

# BIBLICAL LIVING IN AN AGE OF COVID

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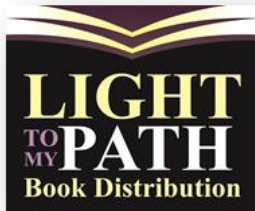
Biblical Principles for Community  
Living in a Global Pandemic



F. Wayne MacLeod

# Biblical Living in an Age of COVID

*Biblical Principles for Community Living in a Global  
Pandemic*



F. Wayne Mac Leod

Light To My Path Book Distribution  
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## **Biblical Living in an Age of COVID**

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# Preface

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As I write, the world has struggled for over two years with the effects of COVID-19 and its various mutations. Millions of people have lost their lives to this dreaded virus. Lives and culture have changed, and our economy has suffered.

Government restrictions have been met with diverse and sometimes divisive opinions. Some people believe the whole thing to be a conspiracy. Others see the vaccine as the mark of the beast described in the book of Revelation.

Regulations imposed on us have transformed how we worship or celebrate holidays. Masks and social distancing have affected the mental health of our children. Those who object to the vaccination requirements have lost jobs or been banned from attending social and religious events. There is no question that COVID-19 has changed our lives.

What is our responsibility as believers in the Lord Jesus? Are there any Biblical precedents or principles that can guide us through this pandemic? While I am aware that I am treading on divisive territory here, I want to base my response to this worldwide pandemic on the clear principles of Scripture.

I trust that this brief reflection will help us examine what the Bible has to say. As believers, this is our one true guide in all matters. While not everyone will agree with my understanding of the passages I will examine, may the study at least direct

each reader to seek the wisdom of the Scriptures in their response to this difficult worldwide crisis.

God bless,

F. Wayne MacLeod

# Chapter 1 – Plagues in the Bible

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While the Bible does not speak directly about COVID-19, it does talk abundantly about plagues and contagious diseases. Consider, for example, the story of the ten plagues inflicted on Egypt at the time of the exodus. These plagues began as an answer to prayer. The children of Israel cried out in their bondage, asking for deliverance. God demonstrated His power and authority through a series of plagues that brought Egypt to its knees. The intention of God in these plagues is evident in Exodus 7:5 when God says:

*(5) The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.” - Exodus 7:2-5 ESV*

Egypt was brought to its knees as God poured out one pestilence after another upon it. The nation's economy was devastated. Apart from the Israelites, no family in the country escaped death and disease. Egypt would never again be the same.

Plagues were not limited to foreign nations, however. In Exodus 32, Aaron fashioned an idol in the form of a golden calf. The people then bowed down and worshipped it. Notice the response of God in Exodus 32:35:

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*(35) Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made - Exodus 32:35 ESV*

This plague fell on those who worshipped the golden calf. It was God's means of punishing Israel for bowing down to another god.

A similar event took place in Numbers 11. Israel complained about the food God had given them in the wilderness. In response, God sent flocks of quail into their camp. Those who had been grumbling gorged themselves on this meat. Listen to the account of what took place that day:

*(33) While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague. (34) Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving. - Numbers 11:31-34 ESV*

According to Numbers 11, the Lord sent a plague among the people, striking down the discontent in their midst. This was such a significant event in the nation's history that she named the place Kibroth-hattaavah, which means "graves of the craving." This was in remembrance of those who grumbled about the manna God provided.

As Israel travelled through the wilderness, Moses sent spies into Canaan to explore the land and bring back a report. When they returned to camp, they reported that the people of the land were too powerful for them to conquer, discouraging

### *Plagues in the Bible*

the people from entering the land God had promised them. Notice the response of God in Numbers 11:36-37:

*(36) And the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation grumble against him by bringing up a bad report about the land— (37) the men who brought up a bad report of the land— died by plague before the LORD. - Numbers 14:36-37  
ESV*

Once again, the Lord sent a plague to kill these spies who brought back this negative report.

Later in Numbers 16, a man named Korah led a group to revolt against Moses and his authority. God responded in anger and sent a plague among the people. Numbers 16:49 tells us that 14,700 Israelites died as a result:

*(49) Now those who died in the plague were 14,700, besides those who died in the affair of Korah. (50) And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting, when the plague was stopped. - Numbers 16:41-50 ESV*

Numbers 25 details how Israel turned from God to sexual immorality with Moabite women and Baal worship. Once again, the result was a plague that killed twenty-four thousand Israelites:

*(9) Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. - Numbers 25:9 ESV*

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When David allowed his pride to get the best of him and he took a census of his people, the Lord determined to punish the nation because of his actions. He sent a pestilence on Israel, and 70,000 men died as a result:

*(15) So the LORD sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time. And there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba 70,000 men. - 2 Samuel 24:15 ESV*

The book of Revelation describes a time of great pestilence on the earth. A fourth of the world will be devastated by sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts:

*(7) When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" (8) And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth. - Revelation 6:7-8 ESV*

In Revelation 8, John saw a great star falling from the sky to the earth, poisoning the waters of the earth so that many people would die:

*(10) The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. (11) The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had*

*Plagues in the Bible*  
*been made bitter. - Revelation 8:10-11*  
*ESV*

Revelation 9 recounts the blowing of seven trumpets releasing plagues on the earth. According to these verses, one-third of humanity will be destroyed by the plagues unleashed by these trumpets:

*(13) Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, (14) saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." (15) So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. ... (18) By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. - Revelation 9:13-15, 18 ESV*

Finally, Revelation 11 tells us about two witnesses who will come in the final days. Notice the power they will be given according to verse 6:

*(6) They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire. - Revelation 11:6 ESV*

These two witnesses will have the power to shut the skies and afflict the earth with every kind of plague as often as they desire.

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I share these examples for a reason. The Bible speaks about plagues and diseases that ravage nations and claim the lives of thousands of people. Since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, sickness and disease have devastated our world. The Bible speaks openly about plagues and diseases.

It is not my purpose to determine the reason for plagues and disasters. What is clear from the verses we have examined is that nothing is new. The Bible has something to say about pandemics and devastation caused by disease and plagues. If we want to know how to deal with COVID or any other virus or contagious infection, we will do well to examine what it has to say.

# Chapter 2 – The Law and Leprosy

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Leprosy was one of the most dreaded diseases of Bible times. There were many reasons for this. It was a life-altering disease because the infected individual was immediately isolated from family and society due to its contagious nature.

In Leviticus 13, Moses lays out God's requirements for anyone diagnosed with the disease. According to the law of the Old Testament, leprosy did not just infect people but also their clothing and homes. Consider the words of Leviticus 13:

*(47) "When there is a case of leprous disease in a garment, whether a woolen or a linen garment, (48) in warp or woof of linen or wool, or in a skin or in anything made of skin, (49) if the disease is greenish or reddish in the garment, or in the skin or in the warp or the woof or in any article made of skin, it is a case of leprous disease, and it shall be shown to the priest. - Leviticus 13:47-49 ESV*

The law stated that a garment with greenish or reddish-coloured growth be brought to the priest for examination. Most Bible commentators believe the growth on the garment to be a form of mould, fungus or mildew. Leviticus 14 goes on

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to speak about leprosy that infected a home. Again this appears to be a case of mould or decay of some kind.

*(34) "When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give you for a possession, and I put a case of leprous disease in a house in the land of your possession, (35) then he who owns the house shall come and tell the priest, 'There seems to me to be some case of disease in my house.' - Leviticus 14:34-35  
ESV*

The leprosy of the Bible was a condition that affected human skin, clothes or even buildings. The law of Moses was very clear about what was to happen when such a case appeared in the nation.

### *Report the Case*

Leviticus 13 begins with these words:

*(1) The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, (2) "When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a case of leprous disease on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests –  
Leviticus 13:1-2, ESV*

Notice what is happening here. When a person was infected with swelling or eruption on the skin, they were to report this to the priest. The law of God was very clear in this regard. All

### *The Law and Leprosy*

such conditions were to be made known to the religious leaders. Leprosy was taken seriously.

Realize that it would not always be convenient for the infected to report their case. These individuals had families, jobs and obligations just as we do. To report a suspected case of leprosy would have disrupted their routine. It could impact whether the family had anything to eat that week. Bills had to be paid; children had to be fed. There would have been many concerns surrounding a positive diagnosis of leprosy.

Despite the inconveniences and deep concerns about a positive diagnosis, God expected every person who suspected infection to reveal their condition to the authorities. Concern for the spread of this disease took priority over any personal concerns the individual might have.

### *Examination of the Infected Person*

Leviticus 13 tells us that the priest was to examine those who reported a suspected case of leprosy. God showed the priest how to diagnose each instance and the symptoms they were to look for to determine whether the individual was leprosy. The priests were to look for the following signs:

- 1) White hair (Leviticus 13:3)
- 2) Swelling in the skin and raw flesh (Leviticus 13:10)
- 3) Evidence of spreading from head to foot (Leviticus 13:12)
- 4) Reddish-white spots in a boil (Leviticus 13:18-19)
- 5) Signs that the infected area was deeper than the skin (Leviticus 13:20)
- 6) A burn that turned reddish-white or white (Leviticus 13:24)

7) Thinning hair that was turning yellow (Leviticus 13:20-30)

God takes the time in Leviticus 13 to teach the priests how to look out for contagious infections among the people. It was the responsibility of each priest to follow up on every reported case.

*Two-week Isolation of Suspected Cases*

God also instructed the priests in what they were to do if they suspected a positive diagnosis of leprosy.

First, if after examining the reported case, the priest suspected that the individual had leprosy, he was to isolate the person for seven days:

*(4) But if the spot is white in the skin of his body and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall shut up the diseased person for seven days. – Leviticus 13:4, ESV*

During these seven days, the individual was separated from the community. Remember that this meant very limited contact with family and friends. It also required that the person not work for that time.

The second stage came after the seven-day isolation period. At this point, the priest would re-examine the suspected case. If the disease showed no evidence of spreading, the individual would proceed to the second period of isolation for another seven days:

### *The Law and Leprosy*

*(5) And the priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if in his eyes the disease is checked and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall shut him up for another seven days. - Leviticus 13:5, ESV*

This second week would give the body time to heal and clear up any infection. Once again, however, this individual was to have no contact with anyone else.

Finally, after two weeks of isolation, the priest would examine the person again. If after this second week the diseased area had faded or showed improvement, he would pronounce the individual clean, and they were free to go back to their family. Notice, however, that the law required that all clothes the individual wore be washed to remove all possibility of disease spreading to anyone else.

*(6) And the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the diseased area has faded and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption. And he shall wash his clothes and be clean. - Leviticus 13:6, ESV*

If the priest discovered that the disease had spread after the two-week isolation period, the individual was declared unclean and would need to remain isolated.

*(7) But if the eruption spreads in the skin, after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest. (8) And the priest shall look, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him*

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*unclean; it is a leprous disease. - Leviticus*  
*13:7-8 ESV*

*Permanent Implications for those who were not Healed*

The implications for those who did not improve during this two-week isolation period were quite grim:

*(45) “The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ (46) He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp. - Leviticus 13:40-46*  
*ESV*

The Law of Moses had four requirements for the leper.

The first requirement was that they wear torn clothes and let their hair hang loose:

*(45) “The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, - Leviticus*  
*13:45a, ESV*

In those days, people would tear their clothes as a sign of mourning and grief. This is what is happening here in Leviticus 13:45. Those who were not healed of leprosy were to live and dress like those who grieved. Their appearance would notify the citizens of their community that they were to keep a distance from them.

### *The Law and Leprosy*

The second requirement for the leper was that they cover their mouth:

*he shall cover his upper lip – Leviticus  
13:45, ESV*

Notice that the verse specifically commanded the leper to cover the upper lip. In other words, the leper was to cover his entire mouth. This was done with a cloth and would prevent the spread of germs to people in the community.

Third, lepers were to announce their presence:

*he shall cover his upper lip and cry out,  
'Unclean, unclean.' - Leviticus 13:45, ESV*

Lepers were to cry out: "Unclean, unclean," when they approached someone in their community. This assured that there would be sufficient social distance between the infected person and anyone else in the community and prevented infection from spreading.

Finally, lepers were to remove themselves from the community and live outside the camp of God's people in isolation:

*(46) He shall remain unclean as long as  
he has the disease. He is unclean. He  
shall live alone. His dwelling shall be  
outside the camp. - Leviticus 13:46 ESV*

The implication of this was quite severe. There would be limited social interaction with family and friends. Lepers would become dependent on others to provide the necessities of life. They would even be excluded from worship at the house of the Lord. We have a clear reference to this in the case of King Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26:

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*(21) And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the LORD. And Jotham his son was over the king's household, governing the people of the land. - 2 Chronicles 26:21 ESV*

What did God expect from His people in the event they suspected they were infected with a contagious disease? He required that they take it seriously and report their symptoms to the priest, who would examine and isolate them for two weeks. Remember that the isolated individual was only suspected of having leprosy –the official diagnosis would only come after isolation. However, they were to distance themselves as a precaution lest they spread the disease to others. Those diagnosed with a contagious disease were to remain isolated, cover their mouths and announce their condition to all who approached them. Infectious diseases existed in the Old Testament among the people of God. God required that they take every precaution lest they spread the infection through the community.

# Chapter 3 – Addressing Uncleanness

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One of the responsibilities of the priests as God's representatives was to teach Israel the difference between clean and unclean. Whole chapters of the Bible are devoted to instructing God's people in this important matter. The consequences for ignoring these regulations were often quite serious. In many of these commands, God's concern was for the nation's physical health.

The Lord God taught His people what they could and could not eat. Leviticus 11 details the kinds of animals that could be eaten and which were to be avoided. Generally speaking, an animal with a parted hoof that chewed the cud was edible (Leviticus 11:3). Only sea creatures with fins and scales were eaten (Leviticus 11:9). Leviticus 11:13-19 details the list of birds to be avoided. Israel could eat crickets, locusts and grasshoppers, but all other insects were unclean (Leviticus 20-23). All rodents and reptiles were avoided (Leviticus 11:29-30). By establishing these dietary laws, God demonstrated His concern for the health of His people.

The laws of Leviticus 11, however, go farther than this. Unclean animals were not to be eaten, but the Law of Moses also cautioned against even touching these animals.

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*(24) "And by these you shall become unclean. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening, (25) and whoever carries any part of their carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening. – Leviticus 11:24-25, ESV*

Sometimes the carcass of an unclean animal needed to be removed and carried somewhere to be discarded. The individual who disposed of any part of an unclean body would also become unclean. These individuals were to wash themselves and the clothes they wore and self-isolate for the rest of the day.

