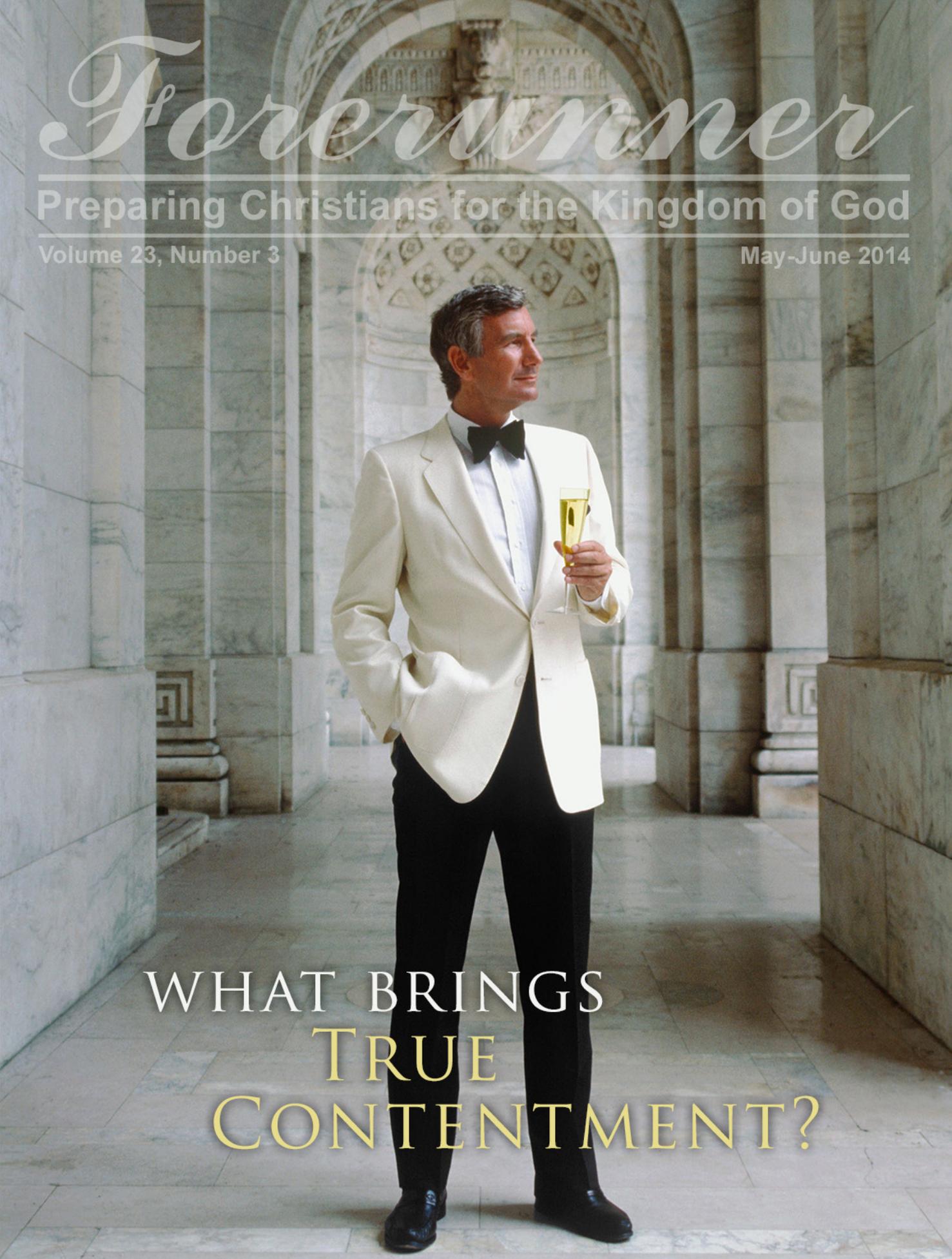


Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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WHAT BRINGS
TRUE
CONTENTMENT?

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volume 23, number 3

3

PERSONAL from *John W. Ritenbaugh*

Ecclesiastes and Christian Living (Part Seven):

Contentment

9

PROPHECY WATCH

A Tale of Two Complaints (Part One)

BY CHARLES F. WHITAKER

11

READY ANSWER

Clothing, Wineskins, and Wine

BY DAVID C. GRABBE

15

WORLDWATCH

Japan: Rising Tensions With China

BY RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

16

BIBLE STUDY

What Must We Do

When We Recognize Our Guilt?

BY MARTIN G. COLLINS

cover

Many people torment themselves throughout their lives with the "if onlies": "If only I had more money . . ." or "If only I could lose a few pounds . . ." or "If only I had a better job. . . ." People seek satisfaction in wealth, success, family, travel, art—and others through drugs, crime, and sex. But where does real contentment come from? In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon provides the answer.

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Ecclesiastes and Christian Living

Part Seven: Contentment

Not until I purposely took a break from this series on Ecclesiastes did I realize, while meditating on some of the material we have covered, that we have been covering a sub-theme that flows just below the surface. Solomon never names it directly, but it is nonetheless present, especially in chapters 4-6. Perhaps, if I can put a modern name to this theme, it will help bring some clarity: It is materialism. Solomon is showing that materialism is a poor source for seeking satisfaction in one's life.

Materialism is the modern label given to the ancient philosophical doctrine that physical well-being and material possessions constitute the highest good in life. Here in this Western world, our cultures have been virtually overwhelmed by this thinking.

Materialism Is Not the Answer

Before proceeding any further, we will quickly summarize Ecclesiastes to this point. Recall that, in chapter 1, Solomon essentially states that life is meaningless. This is the starting point of his thesis, which ends with him declaring that the whole duty of man is to fear God and keep His commandments

(Ecclesiastes 12:13). He thus states dogmatically that, despite what carnal men say, a clear purpose exists for life, and the concepts of materialism do not drive God's purpose for this world.

Thus, in chapter 2, he immediately launches into what he had learned about his works of building material things like houses and gardens and seeking even greater wealth. His conclusion? All of these material achievements were nothing but vanity, a grasping after wind.

He finds no real, sustained profit in them, nothing that truly added to his quality of life, no lasting fulfillment. He does not mean they resulted in no sense of achievement or passing pleasure, but that their fruit never truly fulfilled God's purpose for man. Therefore, those things are poor substitutes for a sustained sense of well-being. He then proceeds into an exploration of wine and entertainment. These are simply another form of materialism, ways of pleasing the flesh. He concludes that they, too, are folly, a mad pursuit.

