

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Looking for Hope?

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The world seems to be dangerously short on hope these days, and as times become increasingly difficult, it will become scarcer still. Yet, hope—a real, powerful hope, not wishful thinking—is always available to us in Christ. If we have faith in Him and the works He has done for us, we will possess a sure, living hope, that will enable us to endure to the end.

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Leadership and Covenants

Part Five

With this article, we will begin to delve into the Bible's first covenant to learn the characteristics of leadership God desires to produce in His children. Recall that a leader is first a follower, so it is of critical importance that we follow the patterns God Himself laid out for us, which is what Jesus did in accomplishing the work set before Him. We cannot go wrong if we walk in His steps, if we imitate Him.

The covenants are designed to provide an overview of the way God wants us relate to Him and to His creation. It helps to understand in simple terms what He is looking for, which will go a long way toward developing what He desires to see in us. At this point, we should not focus on specific qualities because nobody knows exactly what challenges each individual must meet and overcome on the path God has chosen for him or her. Instead, we should think more generally, which will allow room to include more specific traits later.

God desires faithfulness in meeting our responsibilities as disciples of Jesus Christ. If we could fulfill our responsibilities sinlessly, it would glorify Him tremendously, but given the record we have already shown by our lives, that is unrealistic. Deuteronomy 7:9-11 draws attention to this vital trait by showing us God's character in reference to a covenant:

Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those

who love Him and keep His commandments; and He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face. Therefore you shall keep the commandment, the statutes, and the judgments which I command you today, to observe them.

God, who cannot lie, states His record to be one of faithfulness, and He will certainly continue to be so. However, our record is questionable at best. We need to show God in our pattern of living that we believe Him and love Him.

In Hebrews 3:1-2, 5, God singles out Moses as an example of a faithful man despite the difficult responsibilities given to him to accomplish:

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him as Moses also was faithful in all his house. . . . And Moses indeed was faithful in all his house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward.

Hebrews 10:36-38 also admonishes us in this regard, revealing the importance of being faithful:

For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: "For yet a little while,

and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.”

A faithful person is one who adheres firmly and devotedly to God and His Word, meeting even the difficult challenges that God permits into his life in a steadfast spirit while not wavering in his belief. A faithful person trusts that God is leading him and humbly submits.

The Edenic Covenant

The Edenic Covenant is not so named by the Bible. Men have given it this title due to Eden being the site where this foundational statement of mankind’s responsibilities in his relationship with God appears. It is universal in scope, applying to all mankind whether or not one believes in God and His Word. Within the context, Adam and Eve are the ones directly spoken to and about. However, since all humans are counted as descending from them, this covenant is directed broadly to include everyone born since then too.

Before focusing specifically on the particulars of this foundational covenant, we will review the seven major, broad overviews within which mankind’s specific responsibilities are addressed:

1. This covenant introduces the sovereign Creator God Himself. In Genesis 1:1-5, He stands alone; the focus is on Him and what He wants us to learn first about Him. He stands at the beginning of all things and precedes everything. Everything He gives to man—God is the sovereign Creator and Giver of every good gift—he must use responsibly within God’s purpose. This pattern of focusing on the sovereign Creator God and His purposes appears in all covenants with Him. God rules!

2. This covenant reveals that He is orderly. Every step in creation is taken in a scientifically logical progression, establishing that the creation and His purposes are not haphazard. Randomness is not part of His nature. God is purposeful and already has a plan that He is following step by step.

3. In the beginning, like God Himself, everything was morally perfect. No sin is present, nor are any demons there to interrupt His thoughtful construction of a practical and beautiful place for Him to work out His purpose for mankind.

4. No aspect of the creation is to be worshipped. Everything God made and gave to mankind is a product of and inferior to the One who made all things. No animal or object is to be used as an intermediary between the Creator and mankind. Only the Creator is to be worshipped.

5. Beginning with Adam and Eve, humanity is charged with populating the earth and subduing it. Men are not to have an adversarial relationship with the earth but to harness its potential and use its resources for human benefit. In this case, subduing indicates activities like cultivating its fields and mining it for mineral riches. Mankind is not to rape the earth but to work to manage properly what he has been given. Humans, created in God’s image, are to exercise their God-given authority as His servants to care for the earth as He would. That is, men are to follow God’s pattern. There is, of course, far more to being made in His likeness, but ruling is part of the reason for it.

6. Simply being born gives a person a stewardship responsibility. People are to treat God’s wonderful gifts with the same loving care in which God designed and created them.

7. Mankind is to enjoy the foods produced in the Garden as well as the bountiful productivity God placed within humanity’s purview.

God-Given Responsibility

Genesis 1:26-28 reads:

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Two things are made especially plain. God states three times in verse 27 that man is created. In verses 26-27, He says four times that man is created in the image of God. He wants us to grasp those points because the same applies to us! Even though we are now about 6,000 years from when He first spoke those words, these realities have not changed one iota.

In addition, God clearly gave us beings created in His image authority over animals. That authority has not been taken from us. This dominion implies responsibility in managing them that we owe to our Creator.

Many people seek to escape the responsibility of answering to our Creator, devising complex explanations to deny His existence to themselves and others. They may reason that, if He does not exist, how can they be responsible for submitting to His commands? They will move

heaven and earth, as the saying goes, looking for proof to back their denial of God. The great bulk of mankind lacks the resources, the time, or the education to make such a search, so for their own benefit, they simply deny His existence by ignoring Him. These two categories of people are part of the “Nones”—those who claim no spiritual attachment whatever—of this generation.

Others, without making any real effort to search out the truth, create a god or goddess they are comfortable with and worship him or her to salve their consciences. They do not seem to grasp that their dodges do not alter their responsibility to conform to what God laid out in the beginning.