Sometimes the body of an unclean animal or insect fell on an object in an Israelite home. The law of God required that if the body of any unclean animal or insect touched a garment or container of skin or wood, then these objects were to be washed and would be unclean for the rest of the day:

*(32) And anything on which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean, whether it is an article of wood or a garment or a skin or a sack, any article that is used for any purpose. It must be put into water, and it shall be unclean until the evening; then it shall be clean. – Leviticus 11:32, ESV*

If the body of an unclean animal or insect fell into a food container, oven or stove, these objects in which that body fell were destroyed

*(33) And if any of them falls into any earthenware vessel, all that is in it shall be unclean, and you shall break it. (34) Any*

### *Addressing Uncleaness*

*food in it that could be eaten, on which water comes, shall be unclean. And all drink that could be drunk from every such vessel shall be unclean. (35) And everything on which any part of their carcass falls shall be unclean. Whether oven or stove, it shall be broken in pieces. They are unclean and shall remain unclean for you. - Leviticus 11:33-35 ESV*

Unclean animals carried diseases and germs of all kinds. It was the heart of God to prevent the spread of any infectious sickness. For this reason, He required that His people bathe and wash their clothes every time they came into contact with such animals or insects. He also expected that they avoid contact with anyone else until the evening. The bowls and jars touched with this uncleanness were destroyed in certain cases. All of this was for the health of the community. While this would have meant some inconvenience, Israel would bear this inconvenience for the community's health.

In Leviticus 14, the Lord describes His requirement for a home infected with "a case of leprous disease." Most commentators see a reference to mould, mildew or fungus growth in an Israelite home. Such cases were reported to the priest who ordered that the house be emptied of its belongings. It was then put under quarantine for seven days. After seven days, the priest would re-examine the infection. The infected stones and plaster were removed if it had spread, and the entire house scraped down. The scrapings were brought to a dump outside the city (see Leviticus 14:36-42). If, after all this work, the infection reappeared, the whole house was pulled down and carried out to a dump outside the city (see Leviticus 14:43-45). Anyone who entered that home

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was to wash their clothes and self-isolate until the next day (see Leviticus 14:46-47).

The Lord also cautioned His people about bodily discharges in Leviticus 15. These discharges were of various kinds and might include a bleeding sore, emission of semen, or blood, as in the case of a woman on her monthly period. These bodily discharges were unclean. The Law of God was very specific when it came to anyone who had such a discharge:

*(4) Every bed on which the one with the discharge lies shall be unclean, and everything on which he sits shall be unclean. (5) And anyone who touches his bed shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. (6) And whoever sits on anything on which the one with the discharge has sat shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. (7) And whoever touches the body of the one with the discharge shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. – Leviticus 15:4-7, ESV*

Every bed or chair upon which an individual with a discharge sat became unclean. Anyone who came into contact with something that this person touched was to bathe and self-isolate until the evening. They were also to wash all the clothes they wore that day. If the unclean individual touched another person without washing their hands, that individual was to go home, wash their clothes, bathe and self-isolate until the evening. Any earthenware vessel that a person with a discharge touched was destroyed.

### *Addressing Uncleaness*

*(11) Anyone whom the one with the discharge touches without having rinsed his hands in water shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. (12) And an earthenware vessel that the one with the discharge touches shall be broken, and every vessel of wood shall be rinsed in water. - Leviticus 15:11-12 ESV*

These laws of God were not optional but mandated. Anyone unclean person who came to the temple defiled the temple and risked being struck dead for their blasphemy:

*(31) "Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst." - Leviticus 15:31 ESV*

Anyone who ignored the laws regarding uncleanness and refused to cleanse themselves was cut off or banished from the people of God.

*(20) "If the man who is unclean does not cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD. Because the water for impurity has not been thrown on him, he is unclean. - Numbers 19:20 ESV*

The disobedient were banished because they defiled the sanctuary of the Lord. In other words, they showed contempt for God and His people by living in their impurity.

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From these verses, it is clear that the Lord God required that His people understand how disease and infections spread. As a people of God, they were to do everything possible to prevent the spread of germs, infections and sickness. They were to do this despite the inconvenience this caused them personally. The housewife was to destroy her oven or stove if there was a risk of uncleanness in it. Families would lose their homes because they were infected with disease-carrying mould or mildew. Families would do extra loads of wash or self-isolate for a day or a week to not spread any disease to another person.

Sin has brought sickness and disease to this world. None of us are immune from this. God expected that His people battle the spread of disease and infection in their society. They would do so by carefully observing the regulations regarding clean and unclean objects.

Please understand that I am not saying that we are under the Old Testament law in our day. The Law of Moses, however, does give us a better understanding of the heart of God and our obligation to do all we can to battle the spread of contagious disease in our day as well.

# Chapter 4 – Medicine in Israel

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What does the Bible say about sickness and how to treat it? How did God's people in Bible times view disease? To answer this question, let's begin with the words of Exodus 15:26:

*(26) saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer."- Exodus 15:26*  
ESV

Exodus 15:26 are the words of the Lord God to His people. Notice what He tells them here. If Israel did what was right, God would not put diseases on them. In other words, God would use sickness and disease to teach or punish His people.

This idea is confirmed in what the Lord said to Israel in Deuteronomy 28:

*(15) "But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses*

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*shall come upon you and overtake you.*  
*(16) Cursed shall you be in the city, and*  
*cursed shall you be in the field. (17)*  
*Cursed shall be your basket and your*  
*kneading bowl. (18) Cursed shall be the*  
*fruit of your womb and the fruit of your*  
*ground, the increase of your herds and the*  
*young of your flock. (19) Cursed shall you*  
*be when you come in, and cursed shall*  
*you be when you go out. (20) "The LORD*  
*will send on you curses, confusion, and*  
*frustration in all that you undertake to do,*  
*until you are destroyed and perish quickly*  
*on account of the evil of your deeds,*  
*because you have forsaken me. (21) The*  
*LORD will make the pestilence stick to you*  
*until he has consumed you off the land*  
*that you are entering to take possession of*  
*it. (22) The LORD will strike you with*  
*wasting disease and with fever,*  
*inflammation and fiery heat, and with*  
*drought and with blight and with mildew.*  
*They shall pursue you until you perish. -*  
*Deuteronomy 28:15-22 ESV*

Once again, the Lord God tells His people to be careful to follow His commandments. If they did not do so, God's curse would be upon them. The evidence of this curse would be their fruitless fields and the disease, fever, drought, and mildew that infected their bodies, homes and land.

This was the understanding of the disciples of Jesus in John 9. Notice the question they asked Jesus when they encountered a man who was blind from birth.

*(1) As he passed by, he saw a man blind*  
*from birth. (2) And his disciples asked him,*

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*"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (3) Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. - John 9:1-3 ESV*

The disciples assumed that this man was born blind because of some sin he or his parents had committed. The answer Jesus gives is important. He told them that this man was not born blind because of sin but rather that the purpose of God might be displayed in him. In saying this, Jesus shows us that not all sickness is a punishment from God for sin. The goal of some illnesses and diseases is to reveal the power and work of God.

Paul had to learn this when he prayed three times for God to remove a physical affliction from him.

*(7) So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. (9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. - 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 ESV*

God told Paul that it was His purpose for him to bear this affliction so that His power would be revealed in Paul's

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weakness. There was a reason in Paul's ailment, and God would use it in Paul to glorify His name.

While we don't have time in this chapter to examine this more fully, what is clear is that the Bible teaches us that God uses sickness and disease for various purposes. First, He uses it to get our attention and correct behaviour. Second, as in the case of the man born blind, God used physical affliction to demonstrate His power to heal or strengthen.

What was clear in the minds of God's people was that God was not removed from sickness. Certainly, sickness and disease resulted from the fall of humankind into sin. But God would use this to accomplish His purpose in their lives. What was important for the people in Bible times was to discern what God was doing through sickness and submit to His purpose. If this sickness was intended to correct their behaviour or attitudes, then they needed to submit to God for their healing to take place. If God wanted to demonstrate His power to heal, they needed to allow God to use their sickness to manifest that power. If He wanted them to rely more fully on Him in their weakness, they needed to surrender to God and learn what He had for them.

Listen to the words of the apostle James in James 5:

*(14) Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. (15) And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. (16) Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous*

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*person has great power as it is working. -*  
*James 5:14-16 ESV*

The apostle tells his readers what they should do when sick in this passage. They were to call on the church elders to anoint them and pray for them. Notice also that he goes on to say, "if he had committed sins, he will be forgiven." While James understood that not all sickness was the result of sin, he knew that there was a possibility that God was correcting the person who came for prayer. For this reason, he reminded believers in this passage to confess their sins to one another so that they could be healed.

The responsibility of the elders was to help the sick discern what God was saying through their sickness. Was God using the affliction to correct a behaviour or attitude? Was He using their condition to reveal His presence more deeply? By coming to the spiritual leaders, the sick were seeking to discern the purpose of God in their illness.

In our sickness, God captures our attention. While not all illnesses and diseases result from sin, we need to understand that God is not silent in these times. He uses our sickness to speak to us. Even sickness has a purpose. It can readjust our priorities or teach us lessons we would never have learned in any other way. Our ears need to be opened more than ever in our pain to understand what God has for us. This appears to be the mindset of the Old and New Testament believers.

Another important understanding in the Old and New Testaments was that the true healer of diseases was the Lord God. Consider the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 102:

*(2) Bless the LORD, O my soul, and  
forget not all his benefits, (3) who forgives*

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*all your iniquity, who heals all your*  
*diseases, - Psalms 103:2-3 ESV*

The Psalmist praised the Lord because He forgave sin and healed all his diseases. Believers of the Old Testament would seek the Lord for their healing.

It is quite surprising how little the Bible speaks about the profession of physician. The word "physician" occurs only eleven times in the Bible. Joseph had Egyptian physicians embalm his father (Genesis 50:2). Job calls his friends "worthless physicians" when they could not heal his pain (Job 13:4). Jeremiah grieved over the condition of his people because of their sin and asked, "Is there no physician there?" (Jeremiah 8:22). The Gospel writers speak about a woman who had a flow of blood that no physician could heal (Mark 5:26; Luke 8:43). Colossians 4:14 tell us that Luke was a physician, but we have no record in Scripture of him ever practising his profession. Jesus responds to the objection of the religious leaders about eating with sinners by reminding them that it was those who were sick who needed a physician, not those who were well (Matthew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31). He presented Himself here as the physician for the sinner in Luke 4:23. Jesus quotes a proverb commonly used in His day: "Physician heal yourself" when the people of his day questioned His interpretation of Scripture (Luke 4:23). The final reference to physicians in the Scripture is found in 2 Chronicles 16:12, which says:

*12 In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe. Yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought help from physicians. – 2 Chronicles 16:12, ESV*

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Here we have the story of King Asa, who refused to seek the Lord when his feet were diseased but chose to consult physicians instead. The very next verse tells us that he died as a result. It appears that the sin of Asa was not that he consulted the physician but that he refused to seek the will and the purpose of the Lord in his disease. He turned from the Lord and what He was trying to say to Him in his affliction.

While physicians were present in those days, they were not the only ones to be consulted in times of illness and disease. God's people sought the Lord in their sickness and pain. While some did very likely consult the physician, first and foremost, they were to place themselves in the hands of the Lord. One of our great errors as believers today is not seeking the Lord in our afflictions, for He has much to teach us through these ailments. He wants to meet us in these times.

We must understand that the Bible is not against physicians and medical treatments. Consider the words of Jesus to the church of Laodicea:

*13 I counsel you to buy from me gold  
refined by fire, so that you may be rich,  
and white garments so that you may  
clothe yourself and the shame of your  
nakedness may not be seen, and salve to  
anoint your eyes, so that you may see. –  
Revelation 3:18, ESV*

The Lord counsels the church of Laodicea to buy salve to anoint their eyes so that they could see.

Timothy was a faithful servant of God who often suffered from poor health. Listen to Paul's counsel in 1 Timothy 5:23:

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*23 (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) – 1 Timothy 5:23, ESV*

Paul could have prayed that God heal Timothy of his "frequent ailments," but he did not. Instead, he encouraged him to take a little wine to settle his stomach.

One day, God sent Isaiah to King Hezekiah to tell him he would die. Hearing this word from God, the king immediately repented of his sin and pleaded with God to extend his life. God sent Isaiah back with another word for the king:

*21 Now Isaiah had said, "Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover." - Isaiah 38:21, ESV*

Isaiah told the king's servants to apply a "cake of figs" to the king's boil so that it would heal. God's remedy was not instant healing but the application of medication to the wound.

Jesus told a story about a man robbed, beaten and left to die at the side of the road. Luke 10:34 describes what a hated Samaritan did for him:

*34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. - Luke 10:34, ESV*

The Samaritan bound the wounds of the wounded man. Notice also that he poured oil and wine on him as well. The wine would have killed the germs, and the oil aided the healing. Jesus commends this man for applying this medication to the wound of an enemy.

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Consider also the words of the writer of Proverbs to those who were in deep distress:

*6 Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, And wine to those in bitter distress; (7) let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. - Proverbs 31:6,7 ESV*

The strong drink given to the perishing would ease their pain. Wine given to those in bitter distress would help improve their emotional state.

We see from this that Scripture is not against easing suffering through remedies of various kinds. It also encourages the use of treatments to help the body to heal. Remember, however, that the believer's confidence is not in the remedies and medication but in the Lord who heals.

There is one more final point I want to make in closing. Consider what The Tyndale Bible Dictionary has to say about the contribution of the Hebrews to medicine:

*The most significant contribution the Hebrews gave to medicine was in the hygienic measures outlined in the Law, particularly Lev 11-15. While these had primarily a religious significance, they undoubtedly improved the general level of health and physical well-being of the people.*

*Philip W. Comfort, Ph.D., Walter A. Elwell, Ph.D., "Medicine and Medical Practice," Tyndale Bible Dictionary, Electronic Edition, L A R I D I A N: Cedar Rapids,*

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*Iowa, 2001, Tyndale House Publishers,*  
*Inc.*

The Law of Moses promoted healthy living and lifestyle. God taught His people the kinds of food they should avoid. He encouraged the isolation of the sick and gave them rules of hygiene that prevented the spread of diseases and infections.

What does all this have to teach us? Sickness, disease and ailments ought to bring us to God. In these times, we are to listen carefully to Him. We are to learn what He wants us to understand. Scripture does not discourage physicians and remedies to promote healing and ease pain, but these solutions do not replace our need to seek God in sickness, nor should they keep us from recognizing that the healing we need is from Him. The Bible speaks more about the sick seeking the prayers and counsel of their religious leaders than it does about physicians. This is because God wants us to seek Him in times of need.

As I write this, the world faces a pandemic that has taken millions of lives. We have become focused on how to cure and curtail this virus. While this is as it should be, Scripture teaches us that we also need to seek the Lord and what He is telling us in times such as these. I suspect that there are many lessons God is teaching us. Are we ready to listen? He has allowed our lives to be disrupted. He has challenged us to step out in new ways and re-examine our priorities. The one thing worse than going through a pandemic is coming out the other end the same. We must allow God to refine us through it. He will do so if we trust in Him.