Chapter 3 seemingly deviates from this theme, but the deviation is purposeful. He is planting a seed for further, wider, and greater understanding, a true foundation to build on.

personal *Ecclesiastes and Christian Living*

He shows that God, though unseen, is actively guiding and deeply involved in working in His creation, effectively moving both time and events to fulfill His purposes for individuals and nations. God has already given us a priceless gift: He has put eternity into our hearts to remind us that His work involves us in an eternal, spiritual—not a material—purpose. Our lives have direction.

In chapters 4-6, he shows us that satisfaction in life is produced or given as a result of gifts tendered by God, who is intimately involved with us in working out His purpose as we seek Him. Thus, he comes to a partial conclusion at the book's halfway point.

Satisfaction in life is not derived from wealth, status in society, or any material thing. Material things can provide pleasure, and that is good, but like everything physical, the pleasure is momentary compared to the eternal. It is the eternal, spiritual relationship with our Creator, in which God gifts us with what we need to use our lives wisely, that brings the balanced and sustained measure of satisfaction. To make right use of this life in glorifying God is our goal. It is the righteous pursuit.

Satisfaction and Contentment

Part Six showed that satisfaction in life is not attained simply because a person may have an abundance of material means and goods to accompany him through life. It also requires his life to be accompanied by God, imparting gifts that provide him with the proper appreciation of the blessings he is receiving.

Chapters 4-6 have influenced my thinking to an extent I never dreamed. Some of the impact is due to my age, but I have also come to appreciate this book's wisdom as never before. Before this study, I always found Ecclesiastes mystifying; I could not grasp its purpose. I have since found it has much to teach us. I now see it as one of the most bluntly practical writings in the entire Bible. It is, however, not an elementary book in any way. Its thoughts are brief but complex and sometimes difficult. One must research and thoroughly think through its metaphors to discover their lessons.

The primary lesson these chapters impart is how much a Christian needs his relationship with God. Not since becoming converted have I ever thought I did not need the relationship, but since beginning this series on Ecclesiastes, I now see it is an urgent necessity to hang on to it for dear life.

Why? This article takes a step beyond satisfaction in life to contentment. Though "satisfaction" and "contentment" are usually—and correctly—consid-

ered as synonyms, there is a meaningful difference. As Solomon shows in the previous chapter, contentment is a learned quality. Paul shows he learned it in his relationship with God (Philippians 4:11). Thus, it is a fruit of faith working within the relationship.

The Bible's usage of "contentment" comes close to implying a Christian needs no more and suggesting that there is no other source for it than a person's relationship with God. A contented person is at peace. In contrast, satisfaction contains a momentary, temporary implication. It most certainly includes a sense of gratification and thankfulness but allows room for more and greater satisfaction. It is as though a need has been met, assuring a person that he is on the right course for life, but now on to new challenges. We need both of these fruits for the quality of life that God desires us to have.

The Necessity of a Creator

David writes in Psalm 139:13-14:

For You have formed my inward parts; You have covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well.

This is a somewhat elementary, perhaps even a crude, illustration that clearly pictures why the relationship with God is absolutely necessary. It begins by admitting that we neither created ourselves nor gave ourselves life. David admits someone else made him; he did not arise to life fully formed out of nothing. Like him, we did not determine that we would physically be in God's image. The Creator made that determination. Can we mentally picture God kneeling down in the dirt, placing Adam's every part where He wanted it and determining how every part would function with every other system in his body? Even everyday realities such as these need a functioning Creator to bring them to pass.

The need for a relationship with our Creator is beginning to emerge. II Corinthians 5:17 carries the need of the creative relationship a major step further: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." We are now a new creation, a spiritual creation. A process begun in Eden continues.

When Paul wrote about a "new" creation, he had his choice of two Greek words. One expresses newness in the sense of "renovation." However, Paul used the second term, which suggests new in the sense of "brand new." He indicates, then, a person as

a new individual with a new family, a new set of values, new motivations, and new possessions. Nothing new in this sense creates itself. Even a new baby in a womb does not make itself. The baby has absolutely no idea what it is in process of becoming.

Are we making ourselves spiritually? As a new creation in Christ Jesus, we are no more making ourselves spiritually than we did physically. However, this creation is far more difficult and important because it requires our mindful and willing *cooperation* with our Creator.

How clearly and precisely do we foresee where our spiritual Creator is headed? To say it bluntly, without God's calling, which creates the relationship with Him, there is no possibility whatever of knowing anything meaningful about what God is in the process of creating, and therefore no eternal, spiritual salvation would exist. Do we know how to give ourselves everlasting life? Do we know where we will fit into the Creator's finished plan?

Therefore, it is our responsibility always to do whatever is necessary to seek Him and glorify Him, helping to keep the relationship going and knowledge increasing. Without the relationship that He invited us into, there is no possibility of ever accomplishing the end that He is heading toward and yielding to what He desires. It is as though He has opened the gate to allow us back into the Garden of Eden, right into the very source of every good and perfect gift that will enable us to glorify Him by fulfilling our responsibilities to Him. It is as if He says, as He opens the gate, "Now there, let's begin the next step in My overall purpose!"

The Point: A Fully Developed Life

Are we content with this? Part of the conclusion we can reach from the examples given in chapters 4-6 and from observing the activities and attitudes of many around us is that, somehow, almost nobody learns that enjoyment and contentment in life, not just satisfaction, are generated from within and enabled by the gifts God gives from within a relationship with Him. The basic cause of never learning this is that there is no relationship with Him. Thus, because they continuously grasp for it by other means, the unconverted never reach the state of contentment necessary for true satisfaction. We can avoid this pitfall by avoiding the temptation to reach for satisfaction in the same manner as those living under-the-sun lives.

In a relationship with God, we have the comfort of knowing that creative development is taking place and a purpose is being worked out. This provides

balanced contentment and satisfaction in life, even though we do not have complete answers either. It is God within the relationship who provides hope in the face of life's trials. He, our Creator, has deemed that we must face hardship with Him involved. Did not Israel face hardship under God in the wilderness, even though they had visible representations of Him at all times in the cloud and pillar of fire?