Another category is quite worrisome: the sincere folk who consider themselves Christian. However, either due to false teaching in their churches or perhaps their own laziness, they believe that much of the Old Testament no longer applies to them. In their minds, it has been “done away” along with what they consider Old Covenant laws, deliberately ignoring what Jesus Himself says about those same laws (Matthew 5:17-20).

However, God’s Word still stands, and mankind is still responsible to follow this covenant, as Romans 1:20-21 declares:

For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead [margin, *divine nature*], so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

God’s Blessing

Genesis 1:28 reads: “Then God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” This verse contains the first words God spoke to mankind. The Hebrew word translated as “blessed” can also at times signify a curse. Here, without a doubt, it signifies that God’s conferring of good on the newly created couple is to be shared by their descendants.

This divine act not only confers dominion over what God created, but it also establishes that, even as God is the Creator and Giver of His wonderful creation at that moment, He is also the Giver of its continued blessings through time to Adam and Eve’s descendants. In His first oral communication to them—an authoritative command to spread over the earth and enjoy His creation’s benefits—He desires to establish in their minds that everything before them was a gift from Him to prepare them to face life.

The physical creation of earth, which culminated in the creation of Adam and Eve, parallels the spiritual creation this same God is undertaking in us. Even as God supplied all that Adam and Eve needed for life, so is He supplying all that we need for our spiritual creation. The apostle Paul

confirms this in Philippians 4:19, “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Our responsibility is to hold fast to His promises in faith.

We have been given much, but much more is required of us than is required of the unconverted because God has given us gifts not given to them. This principle of God’s judgment appears in Luke 12:47-48:

And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

The overriding thought in the foreground of this first and universal covenant is that the entire creation—including us and the spiritual life given us, but in context, especially earth and what it contains—is a gift from God to aid us in making our way through the physical life He has provided. This is a reality: We live and have being, and we think, plan, build, and look to the future all *because of what God has done*. This reality must be foundational in our relationship with Him because it provides solid footing for the humility that is necessary to make it work. Because He is the Giver of all good things, our thinking about ourselves in relation to Him must begin here.

In the context of Genesis 1, these blessings, these gifts, are somewhat similar to the gifts of the Spirit listed in I Corinthians 12. A dissimilarity, though, is that I Corinthians 12:11 says, “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He will.” Here, God supplies gifts for functions He assigns within the church rather than for all of life. But an important similarity that we must live by is that God is still gifting to meet the needs of those He is creating, but in this case the gifts are spiritual rather than physical.

The following truth is not stated in Genesis 1-3, but it is a conclusion gathered from this covenant’s entire context combined with understanding gathered elsewhere in God’s Word: All of God’s gifts are aspects of His grace given to aid us in succeeding within His purpose.

The emphasis should be on His purpose. For example the entire creation is a gift. Whether one is converted or unconverted, it stands as a major teaching device, and receiving it bears responsibilities. Serious and honest consideration of it should lead to answering many questions about our place in a relationship with God, and to realizing some of our responsibilities. This is why Paul declares mankind “without excuse.” The fulfillment of these responsibilities lies in the uses we make of the gifts God has given.

Why should anyone be concerned about this? Because of mankind’s past and present track record. Human history is telling. Recall Solomon’s declaration in Ecclesiastes 7:29: “Truly, this only have I found: that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.” Gifts freely given, even gifts from God, are not always used well

by the recipients. An obvious example is that people can examine their own lives and the earth itself and not discern the Creator as the Giver of these awesome gifts. Rather than declaring the glory of God's bountiful mercies in even these obvious gifts, they loudly proclaim that all of creation arose from nothing and proceed to ignore the Giver, doing as they good and well please!

Why is this so? Romans 8:6-8 reminds us: "For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those that are in the flesh cannot please God." Under the influence of the arch-deceiver, Satan, mankind has been persuaded that God, the Giver of every good and perfect gift, is the enemy. So, like Eve and then Adam, we are turned against God until He personally and mercifully intervenes with more gifts to help us escape our confusion.

An Additional Blessing, the Sabbath

As the sixth day ended, the creation week was not yet complete. One more day and a major blessing remained to be given to mankind to aid it in accomplishing God's purpose for all. Genesis 2:1-3 states:

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

God created the Sabbath by resting on it and sanctified it as a blessing for mankind to observe in a similar fashion. God did not need to rest because He had grown tired, as we humans do. We are assured in Psalm 121:4, "He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." He rested as an example to us, showing what we must do on the seventh day, as well as to sanctify it as a special day to accomplish His purposes in creating us.

He did not do this for any other day. The Sabbath is part of the Ten Commandments, and as nearly the middle commandment, functions as a bridge between the law's two parts. It is the only one of the ten directly mentioned in this covenant, even though others are certainly implied when Adam and Eve sinned.

Why has observance of this day fallen into such disrepute? It is not only disregarded by most, but even hated within some circles of the "Christian" world, as if keeping it is a curse. Though many do not necessarily hate it, they make no effort to observe it despite God singling the seventh day out as different from the other six days. The reason for this disregard is that, because it is so vital to our Creator's overall purpose, Satan has gone to great lengths to obscure its value.

Jesus states unequivocally in Mark 2:27, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." The Sabbath, a special creation, was made for the benefit of mankind. He did not make it only for the Israelites, who did not even exist when He created it. Jesus uses "man" here to stand for all humanity beginning with Adam and Eve, not just one particular group or race or family of people. Jesus would certainly understand this, as He was the One who created the day for mankind (Colossians 1:15-19).

God specifically identifies Himself with no other day of the week. In Ezekiel 20:12-24, He specifically calls them "My Sabbaths" six times. He does not refer to them as belonging to Israel but to Himself. He also identifies Himself with those who keep the day:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak also to the children of Israel, saying; surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed." (Exodus 31:12-17)

His statement explicitly establishes non-observance of the Sabbath as sin, and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)!