# Chapter 5 – Community Thinking

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God required that His people demonstrate compassion and concern for one another. The apostle Paul confirms this in his words to the Philippians:

*(3) Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (4) Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (5) Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, (6) who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, (7) but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. - Philippians 2:3-7 ESV*

According to the apostle Paul, it was the responsibility of every believer to consider others as “more significant” than themselves. That is not to say that we should see ourselves as insignificant or of no value. Paul is simply telling the Philippians that they needed to look out for the interests of those around them. They were to follow the example of Jesus Christ, who willingly emptied Himself and became a servant.

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It is easy for us to become so focused on ourselves and our interests. We push ahead with little concern for others. We become so focused on achieving our personal goals that we step on people to get where we want to be. Paul reminds us that God expects us to consider others when making our decisions. Many of life's problems originate with people who do not consider the impact of their choices on friends and neighbours.

In Romans 14, the apostle Paul addressed a difference of opinion among believers over food and the celebration of holy days. He ended this discussion with the following words:

*(13) Therefore let us not pass judgment  
on one another any longer, but rather  
decide never to put a stumbling block or  
hindrance in the way of a brother. -  
Romans 14:13 ESV*

According to Paul, the Romans were to allow differences on minor matters and commit themselves never to do anything that would cause a brother or sister to stumble in their faith. We obey this principle when we consider the view of our brother or sister when making our decisions. In other words, we must ask ourselves how our choices and actions will impact others?

Listen to what Paul told the Corinthians:

*(31) So, whether you eat or drink, or  
whatever you do, do all to the glory of  
God. (32) Give no offense to Jews or to  
Greeks or to the church of God, (33) just  
as I try to please everyone in everything I  
do, not seeking my own advantage, but*

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*that of many, that they may be saved. - 1*

*Corinthians 10:31-33 ESV*

According to Paul, we are to “try to please everyone in everything we do.” We must understand here that Paul was a people pleaser in the sense that he was governed by what people thought of him. This is not what the apostle is saying here. He is telling the Corinthians that the Lord God expected them not to seek their own advantage above that of others. We are not to climb over people to get what we want. Instead, we must be willing to consider the impact of our actions on those around us. We need to do what will benefit the larger community and not just ourselves.

The apostle demonstrated this principle in his life. Consider how he described his ministry and that of his coworkers in 2 Corinthians 6:

*(3) We put no obstacle in anyone's way,  
so that no fault may be found with our  
ministry, (4) but as servants of God we  
commend ourselves in every way: by great  
endurance, in afflictions, hardships,  
calamities, (5) beatings, imprisonments,  
riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger - 2  
Corinthians 6:3-10 ESV*

Paul ministered in such a way that he put no obstacle in the path of another. The apostle endured hardship, beatings, imprisonment, hunger and sleepless nights so as not to burden those to whom he ministered. He willingly suffered to bring the message of hope to the communities where he worked. He considered the needs of others as more important than his own.

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This concept of community thinking is laid out clearly in the Law of Moses. An Old Testament law that has always intrigued me is found in Deuteronomy 22:8:

*(8) "When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it. - Deuteronomy 22:8 ESV*

The law of Moses included regulations about how an individual could build their home. In Bible times, the flat roof was living space. The problem with a roof was the risk of falling off the edge if someone went too close. The law required a "parapet" or wall around the edge of the building to prevent anyone from falling. Notice that the "guilt of blood" would be brought upon a home if someone fell from their roof and died. The homeowner was to take on the expense of building this wall on his roof as a precautionary measure. He was to do all he could to protect anyone visiting his home from potential harm.

Exodus 21 describes the responsibility of a man whose ox gored someone to death:

*(28) "When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. (29) But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. - Exodus 21:28-29 ESV*

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If the ox killed a man or woman, it was stoned to death, and the meat could not be eaten. If, however, the ox owner knew the animal was violent and left it loose when it killed someone, then both the ox and the owner were to be put to death. The owner was put to death because he did not take the necessary precautions to restrain his violent animal. In this case, he was responsible for his animal's actions.

Exodus 21 explains the requirement of God for the owner of a pit into which someone's animal fell:

*(33) "When a man opens a pit, or when a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, (34) the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his. - Exodus 21:33-34  
ESV*

If a neighbour's animal fell into a pit that was not covered, the pit owner was to pay full price for the animal to his neighbour. He was responsible for this accident because he did not take the precaution of covering it up.

Consider also the law of God in Exodus 21:18-19:

*(18) "When his men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, (19) then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed. - Exodus 21:18-19 ESV*

We have a case here of two men who quarrelled, and one of them hit and wounded the other. As a result, the wounded

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man was confined to bed or had to walk with a staff. The law required that the man who wounded him pay for the loss of his wages until he was completely healed.

The law required that slaves be freed if they lost an eye or tooth because their owner or representative struck them:

*(26) "When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. (27) If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth. - Exodus 21:26-27 ESV*

For the sake of a tooth, the owner would lose a slave. God required that slave owners consider the wellbeing of their workers. They were held responsible for injury

Listen to the law of God concerning a person who injured their neighbour:

*(19) If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, (20) fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. - Leviticus 24:19-20 ESV*

If you broke your neighbour's arm, then the law required that your arm be broken in punishment. If your neighbour lost his eye or tooth, then yours would be pulled out as well.

What does all of this teach us? The Bible obliges us to live lives that take the wellbeing of others into account. Old Testament believers were required to take precautions against potential danger. They were to build a wall around

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their roof, fence in their violent animal, and cover any pit they had dug lest they cause harm to another human being or their animals.

God also expected that His people be responsible for any harm they did to the health or physical wellbeing of another human being. If I caused the loss of a tooth, I would lose my tooth in punishment. If I injured someone so that they lost work, I was responsible for paying their wages until they were well enough to work again.

As believers, we are called to be community thinkers. We are to strive for the ultimate good of our community. As the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians

*(3) We put no obstacle in anyone's way,  
so that no fault may be found with our  
ministry - 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 ESV*

Believers are to lead the way in community concern and wellbeing. We are to take the precautions necessary lest our actions negatively impact the health and wellbeing of those around us.



# Chapter 6 - Respect for Our Physical Bodies

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Writing to Ephesian husbands about marriage, the apostle Paul said:

*(25) Husbands, love your wives, as Christ 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) so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (28) In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (29) For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, (30) because we are members of his body. (31) "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." (32) This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. - Ephesians 5:25-32 ESV*

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While Paul challenged Ephesian men to care for their wives in this passage, the heart of his argument comes in verses 29-30, where he says:

*(29) For no one ever hated his own flesh,  
but nourishes and cherishes it, just as  
Christ does the church, (30) because we  
are members of his body. – Ephesians  
5:29-30 ESV*

There are some key points I would like to underline in these words of Paul.

*“No one ever hated his own flesh”*

I have always been perplexed by this phrase in Scripture. There was a time in my life when I did hate myself and wished I could die. Consider Job, suffering on the ash heap, cursing the day of his birth. Numerous individuals in Scripture just wanted to die. However, what is interesting is that behind each of these complaints and death wishes is a sincere love and desire for physical and emotional well-being. Job agonized because of the pain in his body and longed to be relieved of this terror. The prophets of the Old Testament grieved over the response of the people toward them and longed to be free from rejection. A desire for physical and emotional health drove them to seek relief through death.

I don't know many people who long to inflict their bodies with pain and suffering. When I hit my finger with a hammer, my first reaction is to seek relief from that pain. If I cut my finger with a knife, I want to stop the bleeding. When something is heading directly for my face, my first impulse is to duck and

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avoid it. God has created us with a need to protect ourselves and a desire for wholeness.

*“But nourishes and cherishes it”*

Paul goes on to say that within each of us is a need to nourish and cherish our flesh. When our body is hungry, we seek food. If we are cold, we pursue warmth. When we are tired, we lay down to rest. These tendencies are hard-wired into our makeup. We will go through great efforts to satisfy these physical needs. The word cherish means “to make warm” in Greek. I have a pet cat that seems to be able to find any source of heat he can. When he discovers it, that is where he will lay down and rest. It is in his makeup to seek out comfort. We are like that. We want our bodies to be comfortable and enjoy the good things God has given. God has created us so that we naturally protect, nourish and care for the bodies He has given us.

*“Because we are members of His Body.”*

Paul tells the Ephesian men that they were to care for their wives in the same way. He gives them the example of how Jesus cared for the church.

Paul concludes his argument with the statement: “because we are members of His body.” We nourish and cherish our bodies and those of our partners because we are members of the Body of Christ. In other words, because we belong to the Lord Jesus and our bodies belong to Him, we nourish and protect them for His glory.

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Speaking out against sexual immorality among the Corinthians, the apostle Paul said:

*(15) Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! - 1 Corinthians 6:15 ESV*

Paul reminded the Corinthians that their bodies were members of Jesus Christ. Therefore, they had an obligation to respect these bodies for His sake. In this case, by engaging in sexual activity with a prostitute, they defiled their bodies. As believers, we must keep our bodies pure and undefiled before God.

The apostle told the Corinthians that their bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit:

*(19) Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, (20) for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. - 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 ESV*

These frail bodies house the presence of Jesus Christ. He has chosen to work through these human frames. We dare not defile the temple in which He has chosen to dwell. Paul tells us we are to glorify God in our bodies. In the case described here, the Corinthians were to do this by resisting sexual immorality. There are, however, many other ways in which we can defile our human bodies.

We have examined the dietary laws of the Old Testament. In these laws, the Lord instructed His people to care for their bodies by what they ate. Some creatures could make them

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sick, so they were forbidden to eat them. We honour God in our bodies by eating healthy and keeping them in good condition.

The abuse of food and drink is seen in the Bible as sinful. Consider the law of God for parents of a rebellious son who lived a life of gluttony and drunkenness:

*(20) and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' (21) Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear. - Deuteronomy 21:20-21  
ESV*

Proverbs 28:7 is more specific when it says that the companion of gluttons shames his father:

*(7) The one who keeps the law is a son with understanding, but a companion of gluttons shames his father. - Proverbs 28:7  
ESV*

Excessive eating and drinking are discouraged in the Bible. Moderation was the standard for the believer.

Scriptures also encouraged an active lifestyle. Writing to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul said:

*(6) Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. (7)*

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*For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, - 2 Thessalonians 3:6-7*  
*ESV*

The apostle would go even further to say:

*(10) For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. (11) For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. - 2 Thessalonians 3:10-11*  
*ESV*

The idleness spoken of here is an unwillingness to work and a decision to live off others. Believers are encouraged to provide for their own needs, the needs of our family and their community. Scripture rebukes the sluggard:

*(14) As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed. (15) The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth. -*  
*Proverbs 26:14-15 ESV*

The lazy person is humorously compared to a door that turns back and forth on his bed. He is also compared to a man who puts his hand into a food dish but doesn't have the energy to bring it up to his mouth.

While there is a reference to games and sports in the Bible, these were more part of Greek and Roman culture than Jewish culture. The active lifestyle the Bible describes is not so much a life of sports and recreation as it was of work and godliness. Writing to Timothy, who was at times quite sickly, the apostle Paul would say:

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*(7) Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness;*

*(8) for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. - 1 Timothy 4:7-8*

*ESV*

The apostle recognized the value of physical training, but this was secondary to training to be godly. In his godliness training, Paul disciplined himself as an athlete, keeping his passions and body under control to the service of God:

*(24) Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. (25) Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (26) So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. (27) But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. - 1 Corinthians 9:24-27* *ESV*

The apostle Peter challenged the woman of his day to be less focused on their external appearance and more on the beauty of their spirit:

*(3) Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— (4) but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. - 1 Peter 3:3-4* *ESV*

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Scripture encourages us to eat healthy foods and live an active lifestyle, but the focus is not looking good and competing against our neighbours. Healthy living and lifestyle have more to do with the fact that our bodies are the temple of God, and we take care of them, so they are healthy and strong vessels through which He can work.

There is an interesting passage in Luke 4:9-12. In this passage, the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, telling him to throw himself down from there:

*(9) And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, (10) for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you," (11) and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." (12) And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" - Luke 4:9-12 ESV*

Notice what is happening in this temptation of Jesus. The devil wanted Jesus to risk physically harming His body to prove that God would send His angels to protect Him. He reminded Jesus of Scripture from Psalm 91:11-12 that said that God would protect Him so that his foot would not strike a stone and get hurt.

Notice the response of Jesus to the temptation of Satan: *"It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" - Luke 4:12 ESV*. In other words, Jesus refused to put his body in danger to prove that the Father would protect Him. He had been entrusted with this physical body, and He would not

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endanger it for some fruitless temptation of the devil. It should also be noted that the Lord Jesus, who would not risk harm to his physical body when tempted by the devil, willingly laid it down to be crucified when asked by the Father to do so.

What do these things teach us about God's expectations? The Creator has given us a natural impulse to nourish and cherish these bodies for a reason. They are the temples of His Spirit through which He has chosen to do His work. We must glorify God in and through these mortal frames. Just as Jesus refused to foolishly risk harming His body through the temptation of the devil, we too must be careful to protect and care for the bodies God has given us until He calls us to give them up to Him.

What the application of these principles looks like may differ from one person to another. What is clear is that we are not to recklessly endanger the bodies God has given us but care for them as temples where He dwells and through which He accomplishes His purpose.



# Chapter 7 - Respecting Authorities

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So far in this study, we have examined the teaching of Scripture about sickness and medicine. We have seen how the Bible teaches about self-isolation, face coverings and respect for each other. In times of pandemics, our civil and religious leaders must address many serious questions. The responsibilities of leadership demand that they do all they can to protect society from a life-threatening illness. Decisions made by our leaders sometimes involve sacrifice and require a change of lifestyle. This is not always appreciated. In some cases, there is pushback from those who feel their leaders are going too far. This is a delicate issue to address, but let's examine some basic Biblical principles that may help us determine our response to these restrictions.

## *The Call to Obey Authorities*

The apostle Paul challenged the Romans to be subject to governing authorities. Consider his words in Romans 13:

*(1) Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. (2) Therefore whoever resists the authorities*

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*resists what God has appointed, and those*  
*who resist will incur judgment. (3) For*  
*rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but*  
*to bad. Would you have no fear of the one*  
*who is in authority? Then do what is good,*  
*and you will receive his approval, (4) for*  
*he is God's servant for your good. But if*  
*you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not*  
*bear the sword in vain. For he is the*  
*servant of God, an avenger who carries*  
*out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (5)*  
*Therefore one must be in subjection, not*  
*only to avoid God's wrath but also for the*  
*sake of conscience. - Romans 13:1-5*  
*ESV*

Paul told the Romans that they were to subject themselves to the authority of Rome because God had instituted that authority. Understand that this did not imply that every decision Rome made was godly. Rome put Christians in the arena to be torn apart by lions. Under its rule, Christians were crucified and burned to death for their faith. Despite this, Paul told believers in Rome that they were to do all they could to respect the rules and regulations put into effect by Roman authorities. He went as far as to say that they were to be subject to Rome to avoid God's wrath (verse 5). In other words, God expected believers to obey their political authorities and be model citizens in their community.