We learn from the Israelites' example that hardship can come from many different directions. Much of mankind's restlessness and dissatisfaction in life derives from his carnal nature never being satisfied, a fact that we must come to understand. Human nature forever wants more. Its desires, its cravings, its appetites, like those in our stomach, are briefly satisfied only to return hungering, as though it had never been filled. Rich or poor, wise or foolish, male or female, young or old—all must deal with this same basic issue. All have unfulfilled longings to take in hand.

One commentator compared our desires to being like a tramp, a word not used much today but used frequently during the Great Depression of the 1930s. A tramp is a person who wanders aimlessly about and never settles down in one place to hold a job, put down roots, and prosper. He is never content to stay at home. Thus personified, carnal desire loves to "window shop," always eager to find or do something new "to make life more fulfilling." It is as though our desires are always traveling but never arriving, which is why Solomon mentions the wandering of desire in Ecclesiastes 6:9.

Another commentator illustrates how quickly a person's attention can latch on to a desire, even in the face of grave danger. During the famous eruption of Mount Vesuvius just outside of Pompeii, Italy, in AD 79, the gases and lava flows moved so rapidly that they caught people in the midst of various activities, entombing them right in those acts as though they had been sculpted.

One woman so "caught in the act" was apparently fleeing the eruption. Interestingly, her feet pointed in one direction, that is, apparently in the direction of escape from the dangers of the eruption, but her head, one arm, and hand were pointed behind her. It seems that even as she fled for her life, something behind her caught her attention. She reached back to grab it, but in that very instant, she died and was covered by the eruption's debris, evidently not even falling to the ground. Was she reaching for a beautiful piece of jewelry that she did not want to leave behind? Nobody knows, but her desire was never fulfilled. It appears to have destroyed her life.

Without saying it frequently or directly, God is

personal *Ecclesiastes and Christian Living*

gradually showing through Solomon's illustrations that it is He, giving His gifts within the relationship, who adds purpose and fulfillment to mere living. He has the power to gift us with what truly builds a life of satisfying and contented fulfillment.

Solomon is getting at something that is keenly important. Most of us live in areas where we can watch birds. Birds seem to spend all their waking hours looking for food to eat. All animals have this same characteristic. Their activity provides helpful insight: The birds are alive but not really living as we understand living. They merely exist. Yet, at the same time, they are fulfilling a purpose for which God created them, and they even sing about it.

Solomon is not suggesting at all that it is wrong to either work or eat, nor is it sin that we should have desires, of and by themselves. Working, eating, and having desires can be quite enjoyable and profitable. But if that is all we do, we merely exist at an animal level. We must do something with our lives that is positive and purposeful and conforms to God's purpose, or we are going to waste them, achieving nothing within His purpose.

Life Is More Than Dreaming

We are part of God's spiritual creation. A person being spiritually created in the image of God must not drift but deliberately choose to live for goals far higher, goals that God establishes. Solomon is not belittling anybody, but simply teaching a truth, a reality that material things of themselves cannot make life richly satisfying. A Christian's life must be rightly balanced toward his relationship with God, and he must strive to follow God by living in the same loving manner as Christ did as a human and continues doing eternally.

Ecclesiastes 6:9 is Solomon's version of the cliché, "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush." He is essentially saying, "It is better to have little and purposely enjoy it than to dream about much and never attain it." A problem with dreams is that, all too often, they never become a reality. Thus, a sense of satisfaction and contentment remains unfulfilled. Solomon is not saying it is wrong to have a dream on which to spend our ambition, but that our ambition must be motivated for the glory of God and not the praise of men—including ourselves. If we think material achievements will automatically produce these qualities, we are wrong.

True satisfaction and contentment comes when we do the will of God from the heart for His glory. When that happens, we get to share in real satisfaction. In John 4:34, Jesus says, "My food [meaning that which

energizes Him and fills His life with satisfaction] is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work." David adds in Psalm 16:11: "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore." That is real satisfaction and contentment. These verses reinforce the truth that satisfaction and contentment in life is within a relationship with God.

True happiness and these qualities in life do not automatically result from "making a good living." Rather, they are a very blessed byproduct of making a good life with God as our Leader. If one devotes his life to doing God's will, satisfaction and contentment will be its fruit.

Questions Asked by the Self-justifying

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 6:10-12:

Whatever one is, he has been named already, for it is known that he is man; and he cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he. Since there are many things that increase vanity, how is man the better? For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?

The meaning of these verses is mystifying. One commentator suggests this title: "Questions Without Answers." This does not mean, though, that one should ignore God and His way and avoid receiving godly correction. Why? Because God does have the answers, and He reveals them individually within the relationship. We may need the answers very much.

The questions must be understood, at least somewhat, against the background of the context of these last chapters, in which he is showing that the roots of true satisfaction and contentment lie within God's gifting within a relationship with Him. In addition, we must understand them by evaluating the book's overall theme, in which he urges us to keep God's commandments, thus to live an above-the-sun life. We can also seek to grasp them by considering Solomon and what he reveals of himself.

Solomon presents a series of perplexing statements, but he gives no clear answers in the immediate context. Recall, however, that the overall subject of the chapter is about finding satisfaction in life, and he uses examples to illustrate circumstances about why life is puzzling and dissatisfying.

Let us consider Solomon himself. Did he know the answers? First, he probably knew the overall answer to satisfaction and contentment in life, but he did not

necessarily experience it because he did not apply God's way well. It is difficult to see how, having a father like David, as well as the personal experiences he had with God early in his manhood, that he did not know the overall answer. However, did he truly believe it? Did he live it? Both are necessary.

God has not answered this in absolute terms as He does regarding David. We have no doubt that David will be in God's Kingdom. Based on what is in the Bible, the answer regarding Solomon is that he apparently fell short. Is he lost? We do not know.

Nevertheless, he knew intellectually what the missing link is. The answer to contentment in life hinges on whether one knows what God's overall purpose for his life is. It is another matter altogether whether we believe that purpose is true and make the effort to seek God and live as He commands by faith.

Verse 10 is essentially saying that God is sovereign, and some things that He has established cannot be changed. Naming a thing is an indication that the thing so named is set. This is why the principles given in John 4:34 and Psalm 16:11 are so important to the converted. Being in God's presence is the overall solution. These statements by Jesus and David give assurance that contentment in life lies within the combination of properly blending the knowledge of God's purpose and deliberately choosing to live according to that purpose within a relationship with our very Creator.

This combination is what makes everything in life matter in a positive way, producing satisfaction and contentment in life. In this three-verse section, Solomon addresses four situations that revolve around not getting much in the way of these qualities from life because people do not give of themselves sufficiently to make the relationship work. Each verse, rather than answering, produces questions that, with a brief explanation, are helpful. If one does not get answers he can accept, then dissatisfaction and discontentment remain.