God sanctified or hallowed the seventh day, the Sabbath. It takes a holy God to make holy time, and He made no time holy other than His Sabbaths. Though people can be made holy by God, they cannot make something holy because they do not possess a holiness that can be transferred to anything else. Since only a holy God can hallow something, any day other than what God has made holy—even though billions of people may proclaim it to be holy—cannot be holy time. It is utterly impossible. No day can be holy except the one God made holy.

This means that the Sabbath is worthy of respect, deference, and even devotion that cannot be given to other periods of time. It is set apart for sacred use because it is derived directly from Him and made holy at creation. Because of God's assignment of the word "holy" to the Sabbath, this day is changed into something special. Even though it is a part of the cycle of the week, the Sabbath is

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Defining Hope for the Creation

*“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly,
but because of Him who subjected it in hope.”*

—Romans 8:20

Here is an interesting thought for consideration. It introduces an idea that is difficult to quantify in an empirical manner (which would satisfy the world’s scrutiny), but it is nonetheless worthy of contemplation.

Everyone alive is—or soon will become—damaged goods. In a sense, we are all just broken or defective machines. We are damaged in various ways, physically and spiritually banged up, if you will, by forces that dictate, control, and corrupt the environment we live in day by day. Some of us are damaged more than others, but it includes everyone, regardless of any religious affiliation or calling.

A few of us arrive in this world in a damaged state, while most of us develop our “impairments” over time, much like an appliance or a lawn mower or a car. Whereas some people, just like some machines, have defects that are easy for anyone to recognize, others are more difficult to see, but in time, when we get to know someone—just like that appliance or lawn mower or car—we learn they have defects too.

The apostle Paul, though, discusses the concept in Romans 8:19-25 that we, as creations and children of God, are subjected to our frailties in hope—in essence, hope for the repair of all our defects and the renewal of our damaged bodies upon our adoption and redemption. But he also implies in verses 20-22 that the “whole creation,” seemingly the entire physical world around us—the rocks, the vegetation, and the animals—all have this same hope:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the *whole creation* groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. (Emphasis ours)

Ready Answer

Defining Hope for the Creation

Was the apostle suggesting that the earth, the trees, and the animals could and should hope for their redemption as well? Just what is this hope that he writes of and to whom or to what does it apply?

Sin Separates

Since Adam and Eve were sent packing out of Eden, mankind has been separated from God, and along with the physical creation—the environment—has been subjected to the ravages of time, and with it, endless decay.

We all know that sin separates and that sin has consequences. Romans 3:23 tells us, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This includes all of mankind who now are subject to death, but also impacts the created universe that was not exempt from the consequences of man’s sins. Romans 8:20 reads: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope.” “Him,” of course, is our Creator—the same Being who cursed the ground because of the rebellion of the first man (Genesis 3:17).

Does it not seem odd that Paul would use the word “hope” with reference to the *whole creation*? How can a mountain or a cow or the moon or trees have hope? Is hope not something only people can have? Does the Bible not teach us that having hope is a virtue? How can a rock or a tree or a dumb animal be virtuous when virtues deal with a person’s behavior and his or her desire for moral or ethical actions?

Many in the world believe Paul is telling us that the earth and all the animals are waiting in hope for the revelation of the children of God just as we are waiting. But while they are sharing in the fallout from man’s sins, and in that sense are certainly in bondage with us, we go astray in our thinking if we start putting moral and theological objectives into the lives of animals or the existence of rocks.

Obviously, Paul is connecting hope to the physical creation metaphorically, and he is also linking God’s ongoing spiritual creation within each of His children with the hope that His creative work provides in a literal sense.

Romans 8:24 begins: “For we were saved in this hope.” It becomes clear that the parts of creation referred to by the word “we” are the children of God. They are the ones who are earnestly expecting the good things that only the promises of God can supply. Hope for salvation is a gift to each of His children as they suffer the ravages of time and trial in a world desperately lacking hope.

Defining Our Hope

Verses 24-25 provide insight into what biblical hope is: “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.”

This hope implies a measure of faith inside the one who is hoping. It is a necessary quality or virtue he needs for the salvation process. But, without perseverance, his hope can quickly turn into the anxiety of impatience. He hopes for something he cannot see with his eyes, for this hope is spiritually discerned. His hope is placed not in something he can do but in what God is doing for him.

Paul’s words help us to distinguish our definition of hope from that of the world. Many people define hope as something more akin to desire or wishful thinking. But desiring or wishing for a future good never takes into account if what is wanted is even possible. Nor does it look much at the difficulty involved in obtaining what is hoped for.

But godly hope originates in our belief—our faith—in something seemingly impossible for us to accomplish, but that *is* possible for God. Like any virtue, we must work to hold onto it. It involves more than just ourselves. It is born within the framework of our relationship with the Father and the Son.

I Peter 1 provides additional insight into other special qualities of our hope:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . . Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ . . . who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1 Peter 1:3, 13, 21)

Peter tells us that we have a living hope and that the goal or object of our hope is Jesus Christ. In a sense, they are one and the same. Because Christ is alive, we have a sure anchor for our hope. Having ourselves been figuratively raised from the dead at our baptism, we can fully place our hope in Him with complete confidence, and we do so by our faith. This is absolutely necessary, for it is through and by His efforts that our hope is justified.

Christ Is the Key

Colossians 1:5 informs us that our hope is “laid up” in heaven, and Colossians 3:1 admonishes us to “seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.”

What we find, then, is that Christ holds two key points for the application of our hope. First and foremost, He is the goal of our hope, and secondly, He is the One we depend upon to realize our hope. It is through His good office as our High Priest, with the atoning work He has done for each one of us, that our hope will find its

fulfillment.