Paul gave this advice to Titus, who ministered to the church in Crete:

*(1) Remind them to be submissive to*  
*rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to*  
*be ready for every good work, - Titus 3:1*  
*ESV*

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The apostle encouraged Titus to instruct the church to obey their rulers. Being a Christian under the authority of Christ did not remove their obligation to obey civil powers.

The apostle Peter held the same position. Listen to his counsel to believers in his first epistle:

*(13) Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, (14) or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. (15) For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. (16) Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. (17) Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.- 1 Peter 2:13-17 ESV*

Peter taught his readers that they were to be subject to every human institution "for the Lord's sake." These institutions included the Roman emperor or his governors (verse 13,14). Christians were not to give anyone cause to blaspheme the Lord because of their civil disobedience. Instead, they were to honour those in positions of authority by their obedience and service as Christian citizens.

Peter would go even further than this and challenge servants to be subject to their masters even if they were unjust:

*(18) Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. - 1 Peter 2:18  
ESV*

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As important as it was to pursue justice, servants were to consider respect for their masters as more important than pursuing their personal interests. Of course, Jesus is a perfect example of this. He was unjustly accused and crucified but submitted to this for our sake.

Consider what took place as Jesus stood before governor Pilate:

*(8) When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. (9) He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. (10) So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" (11) Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." - John 19:8-11 ESV*

These words of Jesus are important. Jesus refused to defend Himself before Pilate. When Pilate reminded Him that he had the authority to crucify Him, Jesus told him that this authority came from His heavenly Father. As Jesus stood before this earthly governor, He did not demand His rights. He did not demand justice. Instead, He submitted to the decision of Pilate and trusted His Father to accomplish His purpose through it.

Because of their disobedience, God determined to punish His people in the days of Jeremiah. He called the prophet to announce His judgement. Listen to the words God gave Jeremiah to speak to His people in that day:

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*(5) "It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. (6) Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. (7) All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes. Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave. (8) " "But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, declares the LORD, until I have consumed it by his hand. - Jeremiah 27:5-8 ESV*

God told His people that He had given their land to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. He declared him to be His servant and demanded that all nations serve him. Any country refusing to do so would be punished by sword, famine, and pestilence.

Jeremiah's message from the Lord would not have been easy for the people of God to hear. It required giving up their homes and being driven into exile. It meant submitting to a ruthless king who, at this point, did not know the Lord God of Israel. Israel would suffer greatly under his authority, but God demanded their submission to him.

Daniel declares that it is God who sets up and removes kings:

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*(21) He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; - Daniel 2:21 ESV*

If God sets up and removes kings, we need to be cautious about our response to them. To disrespect what God has ordained is to sin before God. The law of the Old Testament required respect for those in authority, even demanding the death penalty for those who disobeyed the priest God had placed over them:

*(12) The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. - Deuteronomy 17:12 ESV*

Sodom and Gomorrah have become known as evil cities that God destroyed in the days of Abraham. Listen to how Jude describes them and their sin:

*(7) just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.  
(8) Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. - Jude 7-8 ESV*

Notice the sins listed here. Sodom and Gomorrah indulged in sexual immorality, rejected authority, and blasphemed the glorious ones. Sexual immorality, blasphemy and rejection of

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authority were the causes of Sodom and Gomorrah's downfall.

We see from these verses that the Lord expects us to be submissive to the authorities that He has placed over us. As believers, we are to be model citizens, walking in obedience to the laws of the land and giving no cause for the unbeliever to blaspheme the name of our God. We are to do so even if this requires suffering and a sacrifice of our rights and comforts.

### *The Obligation of Civil Disobedience*

The general principle taught in Scripture is that believers must be subject to civil authorities, pay their taxes and obey their regulations. Because these authorities do not know the Lord, there will be times their laws and requirements force the believer to choose between them and God. Sometimes ungodly civil leaders demand disobedience to the greater authority of heaven. This was the case in Acts 5. Here the religious authorities in Jerusalem demanded that the apostles stop teaching in the name of Jesus. Listen to the response of Peter to this requirement:

*(27) And when they had brought them,  
they set them before the council. And the  
high priest questioned them, (28) saying,  
"We strictly charged you not to teach in  
this name, yet here you have filled  
Jerusalem with your teaching, and you  
intend to bring this man's blood upon us."  
(29) But Peter and the apostles answered,  
"We must obey God rather than men. -  
Acts 5:27-29 ESV*

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Peter boldly told the authorities that they were obligated to obey God rather than man. In other words, they chose not to submit to the restriction of these religious leaders and would continue to preach in the name of Jesus and declare Him to be the Christ.

This was not the first time the apostles had to choose civil disobedience. In Acts 4, when they were told not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus, Peter and John declared:

*(19) But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, (20) for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." - Acts 4:19-20 ESV*

For these apostles, there was a higher authority. While God obliged them to obey their civil government, there was an exception to that principle. When civil authorities demanded disobedience to God, His people were to resist.

We have examples of this in the Old Testament. Consider the children of Israel in Egypt. Fearing the increasing population of slaves, Pharaoh told the Hebrew midwives to kill every male child born to a Hebrew woman. Notice the response of the midwives to this command of Pharaoh

*(17) But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. (18) So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" (19) The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the*

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*Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." (20) So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. (21) And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. - Exodus 1:17-21 ESV*

The midwives refused to murder the male infants of Israel. They willingly disregarded the direct command of Pharaoh because they "feared God." The result was that "God dealt well with the midwives" (verse 20). God blessed their civil disobedience because they chose to walk in His purpose rather than obey the sinful command of Pharaoh.

The writer to the Hebrews identified Moses' parents as a people of faith when they hid their son from the king and his men who sought to kill every male Hebrew child in the land.

*(23) By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. - Hebrews 11:23 ESV*

These parents were determined to protect their child against the evil wishes of Pharaoh. They did so by faith in God and His greater purpose.

We have another example of this in the days of Daniel and his friends in Babylon. On one occasion, King Nebuchadnezzar built an idol and demanded that all his people bow down and worship it. Daniel's friends refused to obey the command of God and were thrown into a fiery furnace. Before being cast into that furnace, they declared:

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*(16) Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. (17) If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. (18) But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." - Daniel 3:16-18 ESV*

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego boldly stood against the command of Nebuchadnezzar to worship the golden image. They chose to face the king's wrath rather than disobey the direct command of God. We know the result of this decision. God protected them in the fiery furnace, and they escaped unharmed. They were blessed because they chose to obey God rather than the ungodly requirement of the king.

Daniel did the same thing when the king signed a document requiring that no one pray or petition any other god other than him for thirty days. Notice the response of Daniel to this official declaration of King Darius:

*(10) When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. (11) Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and plea before his God. - Daniel 6:7-11 ESV*

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For his disobedience to the king's declaration, Daniel was thrown into a den of lions. God protected him because he chose to walk faithfully.

Finally, Revelation 14 speaks of a time when evil will abound on the earth, and believers will need to reject the requirements of pagan civil government. In those days, authorities will demand that everyone worship the beast and receive its mark on their forehead or hand. The Bible tells us that believers will need to choose between listening to the government's demand and obeying the commandments of God. The curse of God will fall on all who choose to worship the beast and receive its mark:

*(9) And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, (10) he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. (11) And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." (12) Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. - Revelation 14:9-12 ESV*

While it is not my purpose in this chapter to discuss the "mark of the beast," what is important for us to notice is that we have a command of God for believers to reject this evil civil

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authority. In this case, we must be ready to suffer the consequences of civil disobedience.

As a general principle, the Word of God teaches that we are to be respectful citizens of our land, following the requirements of civil government and giving no one cause to blaspheme the name of God because of our testimony. We are to respect the authorities God has put in place and be willing to suffer hardship, limitations and restrictions. This is the admonition of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians:

*(3) We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, (4) but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, (5) beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; (6) by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; (7) by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; (8) through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; - 2 Corinthians 6:3-8 ESV*

He counsels Timothy to fulfil his ministry despite the hardship and suffering he endured:

*(5) As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. - 2 Timothy 4:5 ESV*

Scripture tells us that we will face hardship and restrictions as believers. Like many believers worldwide, we willingly join in

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suffering for the Lord Jesus. We will endure injustice and struggle and walk obediently just as our Lord did for us.

However, there comes a time when we are no longer dealing with hardships and limitations. Sometimes the regulations of civil authorities place us in opposition to the direct command of God. In these matters, we will choose to obey God rather than man. The challenge is distinguishing between hardship and disobedience to a direct command of Scripture.



# Chapter 8 – Traditions and the Law's True Intention

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There is an interesting interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark 7. The discussion related to the tradition of washing hands before eating. The practice was a good one and would certainly have helped curtail the spreading of germs and disease. As the scene unfolds, however, the Scribes and Pharisees noticed that Jesus' disciples ate without first washing their hands. While we should not read too much into this, it is clear that these disciples were not overly worried about this tradition. The Scribes and Pharisees, however, were quite concerned and brought the matter to Jesus:

*(5) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" - Mark 7:5 ESV*

Listen to the response Jesus gave:

*(6) And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but*

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*their heart is far from me; (7) in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ (8) You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” - Mark 7:6-8 ESV*

Notice three details in Jesus’ response to these religious leaders.

First, He accused them of being hypocrites by telling them that they honoured God with their lips but not their hearts. Second, He said that their worship and traditions were vain. Finally, Jesus reprimanded them for disobeying the command of God to follow the rules of men.

Jesus explained this in Matthew 15 when He said:

*3 He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ 5 But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” 6 he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. – Matthew 15:3-6*

Instead of supporting their parents, these religious leaders would give a gift to the temple. People noticed their generosity when they donated to the temple. However, they were merely doing their duty by using their funds to support their parents. They justified their neglect of parents by saying that they were giving their time and money to God. Jesus saw the hypocrisy

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of those who so diligently observed the letter of the Law but neglected its intention. Speaking in Matthew 23:23, He says:

*(23) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. - Matthew 23:23 ESV*

Jesus does not condemn the practice of tithing here but shows the Pharisees that justice, mercy, and faithfulness was its true intention.

I have often been intrigued by a story in Genesis 34. In this passage, we read about Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah. On this occasion, Dinah went out to visit the "women of the land." While she was out with her friends, she met a young man named Shechem. Things got out of hand, and Shechem raped her (Genesis 34:2). The young man decided to marry Dinah, but her Israelite family would only consent to marriage if all the men in his city were circumcised. The men agreed to this, but on the third day after their circumcision, Dinah's brothers took their swords and slaughtered them while they were still sore from their procedure.

*(25) On the third day, when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males. (26) They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away. (27) The sons of Jacob came upon the slain*

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*and plundered the city, because they had*  
*defiled their sister. (28) They took their*  
*flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and*  
*whatever was in the city and in the field.*  
*(29) All their wealth, all their little ones and*  
*their wives, all that was in the houses, they*  
*captured and plundered. – Genesis 34:25-*  
*29 ESV*

When their father Jacob rebuked them for what they had done, their response was: “Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?” (Genesis 34:31).

Consider what is happening here. Because Dinah was raped, her brothers killed every male, looted their flocks, herds and plundered their city. They also captured all their children and wives. Admittedly, the rape of Dinah was a horrendous crime but was the action of Jacob’s sons less horrific? We are left wondering which crime was worse –the rape of Dinah and Shechem’s desire to marry her or the slaughter and destruction of the entire city. To add to this is how Jacob’s brothers justified their actions by saying: “Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?” I cannot read this passage without seeing a picture of Jacob’s sons patting themselves on the back for being so righteous. There can be no doubt that horrible things have happened in the name of God by those who sincerely believed they were defending the truth.

One day the disciples of Jesus asked Him about the law of divorce in the Old Testament:

*(7) They said to him, “Why then did Moses*  
*command one to give a certificate of*  
*divorce and to send her away?” - Matthew*  
*19:7 ESV*

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The disciples quoted the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1 here in this question to Jesus.

The answer of Jesus is quite revealing:

*(8) He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. - Matthew 19:8 ESV*

Jesus told the disciples that Moses permitted divorce to avoid an even greater injustice. In other words, to remain married to an individual with a hard heart would create such hardship and evil that it was better to break the covenant between the husband and wife rather than suffer the injustice and sin that resulted from remaining in the marriage.

When asked if it was lawful to heal an individual on the Sabbath, Jesus replied:

*(10) And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"— so that they might accuse him. (11) He said to them, "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? (12) Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." - Matthew 12:10-12 ESV*

While the law of the Sabbath was quite strict, Jesus told the religious leaders that they had to be discerning in its application. He illustrated this by reminding them that if an animal fell into a pit on the Sabbath, the merciful thing to do was to break the law and rescue the animal.

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Consider also the instructions of Jesus about bringing an offering to God:

*(23) So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, (24) leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. - Matthew 5:23-24 ESV*

Bringing an offering to the Lord was required under the Law of Moses. However, there were some conditions where the giver was to refrain from doing so. One of those times was when the offerer had a broken relationship with someone else. It was preferable to make amends with one's brother or sister than to bring an offering to God.

Consider the words of Paul to the Colossians who lived according to a strict set of religious regulations:

*(20) If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— (21) “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (22) (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? (23) These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. - Colossians 2:20-23 ESV*

Paul challenged the Colossians regarding their many rules for spiritual living – “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.”

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He tells them that while these many regulations had an appearance of wisdom, they promoted a “self-made religion” that did nothing to change the heart.

The Lord Jesus criticized the Pharisees more than any other group in the New Testament. Listen to His rebuke in Matthew 23:27-28:

*(27) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. (28) So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. - Matthew 23:27-28 ESV*

God is more concerned about the heart than He is the outward actions. Those whose hearts were not in tune with their external actions were called hypocrites.

One of the great concerns of the Apostle Paul for the Galatians was that their faith had become more about rules and regulations than it was about Christ and His wonderful grace and forgiveness. Writing to them in Galatians 4, the apostle says:

*10 You observe days and months and seasons and years! 11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. - Galatians 4:10-11 ESV*

The concern of the Galatian church for the celebration of days, months, seasons and years upset Paul. To him, they had reduced their faith to a set of traditions and rituals, but it was not about a relationship with the Lord Jesus.

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There are several principles we need to learn from these Scriptures. First, we are reminded that when the law collides with justice and compassion, we are to err on the side of compassion and justice. Who among us would not willingly break the speed limit to get a dying friend to the hospital in time to save their life? Who among us would not skip church when an emergency arose in our family? Would it not be calloused and cruel to leave the sheep in the pit on the Sabbath when we could ease its suffering on that holy day? There are times when our rigid application of the law makes us guilty of sin. We must consider the “weightier” matters in our application of the law.