The questions that arise in these verses are expressions of justification that a converted person might give himself for not zealously throwing himself into the relationship with God. They are for the most part expressions of doubt that linger to support the lack of progress.

Solomon's Five Questions

Solomon touches on five questions. The *first* is based in verse 10: "Since what's going to be is going to be, why bother to make decisions? Isn't it all predestined anyway?" This is broadly why some will not really cooperate with God in a relationship. Mar-

tin Luther gave this German proverb: "As things have been, so they still are; and as things are so shall they be." In other words, the proverb is asking if there anything we actually control. Things are so far from our control, why make an effort?

In this verse, the One "mightier than he" is God. We must firmly accept that God can indeed accomplish His purposes without our cooperation. He does not need us, but He most assuredly loves us! God indeed has "fixed," that is, named what He will accomplish, but He has also given us free-moral agency.

We must know that the world we live in is not a prison. We are free to evaluate and then choose what our personal world will be, but we are not free to change what the consequences of our actions will be. This is why we should give everything thoughtful consideration. Stepping off the roof of a ten-story building may be our choice, but once we commit ourselves and do it, there is no altering the outcome!

Everything matters! Job discovered this in a grueling and humbling circumstance with God. Job 42:3, 6 states his lack of thoughtful consideration before Him:

You asked, "Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

The reality is that our choices do make a great deal of difference. Like everything in life, they matter.

The *second* question is also based in verse 10. Why disagree with God? We cannot oppose Him and win, can we? This question suggests that God's will is difficult, painful to accomplish, and should be avoided at all costs.

Compare this with what Jesus says in Matthew 11:29-30: "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. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Add to this what He says earlier in His ministry about doing God's will being nourishing and energizing to a Christian. Why would anyone, making a fair analysis by comparing God's way with his self-chosen way and seeing what mankind has produced in this world, rather have his own way rather than God's? That makes no sense whatever!

If God really wanted to make life truly difficult, He would give man absolute freedom—and that is exactly where this world is heading during this end time. It really builds satisfaction and contentment, right? No, not at all.

personal *Ecclesiastes and Christian Living*

Like Job, we must know what our limits are, and one of them is that we do not have the wisdom to out-think and out-talk God. We must truly realize that the more we talk, the emptier our words become, which is exactly what happened to Job. This leads to the fact that humanity must accept that God, as sovereign Creator, is free to act as He sees fit in every situation. Such acceptance will help to produce the contentment that mankind yearns for.

The *third* question appears to be drawn from Solomon's many words in writing this book, in addition to all the words we might hear in sermons and the like. He asks, "What do we accomplish with all these words? Does talking about it solve the problems?"

Verse 11 in the *New International Version* reads, "The more words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?" Are we not receiving a thorough education in this as we listen to all the convoluted political and economic arguments in recent times? Yet, these are all words of men. The Word of God is exactly what is needed because it is truth! God's truths do not bind people; they free (John 8:32). Satisfaction and contentment are the fruits of truth that is accepted and used. One must listen to God's Word and use it for satisfaction in life.

The *fourth* question arises from verse 12: "Who knows what is good for us?" This question is directly linked to the previous one. It brings to mind a saying that this same Solomon states twice in Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." Human history proves that without the knowledge of God, mankind finds himself satanically deceived, drifting forever on a vast sea of human speculations. However, God knows what is good for us, and He is willing to share it with His children. Without the knowledge of God's truth, life remains vanity, meaningless. God's Word says, "He who does the will of God abides forever" (I John 2:17)—in, I might add, satisfaction and contentment.

The *fifth* question also derives from verse 12: "Does anybody know what is coming next?" This question must be understood within the context of the entire book. It is not talking about small, day-to-day issues, but rather the huge ones that pertain to the overall purpose being worked out on earth. Of course, the answer is that nobody knows perfectly except for God. Everybody else's opinions are largely speculations. If God gave us more specific detail, it might severely damage the vital use of faith. He gives us enough information to

keep us looking ahead and to encourage us to be patient and make the best use of the time that He gives us to prepare, because time is valuable.

The Correct Response for All Concerned

The proper answer to all of these questions—especially if it is correct that they are self-justifications raised by converted persons due to a lack of growth—lies in one's use of the faith that God has given us to function within the relationship that He has opened to us.

Life is God's gift, and He desires that we spend it involved with Him, using our faith to prepare for an eternal relationship with Him in His Family Kingdom. This will produce the enjoyable satisfaction and contentment in life that He desires for us. Involving Him is the above-the-sun life.

If there is no Kingdom of God, and if no grand purpose is being worked out, then nothing matters except for what is happening at the moment. This is the mindset of the intellectual and ruling elite in this nation, and they are continuing to slide into it more deeply. This mindset is tilted toward either humanism or secularism, and its fruit is the moral and ethical depravity of a Sodom and Gomorrah. They have nothing glorious to prepare for, so why should they deny themselves any pleasure, any excitement, that their minds and bodies desire right now? God's children, however, because they possess *the* faith, cannot allow themselves to drift into such a destructive mindset.

That leads into the overall subject of the next two chapters of Ecclesiastes: wisdom. To the modern mind, wisdom seems to have evolved into a philosophical abstraction, so it is difficult to nail down as something concrete and useful for daily life.

However, the Bible takes pains to show that the ancient Israelites perceived wisdom as a practical, mental quality linked to skill and most strongly associated with skill in living. It appears primarily to be a fruit of knowledge and understanding derived from life's experiences and fashioned into a highly honed skill. In order to achieve the highest level of this skill, a person must be working with truth, and this is exactly where the Word of God becomes exceedingly important.

In Christian love,



A Tale of Two COMPLAINTS

PART ONE

In the previous issue, we saw that Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe and companion, was affected by the winter of despair that had settled over Judah in the days before its fall to the Babylonians. He groaned and complained. Did that pandemic of despair affect Jeremiah as well? Did he also come to complain to God about his lot in these "worst of times"?

The Scriptures narrate at least two complaints that Jeremiah issued to God. In this article, we will look at the one recorded in Jeremiah 12 (compare Moses' complaint, recorded in Numbers 11:11-15). Here, the prophet treads gingerly:

Righteous are You, O LORD, when I plead with
You;
Yet let me talk with You about Your
judgments.
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?
You have planted them, yes, they have taken
root;
They grow, yes, they bear fruit.
You are near in their mouth
But far from their mind.