We cannot save ourselves. If we were ever hopeful that we could be good enough, or that we could please God often enough and move Him to give us eternal life, then we would have a hope based on our own efforts. This is nothing more than a religion based solely on our own works. Many people think this way, but they are wrong. Others believe they are already saved. These people have no need of hope at all, for why would one hope for what one already has? That would be pointless.

But because God has called us and desires to save us, and also because He possesses all the power necessary to bring us into a life with Him eternally, we can have a sure hope in the gospel we believe and the ongoing work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

Having Faith in Our Hope

We may not see all the details of what eternal life with God will be. But by faith (another virtue given to us by our Creator) we trust that the hope He has given to us is true and at some future point will be realized. From this, then, we realize our need to let patience have its place in our lives so we do not become discouraged and possibly lose so great a gift.

Our faith should remain absolutely certain in the power and willingness of God to bring His children into the Kingdom. It is this faith that strengthens and informs our hope. By faith, we know that nothing is lacking on God's part nor in His desire or ability to complete His spiritual creation in each of us. Our hope should be anchored in this truth.

While the promises of God are great, we often find our faith lacking. And because of our weaknesses, we repeatedly allow a sense of doubt easy entry into our thinking, which not only weakens our faith but also our vision of hope that Christ is willing to help us. This can also happen when sin enters into our lives, and our focus is more on our desires or our guilt than on the redemptive power of God.

But this view, allowed into our minds by our negative emotions and our broken or damaged nature, does a disservice to God. We are focusing on the ugly influence of the Satanic realm rather than the goodness and power of God and His promise to get us through all our trials (I Corinthians 10:13).

We need to remain mindful of the Parables of the Lost Sheep or of the Prodigal Son of Luke 15, and of God's powerful promise delivered to each of us in Hebrews 13:5-6: "I will never leave you nor forsake you . . . The LORD is my Helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

Our hope can remain strong as long as it is solidly based on the works and the love of Jesus Christ, who, having suffered for us, now sits at the right hand of God the Father and makes intercessions for us (Romans 8:26-27). What more could we ask for? What more could we ever need to bolster our sure hope?

Faith Strengthens our Hope

We must learn that our faith and our hope are like interlocking gears helping to power our walk with God. Just as faith without works is not a true living faith, so faith without hope is also meaningless. James 2:19 says: "Even the demons believe there is one God, and tremble." They tremble so much because they are without hope—they know they have no future good to look forward to. But we do!

Notice how Paul ties faith and hope so closely together in Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence [or *confidence*] of things not seen." Our faith strengthens our hope, and our hope is realized by our faith. These two virtues are so inseparable—both have Jesus Christ as their end view—they seem interchangeable at times. In other words, our hope strengthens our faith with the desire to believe in God's promises, and our faith underpins our hope with that very belief.

Our hope motivates us to right actions toward our future good, and it becomes key in supporting the vision we have of life eternal in the Kingdom of God.

Proverbs 29:19 reads, "Where there is no vision the people perish." Without a future hope, without even an imperfect vision of our future with God, nothing good happens. We end up standing still when we need to be preparing for the future. Godly hope always looks toward a future good, and that motivates us to work harder to strengthen our relationship with God, which allows us to develop our patience and resolve to stand fast in the faith.

Some will say that this hope is nothing more than self-centered thinking and not really virtuous at all. What is virtuous about hoping for one's own good? But the answer is quite simple: Because our hope has a prophetic vision within it and because it is a desire placed in us by God, it makes the object of our hope, not ourselves, but Jesus Christ and the work that He does. When we realize the good works and the love for others that we become capable of when we submit to God, then the hope that springs us forward becomes a genuine virtue for all to admire.

There is an old Johnny Rivers song, written by Smokey Robinson, titled "Tracks of My Tears." He mournfully sings of a lost love and a fading hope of ever finding his way into her life again. For many in the world, this fading hope has become an all-too-familiar refrain for their future. But for us, the children of God, along with the earth that groans under the weight of our sins, the hope we have draws closer to its promised fulfillment with each passing day.

God teaches us in Isaiah 11:9 that one day the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of God. No longer will we be broken or damaged machines. But until that great day, let us be mindful of our need for God and the abiding hope that He provides us via the good works of Jesus Christ on our behalf, "that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7).

—James Beaubelle

The Goodness and Severity of God

PART TWO

A brief tour through the Scriptures finds several passages that link destruction with rejoicing (all from the *English Standard Version* [ESV]):

- Revelation 18:20: “Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!” It is almost as though someone will be dancing in the streets during the Day of the Lord, specifically, when God brings double retribution on Great Babylon. Here, God actually *commands* that we, who love God and long for Christ’s appearing (II Timothy 4:8), rejoice at the fall of this world’s system.
- Deuteronomy 32:43: “Rejoice with Him, O heavens; bow down to Him, all gods, for He avenges the blood of His children and takes vengeance on His adversaries. He repays those who hate Him.”
- Jeremiah 51:48, regarding the fall of Babylon: “Then the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, shall sing for joy over Babylon, for the destroyers shall come against them out of the north.”

When God brings destruction, it is just and thus worthy of praise.

TERROR FOR A BRIEF MOMENT

In the passages in Isaiah 30 and elsewhere, which we saw in Part One, the linkage of opposites is clear. The context is the Day of the Lord, and the time separating the opposites, such as destruction and restoration, is not great. In fact, any number of scriptures point to this truism: *God’s wrath, while burning intensely, does not burn*

long. Is it His recognition of our frailty that impels God to reinstate so quickly some form of normalcy? Micah 7:18-20 summarizes God’s predilection for bringing a quick end to correction and to hasten the healing process.

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of His inheritance? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old. (ESV)

Here are some specific expressions of God’s short-lived correction, all from the book of Isaiah.