The second principle we need to learn from these Scriptures is that the New Testament distinguishes between the “traditions of men” and the commands of Scripture. It is very easy to get these confused. Consider the words of the writer to the Hebrews in Hebrews 10:

*(24) And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, (25) not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. - Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV*

The challenge here is for the body of Christ to stir up its members to love and good works. It did this by meeting together for encouragement. The verse is often used to challenge people to attend church on Sunday morning. However, this does great injustice to the context. According to the passage, the goal of meeting together is to stir up one another to love and good works. I have been in many church services, however, where God’s people gathered, went through a series of traditions and the only conversations that

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took place were about the recent sports scores and the weather. While we went through the motions and did what was expected, no one was stirred to love and good works, nor was anyone encouraged.

Early believers did not have church buildings. We have references to them gathering beside a river in Acts 16:13. Early converts from Judaism would meet in the temple court, but there came a time when they were no longer welcome in these facilities, and they were forced to meet in smaller home groups. Occasionally, when there was the need for a larger facility, believers used halls or buildings with larger capacity. We have evidence in Acts 12 that believers worshiped behind locked doors for fear of persecution (see Acts 12:12-16).

What gathering together looks like will vary from country to country and from situation to situation. It may be a couple of believers gathering together for prayer and study of Scripture. I remember when a fellow pastor would phone me in the morning to pray together. The times when I have been able to stir a brother or sister to love and good works have more often than not been in a one-on-one conversation about spiritual matters at a coffee shop. There have been emails or phone calls that have stimulated me in my walk with God. Hebrews 10:24-25 is not just about going to church but about taking every opportunity to encourage and support each other in the spiritual life. Join together with fellow believers for encouragement and edification. When a brother or sister is struggling, pick up the phone or send them a word of encouragement. Drop in to see them and pray with them. Support them in their pain. Going to church may or may not be where this will happen. What is important is that no brother or sister be abandoned but know they are loved and supported by the larger body of Christ.

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I use this illustration because it is so easy for us to assume that we have done our duty if we have gone to church on Sunday morning. This practice is wonderful, but we can keep the tradition and fall short of the intention of God for assembling.

Finally, these verses challenge us to carefully examine what we are fighting for as believers. We can have full churches empty of spirituality. Like the Pharisees, we can observe the traditions but be like whitewashed tombs, clean outside but full of dead bones and rotten inside. Sometimes the Lord will strip us of the privilege of bringing our offerings and songs to help us understand His priorities. Consider the words of God through the prophet Amos:

*(22) Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. (23) Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. (24) But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. - Amos 5:22-24*  
ESV

The one thing worse than God stripping away Israel's privilege of bringing her offerings and songs of worship was her refusing to learn what He wanted to show them about justice and righteousness. May God give us the grace to hear Him. May our traditions and rules not silence His voice in our hearts. May our traditional application of the law not strip it of its true intent Chapter 8 – Traditions and the Law's True Intention

### *Traditions and the Law's True Intention*

There is an interesting interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark 7. The discussion related to the tradition of washing hands before eating. The practice was a good one and would certainly have helped curtail the spreading of germs and disease. As the scene unfolds, however, the Scribes and Pharisees noticed that Jesus' disciples ate without first washing their hands. While we should not read too much into this, it is clear that these disciples were not overly worried about this tradition. The Scribes and Pharisees, however, were quite concerned and brought the matter to Jesus:

*(5) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" - Mark 7:5 ESV*

Listen to the response Jesus gave:

*(6) And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; (7) in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' (8) You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." - Mark 7:6-8 ESV*

Notice three details in Jesus' response to these religious leaders.

First, He accused them of being hypocrites by telling them that they honoured God with their lips but not their hearts. Second, He said that their worship and traditions were vain.

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Finally, Jesus reprimanded them for disobeying the command of God to follow the rules of men.

Jesus explained this in Matthew 15 when He said:

*3 He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 5 But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," 6 he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. – Matthew 15:3-6*

Instead of supporting their parents, these religious leaders would give a gift to the temple. People noticed their generosity when they donated to the temple. However, they were merely doing their duty by using their funds to support their parents. They justified their neglect of parents by saying that they were giving their time and money to God. Jesus saw the hypocrisy of those who so diligently observed the letter of the Law but neglected its intention. Speaking in Matthew 23:23, He says:

*(23) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. - Matthew 23:23 ESV*

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Jesus does not condemn the practice of tithing here but shows the Pharisees that justice, mercy, and faithfulness was its true intention.

I have often been intrigued by a story in Genesis 34. In this passage, we read about Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah. On this occasion, Dinah went out to visit the “women of the land.” While she was out with her friends, she met a young man named Shechem. Things got out of hand, and Shechem raped her (Genesis 34:2). The young man decided to marry Dinah, but her Israelite family would only consent to marriage if all the men in his city were circumcised. The men agreed to this, but on the third day after their circumcision, Dinah’s brothers took their swords and slaughtered them while they were still sore from their procedure.

*(25) On the third day, when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males. (26) They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword and took Dinah out of Shechem’s house and went away. (27) The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister. (28) They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. (29) All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and plundered. – Genesis 34:25-29 ESV*

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When their father Jacob rebuked them for what they had done, their response was: "Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?" (Genesis 34:31).

Consider what is happening here. Because Dinah was raped, her brothers killed every male, looted their flocks, herds and plundered their city. They also captured all their children and wives. Admittedly, the rape of Dinah was a horrendous crime but was the action of Jacob's sons less horrific? We are left wondering which crime was worse –the rape of Dinah and Shechem's desire to marry her or the slaughter and destruction of the entire city. To add to this is how Jacob's brothers justified their actions by saying: "Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?" I cannot read this passage without seeing a picture of Jacob's sons patting themselves on the back for being so righteous. There can be no doubt that horrible things have happened in the name of God by those who sincerely believed they were defending the truth.

One day the disciples of Jesus asked Him about the law of divorce in the Old Testament:

*(7) They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" - Matthew 19:7 ESV*

The disciples quoted the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1 here in this question to Jesus.

The answer of Jesus is quite revealing:

*(8) He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. - Matthew 19:8 ESV*

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Jesus told the disciples that Moses permitted divorce to avoid an even greater injustice. In other words, to remain married to an individual with a hard heart would create such hardship and evil that it was better to break the covenant between the husband and wife rather than suffer the injustice and sin that resulted from remaining in the marriage.

When asked if it was lawful to heal an individual on the Sabbath, Jesus replied:

*(10) And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"— so that they might accuse him. (11) He said to them, "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? (12) Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." -*

*Matthew 12:10-12 ESV*

While the law of the Sabbath was quite strict, Jesus told the religious leaders that they had to be discerning in its application. He illustrated this by reminding them that if an animal fell into a pit on the Sabbath, the merciful thing to do was to break the law and rescue the animal.

Consider also the instructions of Jesus about bringing an offering to God:

*(23) So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, (24) leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. - Matthew 5:23-*

*24 ESV*

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Bringing an offering to the Lord was required under the Law of Moses. However, there were some conditions where the giver was to refrain from doing so. One of those times was when the offerer had a broken relationship with someone else. It was preferable to make amends with one's brother or sister than to bring an offering to God.

Consider the words of Paul to the Colossians who lived according to a strict set of religious regulations:

*(20) If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— (21) “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (22) (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? (23) These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. - Colossians 2:20-23 ESV*

Paul challenged the Colossians regarding their many rules for spiritual living – “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.” He tells them that while these many regulations had an appearance of wisdom, they promoted a “self-made religion” that did nothing to change the heart.

The Lord Jesus criticized the Pharisees more than any other group in the New Testament. Listen to His rebuke in Matthew 23:27-28:

*(27) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed*

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*tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful,*  
*but within are full of dead people's bones*  
*and all uncleanness. (28) So you also*  
*outwardly appear righteous to others, but*  
*within you are full of hypocrisy and*  
*lawlessness. - Matthew 23:27-28 ESV*

God is more concerned about the heart than He is the outward actions. Those whose hearts were not in tune with their external actions were called hypocrites.

One of the great concerns of the Apostle Paul for the Galatians was that their faith had become more about rules and regulations than it was about Christ and His wonderful grace and forgiveness. Writing to them in Galatians 4, the apostle says:

*10 You observe days and months and*  
*seasons and years! 11 I am afraid I may*  
*have labored over you in vain. - Galatians*  
*4:10-11 ESV*

The concern of the Galatian church for the celebration of days, months, seasons and years upset Paul. To him, they had reduced their faith to a set of traditions and rituals, but it was not about a relationship with the Lord Jesus.

There are several principles we need to learn from these Scriptures. First, we are reminded that when the law collides with justice and compassion, we are to err on the side of compassion and justice. Who among us would not willingly break the speed limit to get a dying friend to the hospital in time to save their life? Who among us would not skip church when an emergency arose in our family? Would it not be calloused and cruel to leave the sheep in the pit on the Sabbath when we could ease its suffering on that holy day?

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There are times when our rigid application of the law makes us guilty of sin. We must consider the “weightier” matters in our application of the law.

The second principle we need to learn from these Scriptures is that the New Testament distinguishes between the “traditions of men” and the commands of Scripture. It is very easy to get these confused. Consider the words of the writer to the Hebrews in Hebrews 10:

*(24) And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, (25) not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. - Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV*

The challenge here is for the body of Christ to stir up its members to love and good works. It did this by meeting together for encouragement. The verse is often used to challenge people to attend church on Sunday morning. However, this does great injustice to the context. According to the passage, the goal of meeting together is to stir up one another to love and good works. I have been in many church services, however, where God’s people gathered, went through a series of traditions and the only conversations that took place were about the recent sports scores and the weather. While we went through the motions and did what was expected, no one was stirred to love and good works, nor was anyone encouraged.

Early believers did not have church buildings. We have references to them gathering beside a river in Acts 16:13. Early converts from Judaism would meet in the temple court, but there came a time when they were no longer welcome in these facilities, and they were forced to meet in smaller home

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groups. Occasionally, when there was the need for a larger facility, believers used halls or buildings with larger capacity. We have evidence in Acts 12 that believers worshiped behind locked doors for fear of persecution (see Acts 12:12-16).

What gathering together looks like will vary from country to country and from situation to situation. It may be a couple of believers gathering together for prayer and study of Scripture. I remember when a fellow pastor would phone me in the morning to pray together. The times when I have been able to stir a brother or sister to love and good works have more often than not been in a one-on-one conversation about spiritual matters at a coffee shop. There have been emails or phone calls that have stimulated me in my walk with God. Hebrews 10:24-25 is not just about going to church but about taking every opportunity to encourage and support each other in the spiritual life. Join together with fellow believers for encouragement and edification. When a brother or sister is struggling, pick up the phone or send them a word of encouragement. Drop in to see them and pray with them. Support them in their pain. Going to church may or may not be where this will happen. What is important is that no brother or sister be abandoned but know they are loved and supported by the larger body of Christ.

I use this illustration because it is so easy for us to assume that we have done our duty if we have gone to church on Sunday morning. This practice is wonderful, but we can keep the tradition and fall short of the intention of God for assembling.

Finally, these verses challenge us to carefully examine what we are fighting for as believers. We can have full churches empty of spirituality. Like the Pharisees, we can observe the traditions but be like whitewashed tombs, clean outside but

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full of dead bones and rotten inside. Sometimes the Lord will strip us of the privilege of bringing our offerings and songs to help us understand His priorities. Consider the words of God through the prophet Amos:

*(22) Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. (23) Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. (24) But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. - Amos 5:22-24*  
ESV

The one thing worse than God stripping away Israel's privilege of bringing her offerings and songs of worship was her refusing to learn what He wanted to show them about justice and righteousness. May God give us the grace to hear Him. May our traditions and rules not silence His voice in our hearts. May our traditional application of the law not strip it of its true intent.

# Chapter 9 – Freedom of Religion

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One of the great cries of our age is for the freedom to make our own choices and practice the faith of our choosing. We do not do well with people telling us what to do, whether it be an employer demanding a vaccination or the government limiting what we can or cannot do at a church service or social gathering.

We have examined what Scripture teaches about our obligation toward the authorities God has put in place. In this chapter, I want to explore what the Bible tells about the freedom we fight so hard to maintain.

Let's begin with the first book of the Bible. Consider the words of the Lord to Eve after she ate from the forbidden tree:

*(16) To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you." - Genesis 3:16 ESV*

These are the words of the Lord God to Eve after her fall into sin. God told her that her natural desire would be contrary to her husband, but he would rule over her. The implication is

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that she would have to submit willingly or unwillingly to another human being. She would not be free to do as she pleased. A measure of freedom is stripped from Eve because of her fall into sin.

It would be easy to say that this "ruling over," because it was the result of the Fall, was not God's original intention. Consider, however, the words of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians:

*(23) For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. (24) Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. - Ephesians 5:23-24*  
ESV

The apostle encouraged women to live in submission to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. Now I know that these verses are not easy to accept in our day, but the point I want to make is that God has established an order. That order naturally strips away some of our freedom. As long as we are under authority, we do not have complete freedom to do as we please.

Consider also the words of the Lord God to His people in Leviticus 26:

*(14) "But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, (15) if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, (16) then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting*

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*disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. (17) I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down before your enemies. Those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when none pursues you. - Leviticus 26:14-17*

*ESV*

Notice what the Lord told His people here. If they refused to obey His commandments and submit to His authority, He would set His face against them, and their enemies would rule over them. God would strip away their freedom, and foreigners would tell them what they could and could not do.

We do not get far into the Old Testament before we read the chilling prophetic word of the Lord God to Abram:

*(12) As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. (13) Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. - Genesis*

*15:12-13 ESV*

The Lord told Abram that the nation born to him would become servants (or slaves) in a land not their own. They would remain in bondage and be afflicted for four hundred years. Joseph's brothers went to Egypt not many years after this prophecy. There they remained in fulfillment of the Lord's word for four hundred agonizing years as slaves to Pharaoh and his cause.

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Israel's freedom to practise her religion was stripped from them in their time of Egyptian bondage. This is evident when Moses pleaded with Pharaoh to let them take a three-day journey away from Egypt to offer sacrifices to the Lord God:

*(26) But Moses said, "It would not be right to do so, for the offerings we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God are an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us? (27) We must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as he tells us."*  
- Exodus 8:26-27 ESV

Notice how Moses told Pharaoh that if the Egyptians saw Israel's sacrifices, they would stone them. The implication here is that Israel did not have the freedom to practise its sacrifices in Egypt.

I do not pretend to understand the purpose of God in this four-hundred-year bondage with no freedom to practice their religion. What we need to see, however, is that God allowed His people's freedom to be taken from them to accomplish a greater purpose.