But You, O LORD, know me;
You have seen me,
And You have tested my heart toward You.
Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter,
And prepare them for the day of slaughter.
How long will the land mourn,
And the herbs of every field wither?

The beasts and birds are consumed,
For the wickedness of those who dwell there,
Because they said, "He will not see our final
end."

Jeremiah, like Baruch, has become discouraged by the turbulent maelstrom of events around him, the confusion and destruction that always accompany the unraveling of a nation. Yet, the prophet's complaint is more focused than that of his scribe's. Moreover, Jeremiah's complaint does not betray the self-absorption that Baruch's grumbling exhibits. Instead, Jeremiah's complaint is oriented outside himself. It is a "green" complaint, as we would say today: The land, he declares, mourns, the herbs everywhere wither, the animals and birds are gone because the residents of the land are evil.

It is clear that the natural environment of Judah was languishing as a result of mismanagement at the hands of selfish, exploitive people. Jeremiah did not limit culpability to Judah's leaders, but speaks more generally of the "wicked" (verse 1) or of "those who dwell there" (verse 4), who have "taken root" (verse 2), that is, become established to the point that they are prospering due to their environmentally destructive activities.

WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?

Jeremiah's complaint, therefore, has at its heart the issue of prosperity on the part of the wicked, people without scruples who take advantage of others and

prophecy watch *A Tale of Two Complaints*

circumstances for their own gain. Why does God permit the wicked to prosper? The psalmist Asaph broached this issue in Psalm 73. Notice verses 1 through 9:

Truly God is good to Israel,
To such as are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
My steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the boastful,
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For there are no pangs in their death,
But their strength is firm.
They are not in trouble as other men,
Nor are they plagued like other men.
Therefore pride serves as their necklace;
Violence covers them like a garment.
Their eyes bulge with abundance;
They have more than heart could wish.
They scoff and speak wickedly concerning
oppression;
They speak loftily.
They set their mouth against the heavens,
And their tongue walks through the earth.

In verses 12 through 15, the psalmist continues his recital about the “benefits” that accrue to the wicked, who, he claims,

. . . are always at ease;
They increase in riches.
Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain,
And washed my hands in innocence.
For all day long I have been plagued,
And chastened every morning.

In verses 18-19, 27-28, however, Asaph comes to understand the end of the ungodly. It is not nearly as rosy as their earlier prosperity had hinted:

Surely You set them in slippery places;
You cast them down to destruction.
Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a
moment!
They are utterly consumed with terrors.

. . .

For indeed, those who are far from You shall per-
ish;
You have destroyed all those who desert You for
harlotry.
But it is good for me to draw near to God;

I have put my trust in the Lord God,
That I may declare all Your works.

Asaph comes to understand that a time will come when, “in a moment,” God will “destroy those who destroy the earth,” as John states it in Revelation 11:18. Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 8:11, “Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.” Sooner or later, though, their sins and crimes catch up to them, and divine justice—destruction and death—follow.

IF YOU THINK IT'S BAD NOW . . .

God, in His response to Jeremiah, replies in a similar key. We will get a running start in Jeremiah 12:5:

If you have run with the footmen, and they
have wearied you,
Then how can you contend with horses?
And if in the land of peace,
In which you trusted, they wearied you,
Then how will you do in the floodplain of the
Jordan?

God begins by asserting, in effect, “If you think it’s bad now, wait until I’m done with Judah. The worst of times are yet to come!” Jeremiah has only done battle with those in Jerusalem in a time of relative calm—the calm before the storm. The going would get *really* tough outside Judah, in the countries where God would eventually send the prophet, in Egypt, Spain, and Ireland.

As in His response to Baruch, God here reminds Jeremiah that he was not living in normal times but turbulent ones: “I have forsaken My house, I have left My heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of My soul into the hand of her enemies” (verse 7). When God lifts His protective hand from His people, all sorts of terrible things are likely to ensue. The wolves will pounce.

God goes on to state His agreement with His prophet that the land has suffered from mismanagement. In verses 10-11, He claims that “many rulers” (the word in Hebrew more specifically denotes “shepherds”)

. . . have destroyed My vineyard,
They have trodden My portion underfoot;
They have made My pleasant portion a desolate
wilderness.
They have made it desolate;
Desolate, it mourns to Me;

(continued on page 14)

ready answer

“Be ready always to give an answer . . .” I Peter 3:15

Clothing, Wineskins, and Wine

“But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

—*Luke 5:38*

In John 1:11, we read that the Word—the Creator God—came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. The gospel accounts provide ample evidence of this in Jesus’ frequent encounters with the Pharisees and other religious authorities of the day. In a well-worn pattern, the Pharisees question Him on every point possible, trying to find a fault.

One such exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees resulted in what is commonly called the Parable of the Cloth and the Wineskins. While found in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-39), Luke’s version is the fullest:

Then He spoke a parable to them: “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’”

While these examples are valuable in their own right, they do not stand on their own. If we were to begin here, it would be like coming in on the last part of a conversation; without understanding what led up to this, our comprehension will be spotty at best. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all put this parable at the end of a fairly lengthy, yet identical, record of Christ’s actions and the Pharisees’ objections (Matthew 9:1-17; Mark 2:1-22; Luke 5:17-39). His words here, then, are the summation and capstone of a much longer interaction.

ready answer *Clothing, Wineskins, and Wine*

A Healing, a Feast, a Prophecy

The story begins in Luke 5:17, when a paralyzed man is brought to Christ. He recognizes the faith involved and tells him that his sins are forgiven (verses 18-20), a statement that the scribes and the Pharisees, of course, consider blasphemous (verse 21). They rightly understand that only God takes away sin, but they would not consider that the Man who was forgiving sin was God. In verses 22-25, Jesus gives proof that He had been given the power to forgive sins: The man had taken up his bed and was walking home.

After this incident, Jesus calls Levi, or Matthew, the tax collector (Luke 5:27), who becomes a disciple and subsequently prepares a feast in honor of Jesus (verses 28-29). In verse 30, the scribes and Pharisees object to His mingling with tax collectors and other sinners, but Jesus responds, “Those who are well don’t need a physician, but those who are sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” [*New English Translation (NET)*].