- Isaiah 54:7: This first example is so clear-cut it is classic. Notice the conceptual opposites of “desertion” and great compassion,” separated by only “a brief moment”:

I deserted you for a brief moment, but I will take you back with great compassion. (Holman Christian Standard Bible [HCSB])

- Isaiah 10:25: Earlier in the chapter, God has described the punishment He will bring on Israel, particularly the northern tribes.

For yet a little while and My indignation against you shall be accomplished, and My anger shall be directed to destruction [of the Assyrian]. (*The Amplified Bible*)

- Isaiah 26:20: God’s anger lasts only “for a little while.”

Go, My people, enter your rooms and close your doors behind you. Hide for a little while until the wrath has passed. (HCSB)

These passages point to the brief nature of God’s wrath. It burns hot but not long. God’s restorative actions follow quickly after His destructive anger.

DARKNESS AND NOT LIGHT

The prophet Amos penned a well-known comment that, at first blush, may seem to argue against the close linkage of destruction and restoration during the Day of the Lord. Amos 5:18-20 deserves more than passing comment.

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? (ESV)

The prophet is explicit: The Day of the Lord is *totally* dark. There is nothing at all light about it!

It is important that we recognize the context of this passage. In verse 1, Amos terms his words “a funeral song—that I am lifting up against you, house of Israel” (*Common English Bible*). The *Modern English Version* and *The Voice* actually refer to it as a “dirge.” The King James Version uses the noun “lamentation.” With that definition in mind, notice the verb tenses in verse 2: “She has fallen; virgin Israel will never rise again. She lies abandoned on her land, with no one to raise her up” (HCSB).

Amos’ vision is so clear that he is actually treating his subject, the nation of Israel, as though she were already dead—gone. Yet, he wrote these words some forty years *before* ten-tribed Israel (that is, the Northern Kingdom) had actually fallen to the Assyrian Empire. Furthermore, we know that Israel *will* rise again, when God restores her, joining her again with Judah (Ezekiel 37:15-28). Indeed, Amos himself speaks of this restoration in Amos 9:11-15. Notice just verses 14-15:

“I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,” says the LORD your God. (ESV)

Both Old and New Testaments speak of this restoration. Clearly, the language of Amos 5:2 is hyperbolic (that is, overstatement), highly apropos rhetoric for a dirge, the

rhetoric of which is about as dark as it can be. With that context in mind, Amos’ meaning in verses 18-20 becomes clearer. The prophet is in fact saying that the people of Israel *thought* the Day of the Lord was one of total light. They misunderstood.

If we were to transport a representative cross-section of Amos’ audience to the twenty-first-century America, we might, after interviewing them, discover a lot of common ground between these self-righteous and hypocritical Israelites and the post-Millennialist members of today’s liberal churches. Post-Millennialists believe that “things” are improving all the time, the result of the effective work of the church. They believe that, eventually, things will be so good that Christ will return. It is almost as though these people listen to different newscasts than the ones to which we listen!¹

So, too, the Israelites of Amos’ day, focusing myopically on their current wealth and false sense of wellbeing, perceived nothing but “good times rolling.” Times were great, getting greater, with no end to prosperity in sight. They imagined themselves to be at the gate of Paradise, what they thought the Day of the Lord would be.

Amos corrects that errant perception. The time is coming, he avers in Amos 5:16, “In all the squares there shall be wailing, and in all the streets they shall say, ‘Alas! Alas!’” This is a far cry from “good times!” From their distress, he says in verse 19, they will find no viable path of escape—running from a lion, they meet a bear! Their doom is sealed.

In reality, for those doomed, the Day of the Lord *will have no good* in it at all. It will be totally dark, exactly the opposite of what Amos’ audience dimwittedly envisioned. We know, however, that those not doomed during the Lord’s Day will see God *promptly* take restorative action, extending “great compassion” to them.²

GOODNESS AND SEVERITY— AND THE NATURE OF GOD

In his letter to the Christians residing at Rome, the apostle Paul is characteristically astute in his statement of the dichotomies we have examined. To him, God’s penchant to follow destruction quickly with restoration is summed up in the merism, “the goodness and severity of God.” He sees these traits, in essence polar opposites, as definitive of God’s character, the operational definition of His interface with mankind. Not that God is bipolar, exhibiting radical mood swings. Rather, God is love, intrinsically so, unchangeably so, but He responds rigorously to sin because He understands how hurtful it is.

Furthermore, implicit in the merism, to Paul’s way of thinking, is a stern warning not to abuse God’s mercy, lest we incur His severity. The context is the mercy that God has shown some Gentiles by calling them into His church, and at the same time, His rejection of His (physical) people Israel—at least for a while:

If God didn’t think twice about taking pruning shears to the natural branches [that is, physical Israel of old],

why would He hesitate over you? He wouldn't give it a second thought. Make sure you stay alert to these qualities of gentle kindness and ruthless severity that exist side by side in God—ruthless with the deadwood, gentle with the grafted shoot. But don't presume on this gentleness. (Romans 11:21-22, *The Message*)

Here is the same dichotomy—punishment and restoration, stated in a New Testament context. Two translations of this same passage, quoted below, make it clear that God's severity and His goodness combine to make up two sides of a single personality. J.B. Phillips' paraphrase puts it this way:

You must try to appreciate both the kindness and the strict justice of God. Those who fell experienced His justice, while you are experiencing His kindness, and will continue to do so as long as you do not abuse that kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. . . .

The Voice is quite clear. Notice the translator's turn, "simultaneous balance":

Witness the simultaneous balance of the kindness and severity of our God. Severity is directed at the fallen branches withering without faith. Yet kindness is directed at you. So live in the kindness of God or else prepare to be cut off yourselves.

