for our petitions should be the glory of God. We should not focus on God “meeting our felt needs,” but on God receiving glory. We can be assured that prayers for the glory of God are much more readily heard and answered than prayers which ask God to meet our selfish desires (see James 4:3).

Finally, the glory of God is the key to understanding God’s order in the church. We should recognize that the church is central to God’s purposes in this age just as Israel was in Old Testament times, and that it will be again (see Romans 11). The church is the body of Christ. Through His Spirit, Christ indwells His church, and through His “**body**,” Christ continues to work in the world. Some of Christ’s instructions to the church may seem difficult to understand and even more difficult to apply. One area is the ministry and conduct of women in the church. One can hardly deny the New Testament teaches that women are to be in submission in the church. This submission relates to women’s dress (1 Timothy 2:9-10; 1 Peter 3:3-5), their prohibition from teaching or exercising authority over men (1 Timothy 2:11-15), and the requirement that they “**keep silent**,” which includes even the asking of questions in the church meeting (1 Corinthians 14:34-36).

My intention is not to convince you that these instructions are just as applicable today as they were in the first century, though this is the simple fact of the matter. The principle objections to the instructions given to women by Peter and Paul come from our own sin natures and from the culture in which we live. Arguments against the simple, straightforward teaching of the New Testament on the ministry and

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<sup>9</sup> Is it not noteworthy that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, is called here by Peter the Spirit of glory?

conduct of women in the church are based on a handling of the New Testament which is far from compelling.<sup>10</sup>

Be all this as it may, my desire is to point out in the context of this message that the glory of God is one of the keys to understanding why these New Testament instructions for women have been given.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, it is the problem passage in 1 Corinthians 11 which most plainly deals with the aspect of the glory of God:

2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the **head** of every man, and the man is the **head** of a woman, and God is the **head** of Christ. 4 Every man who has something on his **head** while praying or prophesying, disgraces his **head**. 5 But every woman who has her **head** uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her **head**; for she is one and the same with her whose **head** is shaved. 6 For if a woman does not cover her **head**, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her **head** shaved, let her cover her **head**. 7 For a man ought not to have his **head** covered, since he is the image and **glory of God**; but the woman is the **glory** of man. 8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; 9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. 10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her **head**, because of the angels. 11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with **head** uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a **dishonor** to him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is a **glory** to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God (1 Corinthians 11:2-16).

While the exposition of this text is not my focus, it is clear that while we may argue over certain “gnats” of this text, the “camels” ought to be clear. The principle underlying the passage is **headship**. The word *head* could hardly be more emphatic than in these verses. What a woman does with regard to her *head* is directly linked to the *headship* of Christ over His church. Headship does involve authority, but it involves much more than just authority. Headship also involves **glory**. That is what the New Testament instructions to women are all about. For the wife to dress in such a way as to draw attention to herself is for the wife to bring glory to herself, rather than to her husband. For a wife to have an uncovered head was to openly display her glory (her hair is her glory), rather than to bring glory to her husband. For the wife to teach or to exercise authority is to take a position which usurps the glory she should seek to bring to her husband. When all is said and done, the principles underlying the ministry and conduct of women in the church are those of headship and glory. If a woman desires to glorify God by her conduct, she will seek to bring glory to her husband rather than seek glory for herself.

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<sup>10</sup> Those who attempt to reject the teaching of the New Testament pertaining to women invariably go to 1 Corinthians 11, and there they do some strange things. Rather than base their conclusions on the clear texts of Scripture, they base their conclusions on the most perplexing text. I like what B. B. Warfield said on this point years ago. Allow me to quote him here:

In the face of these two absolutely plain and emphatic passages [1 Corinthians 14:33ff. and 1 Timothy 2:11ff.], what is said in 1st Cor. 11:5 cannot be appealed to in mitigation or modification. Precisely what is meant in 1st Cor. 11:5, nobody quite knows. What is said there is that every woman praying or prophesying unveiled dishonors her head. It seems fair to infer that if she prays or prophesies veiled she does not dishonor her head. And it seems fair still further to infer that she may properly pray or prophesy if only she does it veiled. We are piling up a chain of inferences. And they have not carried us very far. We cannot infer that it would be proper for her to pray or prophesy in church if only she were veiled. There is nothing said about church in the passage or in the context. The word ‘church’ does not occur until the 16th verse, and then not as a ruling reference of the passage, but only as supplying support for the injunction of the passage. There is no reason whatever for believing that ‘praying or prophesying’ in church is meant. Neither was an exercise confined to the church. B. B. Warfield, “Women Speaking In The Church,” pp. 3-4. [Reprinted by Calvary Press, as taken from *The Savior of the World*.]

<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that we must first know why God has commanded anything before we obey, but to say that there are reasons, whether we understand and accept them or not.

Hard words? Perhaps, but I am convinced they are both biblical and true. But do not think this matter of God's glory only applies to women. Neither is the headship of Christ and His glory an excuse for men to seek a position of preeminence in the church, for preeminence is all about glory, and the glory should be our Lord's. This is also why we find the principle of plurality taught in the Scriptures. *There is but one "Head" of the church, and that "Head" is our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). And because of this, no man is to seek to be preminent, for the glory is to be our Lord's:

1 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, 2 saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; 3 therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. 4 And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. 5 But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. 6 And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. 8 But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 "And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. 11 But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted" (Matthew 23:1-12).

1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, 2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; 3 nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Peter 5:1-4).

What a marvelous reality is the glory of God. The glory of God is our hope. The glory of God is our ambition, our motivation, our goal. The glory of God should govern our actions, our prayers, our motives, our ministry. And, like Moses, we should always seek to see more of His glory as we study His Word and seek to behold the glory of His nature and attributes. May this study be only the beginning of a lifetime of seeking to know God, to see His glory, and to seek His glory. His glory is our highest goal and our highest good. To God be the glory!

23 Thus saith 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: 24 But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23-24, KJV).