This was not the only time God stripped His people of their freedom. The book of Judges recounts a time when Israel was brought so low by the Midianites that they fled their homes to live in mountain dens and caves:

*(2) And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. (3) For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East*

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*would come up against them. (4) They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. (5) For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in. (6) And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the LORD. - Judges 6:2-6 ESV*

A whole book in the Old Testament is devoted to the story of Job, who had every material blessing he could ever have wanted. God stripped Him of this and left him bound to an ash heap in absolute pain and despair. The struggle of Job throughout the entire book relates to why God would take away the freedom and prosperity of a righteous man. The book would be easier to understand if Job was a sinful man who disobeyed the commands of God, but this was not the case. Of all the people on earth, he was one of the most righteous and faithful to God.

Consider the words of God through Amos:

*(20) Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? (21) "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. (22) Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. (23) Take away*

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*from me the noise of your songs; to the*  
*melody of your harps I will not listen. -*  
*Amos 5:20-23 ESV*

"Take away from me the noise of your songs. "I will not listen," God said. He calls for His people's worship to be taken away. It was only a stench to His nostrils.

As the Old Testament closes, we read about the judgement of God upon a people who had turned their backs on Him. The Assyrians and the Babylonians invaded Israel and Judah and took them into captivity. Jeremiah prophesied that this humbling event was coming:

*(4) For thus says the LORD: Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall strike them down with the sword. (5) Moreover, I will give all the wealth of the city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hand of their enemies, who shall plunder them and seize them and carry them to Babylon. -*  
*Jeremiah 20:4-5 ESV*

According to Jeremiah, Babylon would kill many Jews, strip them of their wealth and lead them into captivity. When other prophets rebuked Jeremiah for his words, Jeremiah insisted that this was indeed the purpose of the Lord for His people. They would lose their land and freedom and be held in bondage to a foreign nation.

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*(8) "Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, (9) behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the LORD, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. (10) Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. (11) This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. - Jeremiah 25:8-11 ESV*

Jeremiah told his people that it was the will of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar banish Judah from her land and hold her in captivity for seventy years.

This prophecy did not go well for Jeremiah. The religious and political officials of his day wanted to kill him because he preached about the loss of their land and freedom (see Jeremiah 38:1-4). They even banished him from worshipping in the temple:

*(5) And Jeremiah ordered Baruch, saying, "I am banned from going to the house of the LORD, (6) so you are to go, and on a day of fasting in the hearing of all the people in the LORD's house you shall read the words of the LORD from the scroll that you have written at my dictation. You shall*

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*read them also in the hearing of all the*  
*men of Judah who come out of their cities.*  
*- Jeremiah 36:5-6 ESV*

Because he was stripped of his right to go to the temple, Jeremiah was forced to find an alternative way to communicate the message God had given him. He did so through his secretary Baruch, sending him with a written prophecy to read to the people. If Jeremiah were alive today, he would have used whatever tools he had at his disposal to convey that message. Though no longer permitted to go to the temple, Jeremiah continued to preach the word by whatever means God made available to him.

Just as Jeremiah had prophesied, the temple was burned, and God's people were taken into captivity. While Jeremiah's message of submission to the loss of freedom was not well received, it proved to be from the Lord. The Old Testament shows us that freedom to do what we want or freedom of religion is not guaranteed in this sinful world. Unbelievers stripped Israel of her freedom. Sometimes, God took away her privileges to teach them important lessons.

Let's move now to the teaching of Jesus and the experience of the apostles in the New Testament. Consider first the words of Christ in Matthew 10:

*(16) "Behold, I am sending you out as*  
*sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise*  
*as serpents and innocent as doves. (17)*  
*Beware of men, for they will deliver you*  
*over to courts and flog you in their*  
*synagogues, (18) and you will be*  
*dragged before governors and kings for*  
*my sake, to bear witness before them and*  
*the Gentiles. - Matthew 10:16-18 ESV*

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Jesus told His disciples that He was sending them out like sheep to wolves. The people of their day would not accept them. In some cases, they would react violently towards them, flogging and dragging them before governors and kings for His sake. Jesus warned His followers that they would be persecuted and hated because of Him:

*(19) If you were of the world, the world would love you as 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 servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. - John 15:19-20  
ESV*

Our Lord challenged His followers to always be on guard because they never knew where their persecution would arise:

*(9) "But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. (10) And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. (11) And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. (12) And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have*

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*them put to death. (13) And you will be*  
*hated by all for my name's sake. But the*  
*one who endures to the end will be saved.*  
*- Mark 13:9-13 ESV*

The life of Jesus was an illustration of the principles He taught. Consider what took place in John 8:

*(56) Your father Abraham rejoiced that he*  
*would see my day. He saw it and was*  
*glad." (57) So the Jews said to him, "You*  
*are not yet fifty years old, and have you*  
*seen Abraham?" (58) Jesus said to them,*  
*"Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham*  
*was, I am." (59) So they picked up stones*  
*to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and*  
*went out of the temple. - John 8:56-59*  
*ESV*

Here in these verses, Jesus was driven out of the temple by people who picked up stones to stone him to death. He no longer had the freedom to worship with the religious people in the temple, for they sought to kill him for what He believed. These very people would ultimately succeed in crucifying Him. Jesus was driven out of the temple. He preached with a death sentence over His head. He warned those who followed Him that the world would do the same to them. Should we think it strange that we should, like Jesus, be driven from our places of worship and persecuted? Listen to the words of Jesus in John 16:

*(1) "I have said all these things to you to*  
*keep you from falling away. (2) They will*  
*put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the*  
*hour is coming when whoever kills you will*  
*think he is offering service to God. (3) And*

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*they will do these things because they  
have not known the Father, nor me. - John  
16:1-3 ESV*

What was the experience of the apostles who went in the name of Jesus to preach the Gospel? Acts 4 recounts how the officials of the day banned the apostles from preaching in the name of Jesus:

*(17) But in order that it may spread no  
further among the people, let us warn  
them to speak no more to anyone in this  
name." (18) So they called them and  
charged them not to speak or teach at all  
in the name of Jesus. - Acts 4:17-18 ESV*

The religious authorities forbade the apostles to preach in the name of Jesus. When they continued to do so, they were thrown in prison.

*(14) And more than ever believers were  
added to the Lord, multitudes of both men  
and women, (15) so that they even  
carried out the sick into the streets and  
laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter  
came by at least his shadow might fall on  
some of them. (16) The people also  
gathered from the towns around  
Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those  
afflicted with unclean spirits, and they  
were all healed. (17) But the high priest  
rose up, and all who were with him (that is,  
the party of the Sadducees), and filled with  
jealousy (18) they arrested the apostles  
and put them in the public prison. - Acts  
5:14-18 ESV*

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Like their Saviour, the apostles preached the Gospel with a threat of death hanging over their heads. They did not have government-sanctioned freedom of religion, but they continued to serve the Lord and walk in obedience.

The apostles taught that all believers should expect persecution if they walk in faithful obedience.

*(29) For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, (30) engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. - Philippians 1:29-30 ESV*

Speaking to Timothy, the apostle Paul said:

*(12) Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, (13) while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. - 2 Timothy 3:12-13 ESV*

Religious and civil authorities lined up against the apostles. Official regulations were set in place to keep them from preaching in the name of Jesus. They experienced what their Lord did and taught that all who followed their example should expect the same.

Before we conclude, let's take a moment to consider what the apostle John saw in his revelation of future times. The apostle was in exile on the island of Patmos when he wrote the book of Revelation. Revelation 1:9 tells us this exile:

*(9) I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the*

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*island called Patmos on account of the*  
*word of God and the testimony of Jesus. -*  
*Revelation 1:9 ESV*

John was stripped of his freedom to preach the gospel and sent to an abandoned island prison. It was here that the Lord spoke to Him. While his freedom to preach the gospel had been taken from him, God still had work for him to do.

On Patmos, John saw a vision of the end times. Let me highlight just a few sections of that vision pertaining to the limitation of freedom for believers in the days to come. In Revelation 13, John had a vision of a blasphemous beast that exercised authority on the earth. John tells us that this beast will be allowed to "make war on the saints and to conquer them:"

*(6) It opened its mouth to utter*  
*blasphemies against God, blaspheming*  
*his name and his dwelling, that is, those*  
*who dwell in heaven. (7) Also it was*  
*allowed to make war on the saints and to*  
*conquer them. And authority was given it*  
*over every tribe and people and language*  
*and nation, (8) and all who dwell on earth*  
*will worship it, everyone whose name has*  
*not been written before the foundation of*  
*the world in the book of life of the Lamb*  
*who was slain. - Revelation 13:5-8 ESV*

The enemy will appear to have the upper hand for a time. John tells us that the beast will require a mark of submission and allegiance. Anyone who refused to bear this mark and worship the beast would not be able to buy or sell:

*(15) And it was allowed to give breath to*  
*the image of the beast, so that the image*

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*of the beast might even speak and might*  
*cause those who would not worship the*  
*image of the beast to be slain. (16) Also it*  
*causes all, both small and great, both rich*  
*and poor, both free and slave, to be*  
*marked on the right hand or the forehead,*  
*(17) so that no one can buy or sell unless*  
*he has the mark, that is, the name of the*  
*beast or the number of its name. (18) This*  
*calls for wisdom: let the one who has*  
*understanding calculate the number of the*  
*beast, for it is the number of a man, and*  
*his number is 666. - Revelation 13:15-18*  
*ESV*

Understand here that the freedom to worship the Lord Jesus will be stripped from true believers in those days as the beast wages war on the saints (Revelation 13:7). John reminds us through this vision that the days will come when all believers will worship with a death sentence over their heads. Freedom to worship the Lord Jesus will be taken from them, and they will suffer persecution.

While our nations may grant us freedom of religion to gather for worship, this is not a right guaranteed in the Bible. If anything, the Bible teaches that we will be hated for the sake of Christ. Jeremiah was banished from the temple. Jesus was driven out of the temple. Official regulations were passed down from those in authority forbidding the apostle from preaching in the name of Jesus. The apostle John tells us that the day is coming when our freedom as believers will be stripped from us by the great beast of Revelation 13. Political freedom of religion is not a Scriptural guarantee.

While freedom of religion is not guaranteed to us, we need to understand that even without that freedom, the work of God

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will continue to advance. When driven from the temple, Jesus went elsewhere. When refused permission to preach in the temple, Jeremiah wrote his prophecies and sent them through his secretary. When rejected in one town, the apostles wiped the dust off their feet and went to another. When persecution broke out in Jerusalem, believers left the city, preaching the gospel wherever they went. When locked up in prison, the apostle Paul preached to the prison guards, took up his pen and wrote the majority of the New Testament. Writing to Titus about this, the apostle said:

*(8) Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, (9) for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! - 2 Timothy 2:8-9 ESV*

"I am bound up with chains," said the apostle. "But the word of God is not bound!" You see, God has a way of continuing His work despite the limitations and the restrictions placed on us. The church father Tertullian once said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." In other words, no matter how much political and religious structures limited and killed believers, the gospel continued to spread and accomplish its purpose. God is building His kingdom, and not even the gates of hell will prevent that from taking place. In this, we find great hope and confidence.



# Chapter 10 – Differences between Sincere Believers

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No two believers are alike. While it might be nice to think that everyone would come to the same conclusion, this is not the case, nor will it be this side of heaven. There will always be differences of opinion on theological and practical matters in the Christian faith.

Many people have trouble with this idea. Our faith is sacred to us, and we can't imagine being wrong about something as vital as our relationship with God and our understanding of His character and purpose for our lives. Consider Saul before he became known as the apostle Paul. He was convinced of his Judaism, to the point where he actively sought out Christians and persecuted them for the blasphemy of assuming that the man Jesus could be God. Then one day, he met the Lord Jesus, and everything changed. What would it have been like for him to understand that he had been so wrong? How would he have felt coming to realize that he was persecuting and fighting the very God he claimed to serve?

It would be very easy for us to say: "Well, Paul was an unbeliever at that point, but when he came to the Lord Jesus, everything changed." There is certainly an element of truth to this argument but did coming to Christ mean that Paul got

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everything right from that point onward? Don't get me wrong here. I believe that Paul spoke the truth in what He wrote in the Scriptures and that we can rely completely on the inspired writing in his epistles. Paul would be the first to admit, however, that he was not perfect. He was amazed that God would use him despite his past and ongoing shortcomings. Speaking of himself, the apostle said in Romans 7:

*(15) For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. - Romans 7:15  
ESV*

Listen to how he expressed this to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:

*(15) The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (16) But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. - 1 Timothy 1:15-16 ESV*

The apostle was painfully aware of his shortcomings. Paul was very direct. He held no punches when it came to the message of the gospel. He would openly rebuke those who were not living as God required. Those who received his stern rebukes did not always appreciate this approach. The apostle describes his time with the Corinthians as "painful" in 2 Corinthians 2:

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*(1) For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. (2) For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? - 2 Corinthians 2:1-2 ESV*

Many believers were offended and hurt by his directness. Paul offended believers not just in his visits but also in his letters:

*(8) For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. - 2 Corinthians 7:8 ESV*

Paul's expectations caused problems in Corinth but also with his co-workers. In Acts 15, we have the story of how Barnabas suggested that they return to visit the believers in the cities where they had proclaimed the gospel. Barnabas indicated that he would like to take John Mark with them on this journey. This suggestion did not go well with Paul. John Mark had abandoned them on the first journey, and Paul did not want to take him on this second.

*(37) Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. (38) But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. – Acts 15:37-38 ESV*

Paul did not want to take someone on the journey who had not proven reliable. On the other hand, Barnabas was an encourager who felt John Mark needed a second chance. Paul was unwilling to give the young man this opportunity.

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Acts 15:39 tells us that the disagreement was so severe that Paul and Barnabas parted and went their separate ways.

*(39) And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, (40) but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. (41) And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. - Acts 15:39-41 ESV*

These great men of God disagreed to a point where they could not work together. What we need to understand here, however, is that John Mark was very likely aware of his failure in the first missionary journey. Paul was not the man to take him under his wings and encourage him. Paul expected much from those who worked with him. Just as he had hurt the Corinthians, he could very likely hurt John Mark. Barnabas was much gentler in his approach. John Mark needed a patient and understanding man like Barnabas to help him through this time.

Was Paul wrong not to take John Mark on this missionary journey? I don't believe he was. Paul's style of ministry often stirred people to anger. They would become so angry they would pick up stones to stone him or drive him out of their towns. Very likely, John Mark was not ready for this.

Was Barnabas wrong to take John Mark with him? Not at all. In fact, under his care, he would mature and become very useful for the kingdom. Writing to Timothy later, Paul would say:

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*(11) Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. - 2 Timothy 4:11 ESV*

Even Paul had to admit that Mark had matured and was useful.