It is fair to say that this merism—the opposites expressed in God's goodness and His severity—articulate a central, informing theme of God's Word—from its beginning to its end. We see these opposites in narrative after narrative in the Old Testament. Here are just four examples:

1. The goodness of God toward Noah and his family, His protection of them through the cataclysm that destroyed the world that then was (compare Genesis 8:1 and II Peter 3:5-6).
2. The goodness of God as He delivered "righteous Lot" from the cities of the plain, which He promptly burned to ashes (see II Peter 2:6-7).
3. The severity He displayed to Job in order to teach him an important lesson, and the goodness He showed as He ultimately "blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning" (Job 42:12).
4. The severity He exhibited toward Joseph, a bit of a cocky 17-year-old lad, who basked in his father's favor. He found himself a slave in Egypt. Psalm 105:18 (*Common English Bible*) tells us that his "feet hurt in his shackles; his neck was in an iron collar. . . ." Relatively soon, however, Joseph became Pharaoh's vizier.

GOD'S COMING "GREAT COMPASSION"

In Hebrews 12:18-29, the apostle Paul develops this contrast in a historical context, the theophany at Mount Sinai versus the gentleness of our call:

You have not come to something that you can feel, to a blazing fire, to darkness, to gloom, to a storm, to a trumpet's blast, and to a voice. When your ancestors heard that voice, they begged not to hear it say another word. They couldn't obey the command that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." The sight was so terrifying that even Moses said he was trembling and afraid.

Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to tens of thousands of angels joyfully gathered together and to the assembly of God's firstborn children (whose names are written in heaven). You have come to a judge (the God of all people) and to the spirits of people who have God's approval and have gained eternal life. You have come to Jesus, who brings the new promise from God, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better message than Abel's.

Be careful that you do not refuse to listen when God speaks. Your ancestors didn't escape when they refused to listen to God, who warned them on earth. We certainly won't escape if we turn away from God, who warns us from heaven. When God spoke to your ancestors, his voice shook the earth. But now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the sky."

The words once more show clearly that God will change what he has made. These are the things that can be shaken. Then only the things that cannot be shaken will remain. Therefore, we must be thankful that we have a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Because we are thankful, we must serve God with fear and awe in a way that pleases him. After all, our God is a destructive fire. (*God's Word Translation*)

Now, compare God's severity, here emblemized by the consuming fire experienced by those who rebel against Him, with Paul's comments in Ephesians 3:14-21. Here, Paul states God's goodness in undeniable terms:

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would give you, according to the riches of His glory, power to be strengthened by His Spirit in the inner man, and that

Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or imagine, according to the power that works in us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. (*Modern English Version*)

As end-of-the-age prophecies unfold before our eyes, we must always bear this in mind: No matter whether He expresses Himself in wrath or in kindness, in the fire of destruction or in the water of His Spirit, God's purpose remains the same: the outworking of His plan, His work of reconciliation, His "great compassion." As Psalm 74:12 states, "Yet God is my King of old, working salvation throughout the earth" (*World English Bible*).

The *Obergefell* decision in favor of same-sex marriage is just one manifestation of American decadence. We, standing on the sidelines—hopefully never participating—witness other symptoms of the moral decay daily. As we do so, let us look forward with rejoicing, never failing to see God's mercy everywhere revealing itself.

—Charles F. Whitaker

Endnotes

¹ The world view of a post-Millennial is essentially that of Pollyanna. Less charitably, it is related to the ostrich forcing its head in the sand, an expression of denial.

² In this sense, Amos 5:18-20 bears a definite affinity with Jeremiah 7, where the prophet warns his audience against giving heed to "deceptive words" (verse 4) and behind them, of course, fallacious doctrines. These people "entered these gates [of the Temple] to worship the Lord" (verse 2). Yet, much like those to whom Amos spoke earlier, they were guilty of perpetrating vast social injustices, justifying themselves all the while in the name of religion. Jeremiah asks, rhetorically:

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, "We are delivered!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? (verse 9)

He has already pointed out the moral depravity, however:

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. (verses 5-7)

These people considered themselves safe because of their religious heritage, typified most saliently in Solomon's Temple (verse 4). They thought, "God ould never destroy that!" God instructs the people otherwise, asking them in verse 12 to go "now to My place that was in Shiloh, where I made My name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of My people Israel." History has shown that the threats of the "severe" God are not idle:

Therefore I will do to the house that is called by My name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of My sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim. (verses 14-15)

(continued from page 6)

separate from the other six days. It is different from the common or ordinary. The other six days are common, given for the pursuit of the ordinary things of life. The Sabbath is a day God has reserved for man's benefit for special things, different things—spiritual things.

The Sabbath is not holy merely because God assigned it as such, though by itself, if we truly fear Him, that should be enough. How do things become holy, even things like the soil of the ground, or in this case, time? The Bible shows they become holy because He puts His presence in them. By the fact of His presence, they become a spiritual creation. God's presence is in the weekly Sabbath as well as in the annual Sabbaths, which He also created and made holy for the spiritual guidance of those He has a relationship with.

Luke writes, "So [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read" (Luke 4:16). Jesus kept the weekly Sabbath as well as the annual Sabbaths (see John 7:2, 10). The book of Acts reports the apostle Paul and the New Testament church keeping the weekly and annual Sabbaths, even Gentiles.

Nothing in the Bible changes the day God set aside and made holy at creation. The Catholic Church publicly lays claim to changing the day of worship to Sunday and charges the Protestant churches with following their lead. Can the Catholic Church make anything holy?

Everything that truly matters reveals the Edenic Covenant to be universal in application. This means that, along with everything else in that covenant God charged us to submit to, the Sabbath is still in effect. Nothing holy has been created to replace the Sabbath God created in the first week.

The Blessing of Marriage

Within the covenant, the blessing of the establishment of marriage is preceded by God preparing Adam's mind for his need for a companion suitable to him. Notice Genesis 2:18-20:

And the LORD God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him." Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.