At this point, many translations insert a subheading about fasting, but the story continues. The Pharisees point out that John the Baptist’s disciples made prayer and fasting a regular part of their lives, and they slip in the fact that their disciples did that as well (Luke 5:33). Then they contrast that with Christ’s disciples, observing that they have a great penchant for eating and drinking. They imply that His disciples cannot really be serious about a holy life when all they do is have a good time, and in their minds, this reflects poorly on the Teacher. We know this because in Luke 7:34, Jesus quotes the Pharisees as saying that He—the Son of God—is a glutton and winebibber.

Jesus counters that it would be just as inappropriate for His disciples to fast at that time as it would be for the wedding party to fast when the bridegroom is with them (Luke 5:34-35). In other words, Christ’s presence should be a cause for joy. Psalm 16:11 (NET) says, “I experience absolute joy in Your presence; You always give Me sheer delight.” Yes, Jesus was also a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief, but there was every reason for His disciples to be cheerful when they were in His presence. They had no need to draw closer to God through fasting because He was with them.

His example is clear enough on its own, except that a well-known Messianic prophecy speaks of Israel’s God as her Bridegroom (Isaiah 62:5). He was already on the Pharisees’ bad list for telling a man that his sins were forgiven, and now He follows that up by referring to Himself as the Bridegroom!

Luke 5:35 is pivotal when it comes to understanding the parable that follows: “But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them;

then they will fast in those days.” We know how that played out. He was “taken away” first through His crucifixion and then later through His ascension. Jesus being “taken away,” however, resulted in a tremendous blessing, as we will see.

Old and New

The parable, then, is a series of contrasts between new and old. It contains new and old clothing, new and old wineskins, and new and old wine. Christ’s being taken away makes the “newness” possible, and once that “newness” is available, it is wholly incompatible with the old.

Jesus begins with an example of old and new garments: “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old.” In Scripture, going all the way back to the Garden of Eden, garments or clothing are common symbols of righteousness. After Adam and Eve sinned, they tried to cover themselves with something they made with their own hands (Genesis 3:7). Instead, God gave them tunics made of skin (verse 21), requiring the life of an animal, representing the Lamb of God giving His life to cover sin.

Matthew 22:1-13 contains the Parable of the Wedding Garment, whose lesson is that inappropriate clothing will keep a person out of a wedding feast. Isaiah 64:6 says that “all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.” The Pharisees had a righteousness, but Jesus asserts that our righteousness must exceed theirs (Matthew 5:20), meaning that we need to have His righteousness imputed to us, which becomes our new covering, our new garment. As we become one with Him and submit to taking on His image, we have a righteousness that does not come from our works but from God’s work in us.

Thus, we have a contrast between man’s righteousness and the righteousness of Christ. But, just as it makes no sense to tear off a piece from a new garment to patch an old one, so is it also a futile exercise to try to keep our own righteousness intact and use a little bit of Christ’s righteousness to cover a flaw here and there. The two coverings are incompatible—we have to choose one or the other.

The conclusion is that, if a new garment is available, we would be foolish to use it to mend an old, defective one. Because Jesus was taken away, His righteousness is available to us, so we need to discard any thought that our own is suitable. Instead, we must put on His righteousness and be conformed to it so that it fits and covers us appropriately. Clearly, works are involved and required on our part, but without the covering and

involvement of Christ, those works would continue to be as filthy rags.

To understand the new and the old, it is important to realize that the “old” could have many applications. It is not just the Old Covenant. In fact, the Pharisees in Jesus’ audience did not actually represent the Old Covenant. The system of beliefs and practices that developed into Judaism is *not* the same thing as the Old Covenant. Certainly, Judaism makes use of the writings of Moses and the prophets, but it also leans heavily on the traditions of Jewish scholars and is infused with Greek philosophy.

The Pharisees, then, were not actually living by the Old Covenant! God intended that covenant to prepare His people for the coming of the Messiah. Everything in the holiness code, the sacrifices, and so forth was intended to point to Christ. Since the Pharisees could not recognize the Object of the Covenant, what they were practicing was not what the pre-incarnate Christ delivered to Moses. They had gotten far off course.

Therefore, the “old” elements in this parable could be any system of belief aside from what became available through Christ. At the time, that could have been the Old Covenant or Judaism or a pagan belief system. For us, it could be Catholicism, Protestantism, secularism, or any other *-ism*.

Wine and Wineskins

Continuing in Luke 5:37-38, we see the example of putting new wine into old wineskins:

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

The meaning here is not as cut-and-dried as with the garments, since the Bible uses wine in a wide variety of ways. It can represent a drug or a blessing. It can be a symbol of debauchery or of abundance. Wine was part of the drink offering, symbolizing being poured out in service. It was part of Melchizedek’s blessing on Abraham, and 2,000 years later, Jesus uses it in the Passover as the blood of the New Covenant. Psalm 75 shows a cup of wine of God’s wrath, and Revelation 18 depicts a cup in the hand of Mystery Babylon, representing its intoxicating culture and the spirit of the times.

Obviously, not all of those meanings will fit, but when we link the new wine with Jesus being taken away, it coincides with the Passover cup, representing Christ’s blood and the New Covenant. When we add

the fact that the Holy Spirit could not be given until Jesus had gone away, then the new wine entails more than just forgiveness, but also suggests God’s Spirit—His love, power, and sound-mindedness (II Timothy 1:7).

In the example, the new wine is expansive. The fermentation process produces a great deal of pressure. An old and brittle wineskin will not be able to withstand the increasing stress, and it will burst.

The wineskin is a type of vessel. Throughout Scripture, vessels are symbols for people. For Christians, there is an “old man” and a “new man.” The old man represents the life we had before conversion, and the new man, the new vessel, is the life that comes because of conversion. But if we take the expansive and dynamic new wine, and we attempt to put that into the old life, we can be sure that we will have a disaster on our hands.

Our old lives, our old ways, are entirely incompatible with the new wine. The new wine requires change, expansion, and steady improvement, while in the old life, there was no real desire or ability to change. Remember, the new wine is tied to the blood of Passover, the New Covenant, the receipt of God’s Spirit, and the spiritual result that will be produced by those powerful factors. Trying to cram all that into a person who is unwilling to change will invariably result in his coming apart at the seams. The precious new wine is spilled on the ground and dreadfully wasted.

Verse 39 adds even more: “And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’” On the physical level, a finely aged wine is obviously preferable to a new wine. One year at the Feast of Tabernacles, I had the opportunity to sample a Bordeaux bottled in the late 1970s or early 80s. Suffice it to say that the wine’s depth and complexity of flavors would put to profound shame anything bottled recently.