Two men of God differed in their opinions. They went their separate ways. Both of these men did what they felt the Lord was calling them to do. God blessed both in their endeavour.

The apostle Paul believed that Christians were free from the law. This was particularly true when it came to the practice of circumcision. The believers in Galatia were struggling with this concept. Teachers among them taught that all male Christians needed to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses. Paul reacted strongly against this teaching in Galatians 5 when he said:

*(3) I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. (4) You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (5) For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. (6) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. – Galatians 5:3-6 ESV*

He told the Galatians that if they accepted to be circumcised, they would be obliged to keep the whole law perfectly and be eternally judged by God for any disobedience. He went on to tell them that if they accepted circumcision, they were severed from Christ and had fallen from grace. He made it

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clear that circumcision counted for nothing when it came to salvation. The apostle was so angry with those who taught that circumcision was necessary that he said:

*(12) I wish those who unsettle you would  
emasculate themselves! - Galatians 5:3-6  
ESV*

"Emasculate" means to cut off or castrate in the original language. Many believe that Paul was saying that he wished that these men would cut themselves off from the community of believers. Paul had some strong things to say about believers who practiced circumcision.

Knowing how strongly Paul felt about circumcision, it is striking when we read the following in Acts 16:

*(3) Paul wanted Timothy to accompany  
him, and he took him and circumcised him  
because of the Jews who were in those  
places, for they all knew that his father  
was a Greek. - Acts 16:3 ESV*

The apostle, who believed so strongly that those who preached circumcision should be cut off from the community of faith, took Timothy and circumcised him. Was Paul wrong to circumcise Timothy when he preached so strongly against it? The answer to this lies in the motivation behind the practice.

Paul preached against the belief that circumcision gave anyone favour with God for salvation. Notice, however, the reason Paul circumcised Timothy in Acts 16:3. He wanted Timothy to accompany him on his missionary journey. The Jews knew that Timothy's father was a Greek who would not have circumcised his son. This would automatically hinder

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Timothy's ministry to the Jews. He would not be able to enter the temple or synagogue, for no uncircumcised male would ever be permitted entrance to such a sacred place. Paul knew that if Timothy were going to come with him on his journey, he would need to be circumcised to minister to the Jews. Paul did not circumcise Timothy to give him any favour with God but rather to remove any obstacle to his ministry. Only when you understand Paul's motivation do his actions make sense.

One of the clear commands of the Lord God to His people was that they were not to bow down to or worship any other god but the Lord God of Israel. The severest of punishments were dealt out to those who turned from the one true God.

After helping their brothers conquer the land of Canaan, the tribes of Reuben and Manasseh determined to return to the eastern side of the Jordan River, where the Lord had promised them an inheritance. Before crossing the Jordan, however, Reuben and Manasseh built a large altar at the river's edge. This altar was not like the altars used in Israel for the worship of God. When the other tribes heard about it, they determined to attack their brothers, assuming they had made this altar to worship another god. When the Israelite army surprised Reuben and Manasseh at the Jordan, they accused them of breaking faith with God and rebelling against Him:

*(16) "Thus says the whole congregation of the LORD, 'What is this breach of faith that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away this day from following the LORD by building yourselves an altar this day in rebellion against the LORD? (17) Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor from which even yet we*

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have not cleansed ourselves, and for  
which there came a plague upon the  
congregation of the LORD, (18) that you  
too must turn away this day from following  
the LORD? And if you too rebel against  
the LORD today then tomorrow he will be  
angry with the whole congregation of  
Israel. - Joshua 22:16-20 ESV*

That day, the tribes of Reuben and Manasseh responded to their brother's accusation. In Joshua 22:24-29, they explained how the Jordan River separated them from the rest of the tribes of Israel, and they feared that their children would feel like they had no portion in the Lord God or with their brothers on the western side of the river. To prevent this from happening, they built a large altar on the west side of the Jordan so their children would know that the God of the Israelites on the western side of the Jordan was their God as well. The altar was not intended for worship. It was a witness to their children that they were one with their brothers and sisters on the other side of the river and served the same God.

How easy it is to jump to the wrong conclusion. Because someone does something different, we assume they are wrong. By taking the time to listen to their point of view, we may understand the genuineness of their faith.

Imagine driving down the road in your car when a fellow believer passes you ignoring the speed limit. As you watch him zoom past you and disappear in the distance, you feel anger burn up inside you. You begin to wonder how a person who claims to know the Lord would flagrantly disregard the speed limit and drive so recklessly. You determine that you will reprimand him when you see him at church on Sunday.

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Sunday arrives, and you have prepared what you will say to him as soon as church is over. As the worship service unfolds, you learn that his wife had a heart attack that week, and he had to rush her to the hospital. All of a sudden, everything makes sense. He was not being reckless and carelessly disregarding the law of the land; he was trying to save the life of his wife. It is right to obey the law of the land. Is there ever a time when it is more important to break the law? Let me assure you that if this man were stopped by the police and explained his situation, the police would likely escort him to the hospital speeding all the way to save his wife's life.

As a missionary, I have worked in peaceful countries. I have friends, however, who have worked in countries where governments have been overthrown, and things became very difficult. What would you do if you were in such a situation? Would you consider your family's safety and determine to leave that country, or would you remain? The answer to that question is not the same for everyone. God will call some to go, and He will require that others remain to stand with national believers in their trial.

In the church of Rome, not everyone agreed. Some people felt that some days were holy, and the believer needed to observe these days as special either by performing certain duties or by refraining from work and leisure. Other believers in the church felt that it was important to abstain from eating certain foods. Then, of course, there were the believers who ate everything without question and observed all days as the same. This caused concern and division among sincere believers.

The apostle Paul addressed this issue in Romans 14. Listen to what Paul had to say here:

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*(5) One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. (6) The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. - Romans 14:5-6 ESV*

Paul recognized the two sides here. He doesn't tell the Romans what to do but challenges them to be convinced in "their own mind." He went on to say that the one who observes a day as special did so for the Lord. The one who eats everything without question honours the Lord and gives Him thanks. The person who abstains from eating certain foods also glorifies God and gives Him thanks.

For the apostle, this was not a matter of right or wrong so much as a matter of faith. Is it possible that God would give one person the liberty to eat all foods without question but ask another to abstain? While many Old Testament believers drank wine and ate grapes and raisins, God strictly forbade those under a Nazirite vow to do so.

*(2) "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, (3) he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. (4) All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is*

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produced by the grapevine, not even the  
seeds or the skins. - Numbers 6:2-4 ESV*

What was right for most Israel was not right for those who had committed themselves to this special vow.

Paul challenges the Romans to seek the will of the Lord for themselves personally. If God was calling them to abstain, they were to do so. If they had doubts about practicing something, they were to abstain. They were only to act on what they had a clear conscience to do:

*(23) But whoever has doubts is  
condemned if he eats, because the eating  
is not from faith. For whatever does not  
proceed from faith is sin. - Romans 14:23  
ESV*

The implication here is that the Lord would not necessarily lead everyone in the same way. Legalism applies the letter of the law to everyone without exception. This is not how Paul saw the Christian life. Admittedly, certain doctrines he would fight vigorously to maintain, but he also accepted that God was working in each person differently. What was important for the apostle here was that each person walked in obedience to the leading of the Lord.

We must allow for God to lead us in different ways. We must also permit each person to be at a different place in their walk with God. King Solomon was called to glorify God in tremendous wealth while the Lord Jesus was born in a stable and did not even have a place to lay His head. God called Paul to minister to the Gentiles while other apostles ministered exclusively to the Jews. Some apostles were called to a life of celibacy while others married. John the

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Baptist separated himself from society and lived in the wilderness. Jesus lived in the city, ate and drank with sinners.

Throughout the church's history, sincere believers have differed in many ways. I have met godly believers with whom I can't entirely agree in every point of theology and practice. Do I believe that I am the only one who knows the truth and that everyone should be just like me?

The fact is that God-fearing believers have differed from the beginning of time. God has accepted people of various positions and practices. I am firmly convinced that there will never be a time in this life where every believer completely agrees with each other in every matter of faith and practice. We must allow for differences of opinion and practice. God will not lead us all in the same way. We do not all see things from the same perspective. Circumstances are different for each of us.

Some of the greatest problems in the church today result from believing that every believer should think and act like us. Scripture shows us that this is not the case, nor will it ever be the case on this side of heaven. God has created us as individuals with different gifts and callings in life. God's purpose for one individual is not always the same for another. While we who truly know the Lord Jesus are united by His work in us, we need to respect the differences He allows and stir one another up to maturity and deeper faith.

# Chapter 11 – Living with Differences

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In the last reflection, we discussed the differences between believers in understanding and practice. Some people have trouble accepting these differences. There is something comforting in having everyone believe and practice the same thing. However, we should accept our differences as followers of Jesus Christ and embrace them. Let me qualify what I am saying here. As the body of Christ, there is no room for sin in our midst. Evil and rebellion against God must be addressed. Scripture is quite clear when it comes to dealing with false teaching, immoral or ungodly behaviour. When I speak about differences between believers, I am not talking about sinful actions and practices. These things will only divide and harm the body of Christ.

God has designed the body to be diverse. The apostle Paul explained this to the Corinthians when he wrote:

*(14) For the body does not consist of one member but of many. (15) If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. (16) And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,"*

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*that would not make it any less a part of*  
*the body. - 1 Corinthians 12:14-16 ESV*

Paul compares the church to the human body in these verses. Just as the human body has many parts that radically differ in purpose and appearance from each other, so it is with the people of God. The hand looks very different from the foot, but both have specific functions. The eye is designed to see. The nose is created to smell and the ears to hear. Though different in function and look, each part of the body has a part to play in the body's overall health. According to Paul, this is how the Lord God wants the church to function. Listen to how he explained this in Romans 12:

*(4) For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, (5) so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (6) Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; (7) if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; (8) the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. - Romans 12:4-8 ESV*

God has gifted each member so that they contribute in a unique way to the body of Christ. It is foolish to desire that every believer fit into the same mould. He illustrates this foolishness in 1 Corinthians 12 when he humorously describes what that would look like in the church.

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*(17) If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? (18) But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. (19) If all were a single member, where would the body be? (20) As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. - 1 Corinthians 12:14-20 ESV*

What would you look like if all you were was giant ear? What would your life be like if you and everyone around you were ears? We owe our productivity to the fact that God has designed our body with many different parts, each playing its role. The body of Christ is no different. Each piece contributes to the whole, making it productive and healthy. This is how God designed our physical bodies. It is also how He intends the church to function and flourish.

God has appointed and established different offices and gifts in the church:

*(27) Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (28) And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. (29) Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? (30) Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? - 1 Corinthians 12:27-30 ESV*

If we are going to live as God intends, we must accept these differences. Not everyone will do things as you do. Not everyone will have the same priorities as you do.

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Over the years, I have had many requests for funds from people worldwide. Requests have come in to build church buildings, obtain a Bible School education, cover medical expenses, or help with natural catastrophes. While I have empathy for these needs, the funds the Lord has given me are for the distribution and production of books to encourage and challenge His people. I cannot divert what God has given me for one purpose to another. This has not always been appreciated or understood. I had times when people questioned my concern for the work of God because I did not send money for their particular needs. I do not doubt that other believers are called to provide for those needs, but that is not what God has called me to do.

Some years ago, I was in Haiti. I was somewhat overwhelmed by the poverty and need all around me. I could not go anywhere without someone begging me for money. I remember a time when I went to the Lord and asked, "Lord, what am I doing in light of these tremendous needs?" The answer came back, "I am writing Bible studies." As I reflected on this, I felt somewhat ashamed and began to question if I should stop writing to focus on meeting the physical needs of people around the world. As I reflected, I heard the Lord speak to my heart and say: "Wayne, people need more than just to survive. They need a reason to live. Write to give them a reason to live." Those words removed all doubt from my mind. God had a purpose for me and the resources He was giving me. He expected me to be faithful to that purpose. He would burden others with physical needs, but I was to focus on the spiritual.

What does honouring God look like? In the case I described above, it meant abstaining from diverting funds and energy God had given me to the physical needs of believers around

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the world and keeping them for the purpose God gave them –to strengthen, encourage and support believers in their faith. Honouring God for a person with the gifts of compassion, mercy and helps will be very different. It is of utmost importance that we accept the burdens, callings and gifts God gives to the body of Christ. We need these differences if we are going to thrive as a church. The first step to living with differences is to accept them as the purpose of God for the health of the church.

Consider the words of Jesus in Luke 6:27-31:

*(27) "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, (28) bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (29) To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. (30) Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. (31) And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. - Luke 6:27-31 ESV*

The Lord Jesus taught us to love our enemies. That love is demonstrated in many ways. First, we do good to those who hate us. Second, we bless those who curse us. Third, we pray for those who abuse us. Fourth, when they strike us on the cheek, we humbly offer the other to them as well. Fifth, when they take our coat, we offer him our shirt as well. When they beg for money, we willingly and generously give it. Finally, when they steal our goods, we let them have them without demanding them back. According to Jesus, this is how we are to treat those who hate us, steal from us, abuse us and steal from us. If this is the case for our worst enemies, should it not

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also be true for brothers and sisters in Christ? Sometimes our brothers and sisters are treated worse than an enemy.

As Covid-19 ravages our nation, it has also divided the church. We should not expect that every believer will have the same response. Some will not have the freedom to take a vaccination, while others will have complete freedom. It is not my place to say who is right and who is wrong. What is important is to keep in mind what Jesus tells us about loving our worst enemy. I am not saying that a brother or sister who differs from us regarding our response to Covid-19 is an enemy. What I am saying is that if Jesus expects us to love, bless, pray for and give to our worst enemy, surely this is the case for those closest to us. What is our response to those who differ from us? We love them. We seek to bless them in their decision. This may mean bending over backwards to let them know that we love and care for them despite our difference of opinion. It will mean helping those who have lost their jobs or are banned from public places. It is one thing to accept our differences as believers, but quite another to bless, love and support those who do not see things as we do. God expects nothing less of us.

Let's take this a step further. Not only does God expect us to accept our differences and love each other, but He also demonstrates to us in the person of Jesus Christ that He wants us to sympathize with those who differ from us. Consider what the writer to the Hebrews had to say about the Lord Jesus as our great high priest:

*(15) For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (16) Let us then with confidence draw*

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*near to the throne of grace, that we may  
receive mercy and find grace to help in  
time of need. - Hebrews 4:15-16 ESV*

The writer tells us that Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses. Now weakness is not something God experiences, but Jesus was subject to our weaknesses so that He might overcome them. The word sympathize is translated by the phrase “touched with the feelings of our infirmities” in the King James Version. The idea is that Jesus felt sorrow, pity and compassion for us in our situation. That sympathy led to His death on the cross. He who knew no weakness took our weaknesses and went through what we go through every day. He put himself in our place and felt what we felt. Such was the heart of God for those who wandered from Him and languished in their frailty.