This was no casual activity. It involved a display of the intellectual powers that God gave to Adam. God un-

doubtedly caused animals or groups of animals to gather for Adam to observe, study, and classify, to see what he would call them. In giving each animal group its name, Adam demonstrated his right as God's human regent. He was given dominion over the animals, and he used that authority. Furthermore, it appears that the names Adam gave them "stuck." They did so because he demonstrated good insight into their characteristics, and his descendants later used the names he initially gave the animals.

This exercise demonstrated to Adam that there was no one like him in the animal world. No animal was created in the image of God. If he had chosen one of them, communication and all it entails would necessarily have had to remain at the animal's level. He was now better prepared for God's gift of Eve. Genesis 2:21-24 records Eve's creation and Adam's response:

And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

The warmth and beauty of this creation is fitting, a crown on all that God had created for the man and woman to prepare them for life in the world. Adam's response shows his pleasurable agreement with this added gift.

Feminists take issue with Scripture's reference to Eve as a "helper" (Genesis 2:18), but there is nothing demeaning in the term. It simply means "one who helps." God Himself is referred to as our "help" several times (see Psalm 115:10-11). Remember, Genesis 1:27 asserts, "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." With both sexes created in God's image, neither can claim superiority.

With our knowledge of DNA, it makes perfect sense for God to have built Eve from a small portion of Adam's body because his body already had within it every means for Eve to be his perfect female match. Adam did not know this technical, biological reality, but he was still in naming-mode after his experience with the animals. So, when he saw her he said, in effect, "She is me!" meaning she is like him, not like an animal, naming her "woman." (In Hebrew, "man" is *ish* and "woman" is *isha*.) Each was made to be the perfect companion for the other. The concluding comment in Genesis 2:24—that a man and his wife are to become one flesh—reinforces this.

Today, marriage is not at its most stable state in our Western cultures. Yet, God's intention is plain. When

asked about divorce and remarriage, Jesus declares God's original intent in Matthew 19:8-9:

Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.

Mankind's marriage problems do not stem from God's creation of the institution. They lie in the hardness of heart of both men and women.

Jesus' clear statement is the reality that the modern demand for "equality"—especially from feminists—opposes, and such opposition affects the stability of marriages to such an extent that more than a third of all marriages end in divorce. Some remarry and divorce several times, throwing both family life and society into turmoil. The entire culture is badly fractured.

Feminist anger over God making Eve for Adam reveals that they are anti-God in their outlook on marriage. They forget, or conveniently overlook, that Adam was made for Eve too, and in addition, that she was made from man, meaning that she was part of him. Genesis does not suggest in any way that she was created as man's servant. Adam himself perceived her as a delightful companion.

Are men and woman equal? The answer depends on the particular context. Generally, they are not equal in physical feats of strength, for instance, but they are equal in many ways, especially in mental and spiritual terms. Both are created in the image of God, which starts them on the path to being fit companions for each other. Both are under moral responsibility to God. No place in Scripture states either a man's or a woman's sins are the worse. Both men and women are recipients of God's grace and can be forgiven by the blood of Jesus Christ. Both are equal in terms of being offered salvation and receiving eternal life and reward in God's Kingdom.

The true cause of marital problems lies in the ignorance of both men and women of their responsibilities within a marriage. Compounding this is another reality: the self-centered, carnal character of each personality involved. These two factors—ignorance of responsibility and selfish carnality—result in multitudes of mistakes and misapplications in many areas of the relationship, creating discouragement and anguish rather than satisfaction and joy, as God intended.

We will continue exploring this covenant in the next article.

In Christian love,



Zika: A Real Public Health Emergency?

As the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro approached, two major health scares threatened to undercut the Games. The first concerned the fact that the waters around the city—on which several Olympic competitions would be held—were notorious as dumping grounds for both untreated human waste and the trash of the city’s twelve million residents. After testing the waters, scientists found contamination levels to be far higher than previously thought. Their samples included pathogens like diarrhea- and vomit-inducing rotaviruses and worse, sometimes deadly drug-resistant super-bacteria.

The second health scare also involved a pathogen, a virus spread by two species of mosquito, *Aedes aegypti* and *Aedes albopictus*, aggressive daytime biters. The virus is known as Zika, named after a Ugandan forest where, in 1947, it was first identified in the blood of a rhesus monkey. In early May 2015, Brazil’s National Reference Laboratory confirmed that Zika was spreading within the country, the first time the disease had been locally acquired and transmitted in the Western Hemisphere. By October, cases of neurological disorders—particularly Guillain–Barré syndrome—and microcephaly were rising at an unusual rate. Because of the microcephaly in particular, Brazil declared a national public health emergency on November 11, 2015. Even so, in May 2016 the World Health Organization determined that changing the location or cancelling the Rio Games would not significantly alter Zika’s spread.

Zika’s history is heavily weighted toward the present. Though identified in 1947, it was not until 1952 that the first human cases were detected in Uganda and Tanzania. Twelve years later, while working on the virus, a researcher in Uganda confirmed that Zika causes human disease by contracting it himself, reporting that he suffered only mild symptoms. Over the next two decades, scientists learned that people had been exposed to the virus over a wide area of Africa and Asia, but no deaths—or even hospitalizations—were reported.

In fact, until 2007, only fourteen cases of Zika in humans had been documented worldwide. The first large Zika outbreak took place that year on Yap Island in Micronesia in the Pacific Ocean, infecting 73% of the population. Again, those infected displayed mild symptoms: fever, rash, joint pain, red eyes (conjunctivitis), headache, and muscle pain over several days to a week. The large outbreak is thought to have occurred because the islanders lacked immunity to the virus, unlike the long-exposed populations of Africa and Asia.