Curiously, though, in this parable, the *new* wine is the one that is to be preferred! This may seem incongruous at first, until we remember what these things represent. The new wine of Christ’s sacrifice, of the New Covenant, and of God’s Spirit being poured out on us is infinitely more valuable than anything before conversion. Whether the old wine represents physical abundance or the headiness of what Babylon entices us with constantly, nothing can be compared to the new wine—if we have God’s Spirit.

However, because we are still human, and the old man still remains in us to some degree, at times the old wine seems better. The old wine seems more gratifying to the senses. Before conversion, we certainly had no interest in this new wine because the old wine suited us just fine, even if it was making us miserable. Even after conversion, we sometimes reach for the old wine.

ready answer *Clothing, Wineskins, and Wine*

When we are under that influence, we do not find the new wine appealing because we are hooked on the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (I John 2:16). It requires spiritual sobriety to recognize the true blessing of the new wine, but we cannot do that easily—if at all—when the old wine is on our palate. It is only in abstaining from the old wine that we can truly appreciate the uniqueness and superiority of the new.

Finely Aged Wine

There is a final point regarding the new wine in Matthew 26:27-29:

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”

Judges 9:13 informs us that wine cheers both God and man, but Matthew 26:29 goes far beyond that. Clearly, Jesus is awaiting a specific fruit of the vine. Part of that appears to be when this same New Covenant is made with Israel and Judah (see “Finishing the Week,” *Forerunner*, September-October 2011).

Think for a moment, however, about the sanctification process we are experiencing right now, a

process akin to fermentation. We have been blessed with new wine, and we have been given new lives in which to hold it. As we grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18), that wine is aging and maturing within us. He is not merely looking forward to a feast with “drinks all ‘round.” He is anticipating finely aged spiritual wine, wine that He put into new wineskins, wine that has fully matured. He is anticipating a perfected vintage of His people, poured out for Him over the course of our lives. He is looking forward to savoring *us* because of what *He* will have produced in our lives—if we allow Him.

All of Christ’s words and actions in the extended context are wrapped up in this. He forgives the sins of the paralytic, showing that the door was open for others to be forgiven. He then heals the paralytic. Tying that to the quotation in Luke 4:18—that He came to heal the broken-hearted—we can see that His healing goes beyond just broken bodies. He states that those who are sick are in need of a physician, demonstrating His desire and qualifications to take that on. He says that He came, not to condemn sinners, but to call them to repentance, and through their repentance, cleanse and give them life. Then He alludes to being taken away, an event that would open the door for all these things to happen on a larger scale.

While the Pharisees were blind to all this, Christians have been given eyes to see (Matthew 13:16; John 3:3). We would do well to consider what sort of wine we want to bring to the table in our Father’s Kingdom.

—David C. Grabbe

prophecy watch *A Tale of Two Complaints*

(continued from page 10)

The whole land is made desolate,
Because no one takes it to heart.

God had surveyed His land and had seen the horrendous devastation wrought upon it by self-serving, uncaring, unappreciative people, leaders of the nation who should have known better. The result of the environmental degradation will be a lot of work—but not much in the way of harvest. Note verse 13:

They have sown wheat but reaped thorns;
They have put themselves to pain but do not profit.
But be ashamed of your harvest
Because of the fierce anger of the LORD.

In verse 14, God reiterates that He will in no way be

deterred from His purpose of uprooting Judah. The wicked in Judah will ultimately not prosper, and they will assuredly reap what they have sown. He stresses here that He will also destroy Judah’s “evil neighbors,” who have attacked her over the years:

Against all My evil neighbors who touch the inheritance which I have caused My people Israel to inherit—behold, I will pluck them out of their land and pluck out the house of Judah from among them.

Jeremiah took God’s words to heart and went beyond his “attitude”—only to become beset by more serious doubts, a real crisis in his faith. Next month, we will take a look at Jeremiah’s other complaint.

—Charles Whitaker

Japan: Rising Tensions With China

From the dawn of its history, Japan's relationship with China has been a troubled one. While the origin of the Japanese people is shrouded in mystery, what is clear is that the two peoples have borne an antipathy for each other from antiquity, both at times considering the other to be barbarian. In the Medieval period, when strong Chinese emperors ruled, they struggled over the Korean Peninsula. Later, Japanese pirates were the bane of coastal China. More recently, the two nations fought two wars, the first in 1894 and the second in 1937. During World War II, Japanese territorial conquests and atrocities left deep wounds among the Chinese.

Japan's economy soared in the decades after its defeat by the Allies, while China suffered the throes of civil war and its aftermath under the victorious Communists. Yet, as the Cold War was ending, their situations reversed: China's economic potential was unleashed once Deng Xiaoping's reforms took hold, contrasting with Japan's sharp, two-decades-long economic decline and paralysis. China now has the world's second biggest economy, while Japan's has dropped to third.

The economic, demographic, and military power of China looms like a pall over Japan, and its politicians and citizens see it as an existential threat. However, recent events—like the 9.0 Tohoku earthquake that damaged reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in March 2011 and the weakening of the Liberal Democratic Party that has dominated Japanese politics since the 1950s—have combined to begin to shake Japan out of its stagnation. While still uncertain, the country is slowly returning to its more nationalistic stance, an attitude that its neighbors once feared.

However, these are early days. This nascent nationalistic undercurrent may be a substantial force for change, fueling a movement to eliminate its postwar taboos, or it could fizzle out under the weight of Japan's many problems, such as its extremely low birthrate, its burdened social security system, its moribund economy, and its stressed power grid. The nation balances on a knife's edge.

A recent Pew Research poll reported that just 6% of Chinese had a favorable view of Japan, and in Japan, only 5% view China favorably. This antipathy provides the backdrop for Japan's relationship with China, and right now, that relationship overshadows everything. Twenty-three thousand Japanese companies operate in China, employing ten million Chinese workers. Japan envisions the success of these businesses in the vast Chinese market as essential to reviving its domestic economy, even while its distrust of China compels them to hedge their bets by shifting investment to the smaller economies of Southeast Asia.