What is our response to those who have not arrived where we are in our walk with God? How do we respond to those who do not see things as we do? Does the word “sympathy” come to mind? I am not speaking about feeling sorry for someone but a genuine concern that puts itself in a brother or sister’s shoes in an attempt to understand what they are feeling.

Some time ago, I spoke with three individuals who struggled with taking a vaccination against COVID-19. One person expressed their sense of isolation by saying, “I feel like a leper.” Another struggled to understand how to deal with the possibility of losing a job if not vaccinated. The third grieved over not being permitted to be by his wife’s side in the hospital because he was not vaccinated. What is our response to this? Some would say, “all these problems would be resolved if they only got vaccinated.” As I listened to these individuals that Sunday, I felt what they were going through. They were

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struggling deeply. They had a conviction before the Lord about not getting vaccinated. They sincerely did not believe that this was what the Lord wanted them to do. They suffered as a result. Where does genuine sympathy come into play here? As a pastor, I felt their pain and struggle. This was not a time to discuss who was right and wrong. These children of God needed support, encouragement and prayer. My role was to encourage them in what they believed God had called them to do.

Jesus, as a high priest, sympathizes with us in our struggles and temptations. He took the time to feel our weaknesses. He continues to demonstrate great patience with us as we seek to follow what we believe to be His purpose for our lives.

One day Jesus was sharing a meal with a Pharisee who had invited Him into his home. As the meal unfolded, a woman of the city, “who was a sinner” (Luke 7:36), approached and poured oil on His feet, wiping them dry with her hair. Bending down, she kissed Jesus’ feet. The Pharisee in whose home Jesus ate expressed his disgust by saying to himself:

*(39) “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” - Luke 7:36-39 ESV*

His attitude was harsh and critical toward this sinful woman of the city. This woman was not welcome in his home. Jesus’ response was very different. He saw her tears, felt her shame and sympathized with her cry for help. He looked beyond her reputation and sinful life and entered her suffering. “Your sins are forgiven,” Jesus told her. “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (see Luke 7:48-50).

### *Living With Differences*

While the Pharisee could only see the difference between his zealous faith and the woman's sinful reputation, Jesus saw her pain. Can you feel the pain of someone different from you? Can you see beyond these differences to the genuineness of their faith and the hurt they are experiencing?

The apostle Paul challenged the Galatians to bear one another's burdens.

*(2) Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. - Galatians 6:2 ESV*

He does not say, bear the burdens of those who agree with you. He does not make a distinction between believers here. He told the Galatians that they were to sympathize with the griefs and struggles of their brothers and sisters in Christ. More than this, he told them to bear that burden with them.

After speaking about the differences between believers with their various callings and functions, the apostle went on to say:

*(26) If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. - 1 Corinthians 12:26  
ESV*

The body needs its various parts to function as it should. When one part is not working properly, the whole body suffers. What happens if the heart does not beat as it should? What results from the lungs not producing the oxygen the body needs? How does it impact what the body can do if you break your arm? The great problem in the church of God today is not that we are different but that we have not learned to work with our differences. If we want to thrive as the body of Christ, we need to accept and embrace these differences,

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love and sympathize with those who do not see things as we do.

Our unity is not because we all see things in the same way. We are one because Christ Jesus pardoned our sin and is even now transforming us into His image. Not all believers are at the same place in that process. God has called us each to a different role. As diverse as we are, those who know the Lord Jesus as their Lord and Saviour are part of the same body whose purpose is to honour their Lord and advance His kingdom on this earth.

Our Sovereign Lord knows what He is doing. He calls one person to one ministry and another to something radically different. Like a finely tuned engine, one part moves one way and another in the opposite direction. The master mechanic has placed every piece in its place, each with its purpose and function. As they work together, the engine moves the vehicle to its destination. Those who are not mechanically inclined only see a confusion of various parts moving in every direction and doing different things. However, God has put it all together so that every part accomplishes its purpose and advances His kingdom. Let's stand with Him in this wonderful work, embracing the uniqueness of each member of the kingdom. Let us choose to love and sympathize with those who differ from us, so the kingdom is not hindered by our unwillingness to accept any other opinion but our own.

# Chapter 12 – The Redemption of our Trials

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Sin radically changed this world. It brought sickness, disease, and death and broke our relationship with God and fellow human beings.

There is another clear teaching in the Scripture. The Creator of this world is sovereign over every circumstance and can use whatever happens for His glory and our good. The apostle proclaimed his belief in this truth when he declared:

*(28) And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. - Romans 8:28 ESV*

It is easy to interpret this verse to mean that only good things happen to God's people, but that would be a misinterpretation of what Paul was saying. You see, of all the apostles, Paul suffered the most. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul compared his sufferings to those of other Christian workers of his day:

*(23) Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. (24) Five times I*

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*received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. (25) Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; (26) on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; (27) in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (28) And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. - 2 Corinthians 11:23-28*  
*ESV*

Rejection, suffering and persecution awaited Paul everywhere he went. He lived long enough, however, to see how God used those trials to accomplish His purpose.

What was true for Paul in terms of trials, rejection and persecution was also true for physical afflictions and ailments. He describes one of those ailments in 2 Corinthians 12 when he says:

*(7) So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. (9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

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*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of*  
*my weaknesses, so that the power of*  
*Christ may rest upon me. - 2 Corinthians*  
*12:7-9 ESV*

Paul describes a “thorn in his flesh” in these verses. While it is unclear what the nature of this “thorn” was, it was likely some form of physical disability. Notice, however, a couple of details from these verses.

First, Paul understood that this thorn in his flesh had a purpose in the plan of God. The apostle’s conviction was that God intended that this thorn be a means of keeping him humble.

*(7) So to keep me from becoming*  
*conceited because of the surpassing*  
*greatness of the revelations, a thorn was*  
*given me in the flesh, a messenger of*  
*Satan to harass me, to keep me from*  
*becoming conceited. – 2 Corinthians 12:7*  
*ESV*

The apostle received incredible revelations from God. God chose to use him in ways that were many other servants had never been used. All of this could so easily lead to pride in Paul’s heart. That pride would have destroyed his ministry and impact for the kingdom. Paul was convinced that this physical ailment was a gift from God to keep him in a place of dependence and usefulness for the Kingdom.

Paul understood that God was using this affliction to accomplish great things through him. He boldly proclaims, therefore, in 2 Corinthians 12:9:

*I will boast all the more gladly of my*  
*weaknesses, so that the power of Christ*

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*may rest upon me. - 2 Corinthians 12:9*  
*ESV*

Paul was convinced that God was sovereign over trials, afflictions, and physical ailments. As difficult as they were, God could use them to advance the cause of His kingdom on this earth.

How easy it is to pray away all suffering and affliction in our lives. Many years ago, I lost my drivers' license for a year due to a car accident. I was driving to a coffee shop in town to meet my wife when I lost consciousness and overturned my car. Until the medical cause of the accident was determined, I was not permitted to drive. I was subject to one medical test after another to see what caused the loss of consciousness.

Because I could not travel to my ministry locations, I could no longer do my Bible studies and church services. I lost about 75% of my ministry in those days. Along with that was the uncertainty of what was happening medically to my body.

I remember walking to a coffee shop to spend the morning writing. As I walked, I was speaking with the Lord. "Lord," I said, "I am willing to go through this trial, but I ask you one thing. I pray that I would not come out the other side the same." Since that time, I have told people I minister to: "There is one thing worse than having to go through a trial. That is, coming out the other end the same." In other words, if God allows me to face deep suffering in this life and I don't learn from it, what have I gained? Have I not just faced this affliction in vain? Some of the greatest lessons I have learned have come from these times of agony and struggle. God will use what we face to refine and shape us into His image. He will use these times to purge and purify His church.

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In the Old Testament, no one suffered like Job. Job 1:3 describes him as the richest man of all the people of the east:

*(3) He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. - Job 1:3 ESV*

Satan attacked Job, stripped him of his wealth, and killed his children. He then proceeded to inflict him with itching sores all over his body. Godly Job, accustomed to wealth and prosperity, is now an outcast, sitting alone in an ash heap because of his uncleanness with hours each day to lament and reflect on his misery. Here in this exile, Job speaks with God and pleads his case before the great Judge of heaven. Mocked by his friends and loved ones, Job perseveres in his trial, sometimes on the verge of despair, sometimes with a faint glimpse of hope.

Through these days of trial and gloom, Job came to understand God and His purpose in a new way. As we come to Job 42, after hearing the Lord speak to Him, Job responds:

*Then Job answered the LORD and said:*

*(2) "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*

*(3) 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. (4) 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' (5) I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; (6) therefore I despise*

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*myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” -*  
*Job 42:1-6 ESV*

What was the result of Job's affliction? He came to a greater understanding of God. *“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted,”* he said. He saw God as a sovereign God whose plan could never be overturned. Even Job's overwhelming affliction would achieve God's ultimate good.

Second, Job came to a greater understanding of himself. *“I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know,”* he confessed in verse 3. He had done his fair share of arguing with God during these times of trouble. The agony of his afflictions exploded in complaints and questions directed to God. When God finally spoke, all those complaints seemed so foolish. Job came to realize that He had been questioning the wisdom and plan of an almighty and infinitely wise God. He saw the pride in this and repented. Job came to understand what many of us still have to learn. God's ways are perfect and beyond question. His wisdom surpasses ours. Through different from ours, His ways will always be for His glory and our good.

Finally, Job's relationship with God was transformed despite the attack of Satan on his life. Speaking to God that day, Job said: *“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you”* (verse 5). Though Job was a godly man before his trials, he describes this time in his life as a time of *“hearing of the ear.”* In other words, God was someone he had heard about and worshipped as a doctrinal truth. His trial, however, had brought him to a whole new level of intimacy with God. He speaks of this time as a time of seeing God with his eyes. God was not just a doctrinal truth he adhered to, but a very personal and real to Him now. He saw God at work in

### *The Redemption of our Trials*

his life. He experienced the intimate presence of God in a new way. God was no longer a distant God but one who was very near. Job's spiritual life was radically transformed by the trial he experienced.

The Psalms often speak about the sovereignty of God over the trials and sufferings of His people. Listen to the words of Psalm 129:

*(1) "Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth"— let Israel now say— (2) "Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me. (3) The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows." (4) The LORD is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked. - Psalms 129:1-4 ESV*

Israel declares that God had afflicted them from their youth, but their enemies had not prevailed against them. Though the enemies abused them, God released them from their bonds.

Probably one of the most familiar declarations of God's watch-care is found in Psalm 23:

*(4) Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (5) You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. - Psalms 23:4-5 ESV*

The psalmist reminds us that God's people will walk through the "valley of the shadow of death." Even though we will be oppressed and pass through this dark valley, David reminds

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us that we do not need to fear for the comfort of God will be our portion, and God's blessing will remain on us.

Writing in Psalm 76, Asaph the psalmist declared:

*(10) Surely the wrath of man shall praise you; the remnant of wrath you will put on like a belt. - Psalms 76:10 ESV*

This same sentiment is reflected in Psalm 118 when the psalmist writes:

*(5) Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free. (6) The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? - Psalms 118:5-6 ESV*

*"The Lord is on my side... What can man do to me?"* These are words of victory and hope. They are words of confidence in God despite the wrath and fury of humankind directed toward those who belong to Him.

What do we see from these verses? The apostle Paul declared that despite his trials and persecution, he still knew the presence and power of God. God used his physical afflictions to humble him and keep him useful for the kingdom. Job experienced renewal in his spiritual life through the things he suffered. Through his distress, God removed obstacles to intimacy. The Lord God is not only bigger than the problems we face but will use those problems for good in our lives.

As I look over these years of COVID-19, there have been many changes for the church. In a time of social distancing and limitations in gatherings, we have come to understand how much we need each other as a people of God.

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As we began entering into the restrictions of COVID-19, the question that the Lord seemed to be putting on my mind was this: “If we can’t do what we always have done, can we still have faith?” If we cannot sing, can we still worship God? If we cannot pass our communion elements as we have always done, can we still follow the Lord’s instruction to remember Him in the Lord’s table?” If we cannot meet in our church building to preach the gospel, can we still be faithful in its proclamation by other means?” These years have forced us to examine our traditions and the ways we have always done things. God has expanded our horizons and shown us that we can worship Him in new ways and declare His truth in ways we have never done before.

As God has challenged the church to re-examine the way it ministers, the result has been a greater outreach across the world. I began a weekly podcast that is now available to more than just the people in my church. Churches began to turn to the internet to preach the gospel, thus opening their worship services to people worldwide. The sick and invalid could take in church services in ways they never did before. The teaching of Scripture multiplied overnight as God’s people found new ways to communicate. North American believers were for the first time listening to African pastors preaching. Believers in India were able to listen to Canadian preachers.

Beyond the obvious expansion of outreach is a new appreciation of the truths of Scripture about the end times. I remember reading the book of Revelation and wondering how it would be possible for some of the prophecies to take place. It was hard to imagine a global pandemic. China or India seemed so far away that it was hard to imagine that what was happening there could ever impact my nation. In light of what

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we have experienced with COVID-19, do the words of Revelation not seem even more probable to us:

*(17) And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. (18) By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. - Revelation 9:17-18 ESV*

Revelation 9 warns that plagues will kill a third of humankind. Is God not warning us through the things we see in our day? Is He not showing us that His word is true and that it will indeed be accomplished in a day known only to Him? Will we not heed this warning and commit ourselves afresh to Him?

Who among us has not realized afresh that there is a power greater than us at work? As one variant after another makes its way around the world, who among us has not wondered when a super-variant will come we will not be able to resist? There is a limit to what we can achieve in our human wisdom and science. Does COVID-19 not remind us that there are things over which we do not have control? How this ought to turn us to God, whose power and wisdom have no limits. Those who know the Saviour have hope. They cling to the promise of salvation through Jesus and an eternity where the lingering effects of sin will no longer have any place. Amid the uncertainty brought on by COVID-19 and the turbulence of our world governments, we need someone we can trust.

The words of Jesus cry out from the pages of the New Testament to our day:

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*(28) Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (29) Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (30) For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” -  
Matthew 11:28-30 ESV*

I can find no better place to leave you but here. Restrictions and mandates have left many weary and burdened. Others find themselves labouring under the pressure of shorter work hours or lost work. The souls of others have been confused and burdened. To you, the Lord says, “Come to me.” I know your labour and burden and understand your confusion and loneliness. I promise you rest. I will ease the burden you carry, reveal my purpose and draw you near. You will find rest from the turmoil of your soul. In this promise, we have great confidence and hope.



# Light To My Path Book Distribution

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Light To My Path Book Distribution (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement.

F. Wayne Mac Leod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them freely to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

These books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into several languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith-based ministry, and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books? For

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