In 2013 and 2014, after four more outbreaks in other Pacific islands, scientists began to perceive possible links between Zika and congenital defects like micro-

cephaly, as well as autoimmune and neurological complications. The most common of the latter was the aforementioned Guillain–Barré syndrome, a rare disorder in which the body’s immune system attacks the nerves, causing loss of sensation, muscle weakness, and if left untreated, paralysis. In rare instances, it can be fatal if the muscles that control breathing or the heart are affected. The link to Zika seems to be through the dengue and chikungunya viruses, that is, those who have consecutive dengue or chikungunya and Zika infections may be predisposed to develop Guillain–Barré syndrome.

Over the last decade, researchers have also discovered that Zika can be passed to others by both sexual congress and blood transfusion. Though these findings have raised fears about the virus, the fact remains that, on its own in otherwise healthy people, Zika is a mild illness that lingers for about a week. A person is infectious during that time, yet in about two weeks, no live virus remains in bodily fluids. He or she is then immune to subsequent infections.

The most at-risk group is pregnant women. Zika has been linked to a broad set of complications in pregnancy, including miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, microcephaly, and eye problems. Microcephaly (abnormally small head- and thus brain-size in newborns) has received the most attention. Due to the recent hubbub over Zika, many people believe that it alone causes microcephaly, but infections such as rubella, substance abuse during pregnancy, or genetic anomalies can also cause it. Zika causes microcephaly in a low percentage of cases and only in babies already in the womb when the mother contracts the virus (that is, it has no effect on future pregnancies).

What can be done to avoid a Zika infection? The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has advised those in affected areas to apply insect repellent, wear long-sleeved shirts, and keep doors and windows closed. It recommends that infected men not have sexual relations for a month, just in case, and practice safe sex for six months. Pregnant women should avoid travel to affected areas.

Does this sound like a disease on the same level as Ebola, also labeled “a public health emergency of international concern”? Especially in America and Canada, where only a relative handful of infections have been documented, the cautions seem a mite overwrought. Zika appears to be this year’s version of West Nile Virus, swine flu (H1N1), or avian flu (H5N1): a real illness, harmful to a thin slice of the population, hyped into a pandemic by the media. It brings to mind Jesus’ warning in Matthew 24:4: “Take heed that no one deceives you.”

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ?

The Healing of Malchus' Ear (Part One)

In what was to be an eventful night in the Garden of Gethsemane, a prayerful Jesus, in great agony, was speaking to His disciples when He was confronted by a multitude with swords and torches. They had come from the chief priest to arrest Him. Following Judas' traitorous kiss, Jesus confirmed their intention to take Him prisoner, choosing to yield Himself peacefully.

However, Peter was not willing to let his Master be hauled off without a fight. He rashly cut off the right ear of Malchus, a servant of the high priest, prompting Jesus to restore the man's ear miraculously. This merciful act would be His last miracle before being crucified (Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-50; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:1-12).



1. What character flaws does Peter's deed expose? Matthew 26:51-54.

COMMENT: The suddenness of Peter's reaction reveals a lack of forethought and patience. Just before his action, he had asked Christ, "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?" However, he did not wait for an answer (Luke 22:49-50). His abruptness reflects that he was moved more by his passion—his emotions—instead of upright, reasoned thought and godly principle. Such ungoverned passion rarely leads to righteous action.

Pride is also evident in his action. Perhaps he was even trying to impress his fellow disciples. Peter had boasted earlier that he would remain faithful to Christ even if the others were to stumble (Matthew 26:33). Initially, his strike may have appeared to be sparked by a courageous and noble faith, but it was wrongly motivated. It actually manifested more vainglory than faithful courage or nobility. Peter's carnality echoes the approach of many nominal Christians, inspired more by the desire to outshine others instead of a sincere passion to honor and glorify God.

2. Is not doing the will of God ever justified? Mark 14:46.

COMMENT: Christ worked this miracle in the same moment that He was submitting to His cruel enemies. In addition, on the heels of His agonizing prayers (characterized by His bloody perspiration; Luke 22:44), one of His own disciples, Judas, had given Him the kiss of betrayal, a prelude to the coming horrors of His arrest, trial, and crucifixion—the cruelest trial ever suffered by a man. If ever there was a situation that justified a little self-focus, one would think it would have been this time. Yet, amid all of this, Jesus chose to show mercy to His captors and to glorify His Father by submitting to His will.

Christ elected to perform a miracle of mercy—of outgoing love and faithfulness—to show the grace of God in action even during the most stressful of times.

This shames us all! We find so many excuses for not serving God as we should. For the slightest reason, some skip church services, neglect to come to the aid of others, or refuse to help with the needs of the church. If any Christian thinks he has problems sufficient to exempt him from serving God, he had better be sure his problems are greater than those that faced our Savior at the time of this miracle.

3. What part does unbelief play in Jesus' arrest? Luke 22:52-53.

COMMENT: This tragic situation shows unbelief to be destructive, ugly, and cruel. Christ possessed all the power to serve—to heal and to bring peace—yet He was seized and bound to suppress His good works. He lived, died, and rose again so that one day He could fulfill His own inspired words from Isaiah 61:1: "He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." Yet, his captors and eventual slayers, in their ungodly malice, could see His good words and works only as threats and Him only as an enemy, a man to shame, wound, and kill.

People are no better today. Christians are prohibited from praying in many government buildings or at public gatherings and are sometimes prevented from speaking the truth because man's laws have, in effect, seized and bound such activity. The powers of darkness have influenced this world to hinder and persecute Christians just as Christ was.

Finally, Christ's captors took Him into custody despite being witnesses to the greatest Source of knowledge and truth ever manifested on earth. Foolishly thinking they were superior-minded to Christ and His disciples, these men's actions will forever be a shameful tribute to unbelief (Romans 1:18-22). Had they truly known Him and the truth He brought, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (I Corinthians 2:8).

—Martin G. Collins