If Japan continues to increase its trade with the tigers of Southeast Asia, the chance of conflict with China must intensify due to heavy Chinese involvement there. It could even lead to maritime clashes, as each country vies to protect its overseas

interests. Inevitably, the Japanese people would demand a more assertive foreign policy and perhaps even military engagement to keep China at bay. At this time, Japanese naval prowess, despite the nation's recent pacifism, is still superior to China's, and if forced, could blunt or even curb Beijing's growing maritime ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region. If such a situation occurred, it could balance the powers in the East China Sea without the direct involvement of the U.S. Navy, but it could also lead to America losing control of its long-time ally.

Events may be forcing matters toward conflict. At the Munich Security Conference held in January, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying assessed the China-Japan relationship to be "at its worst." At Davos, a Chinese delegation member called Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and North Korea's Kim Jong Un "troublemakers," essentially equating the two. Not to be outdone, Abe described China as militaristic and overly aggressive, comparing it to pre-World War I Germany.

It is not just a war of words. Pushing tensions to new highs, Beijing instituted an extended Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea last November, requiring aircraft to follow instructions issued by Chinese authorities, even over contested territories. A month later, Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine, a lightning rod for anti-Japanese sentiment, since it is associated with Japanese militarism during World War II.

While these are fairly minor provocations, there is always a chance that such an insignificant act could ignite a far larger conflagration. For instance, Japan frequently scrambles its jets to deal with what they consider to be Chinese "incursions" into their territory. What if one of the pilots of either side became trigger-happy? With the strained relations and antagonistic history of these two nations, the aggrieved side will assume the worst of the aggressor's intentions. Worse, at present, Japan and China have no diplomatic outreach to try to avoid such "misunderstandings."

Both nations know that a war is not in their best interests, yet they have their reasons for prolonging tensions. For one thing, it creates positive political approval back home, making the leaders of each nation look strong against their historic enemies across the water. Prime Minister Abe in particular sees a strong and vital China to be a continuing threat to Japan's status in Asia. Thus, if he feels pushed by China, he will not hesitate to push back in kind.

Most likely, over the near term, we can probably expect the two nations to sustain their tit-for-tat relationship. Military conflict between the two is a longshot, but not out of the question. If the mutual retaliation lasts long enough, public opinion will be aggravated, and Abe will certainly attempt either to go around Japan's prohibitions to use force in international disputes or to have them emended. Either way, change in Japan's military stance will likely occur sooner than later.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

WORLDWATCH

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

What Must We Do When We Recognize Our Guilt?

Scripture makes little distinction between guilt, sin, and punishment. Although guilt has its emotional component, it is not primarily a feeling but a state that arises because of a violation of divine law—that is, sin (either of commission or omission) against God or one’s neighbor. Individuals may also bring guilt upon entire groups, as, for instance, Leviticus 4:3 says that the priest’s sins “bring guilt on the people.”

Nevertheless, we must understand sin and guilt as personal responsibilities, emphasizing the motives of the inner heart and mind. Jesus teaches that sin begins in the heart (Matthew 5:21-22). He emphasizes the inner motive and aim of the guilty party, and degrees of guilt are seen in light of individual motive and knowledge.

Guilt is connected to forgiveness of sin as a debt owed to God (Matthew 18:21-35). Guilt has serious consequences and so is deserving of punishment (I Corinthians 11:27-29).

It is only in the life of Jesus Christ that we can measure the extent of humanity’s guilt in the sight of God. He sees man’s guilt as the result of sin that killed His Son. The apostle Paul reinforces the fact that everyone is guilty before God until he is justified and sanctified by God (Romans 1:18-3:20).



1. What are the remedies for guilt? Leviticus 5:17-18; I John 1:7.

COMMENT: Sin requires some sort of punishment (for example, Deuteronomy 19:11-13, 21; 25:1-3). To avoid punishment—receiving the penalty of the law—action must be taken to remove the guilt. In the Old Testament, offerings were performed to cover the penalty (see Leviticus 4-6), along with restitution in relevant cases. Those who sinned defiantly and neglected the required atoning sacrifice were “cut off,” remaining in their guilt.

Under the New Covenant, guilt is addressed by having sin washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. Calling for humility, James commands believers to “cleanse your hands” and “purify your hearts” as requirements for entering God’s presence (James 4:8-10). “Hands” represents action (i.e., stop doing wrong things), while “heart” signifies thinking (i.e., stop thinking bad thoughts). This cleansing is required for salvation (John 13:8; Titus 3:5). Water baptism symbolizes our redemption, in which our guilt is washed away, and we arise to newness of life (Acts 22:16; Romans 6:1-6).

Blood corresponds with the stain of guilt, but it is also the means of atonement for sin. Sprinkling with blood can both cleanse and consecrate (Leviticus 16:18-19; I Peter 1:2). Faith in the blood of Christ is the ultimate remedy for human guilt, bringing full and final atonement to those who believe (Romans 3:23-25).

2. How should we respond once we recognize our guilt? Leviticus 26:40-42; Acts 2:37-38.

COMMENT: We must turn our guilt into responsibility, first by acknowledging and admitting we have committed sin, and then by repenting, changing, and overcoming our wrong ways. The initial step to overcoming sin is to humble our hearts and accept our guilt. Overcoming, that is, our struggle after righteousness, is evidence of our admission of personal guilt; by striving to rid ourselves of sin and living in accordance with God’s standards, we admit to God that we are guilty of sin. The apostle James writes:

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted [found guilty] by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. (James 2:8-10)

Vine’s Expository Dictionary defines the Greek word *enochos*, “guilty” in James 2:10, as “lit., ‘held in, bound by, liable to a charge or action by law.’” When guilty of sin, we have bound ourselves by it, relinquishing our liberty.

3. What is “the whole law”? James 2:10.

COMMENT: The whole law encompasses the entire will of God. To break any part of it is to infringe on that will and therefore become guilty of sin, to become a sinner in principle against each individual law and the intent of the whole law. Even under human justice systems, a person becomes a criminal by breaking just one law.

God’s law goes beyond physical infractions of rules. For instance, when He directs us to love our neighbors, He does not ask us to like the way they are. He expects us to give them tolerance, patience, and help when needed. Passing by a beaten man lying in a ditch on the road to Jericho may not be legally wrong, but it is unloving (Luke 10:25-37). Thus, a person doing so is guilty of far greater spiritual sin. He does not love his neighbor as himself.

In Matthew 22:37-39, Christ tells us how we can fulfill His royal law—by keeping the two great commandments:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

If we want to be part of God’s glorious Kingdom, we must face our guilt and overcome our sins.

—Martin G. Collins