

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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*Lowly,
and
Sitting on a
Donkey*



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Jesus Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem just days before His death is a highlight of His ministry. He rode into the city that day on a donkey rather than on a horse, as we would tend to expect of a king. Biblically, in contrast to the horse, the donkey has a significant symbolic history that adds a great deal to our understanding of Christ Himself and of Christian character.

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Ecclesiastes and Christian Living

Part Eleven: Paradox, Continued

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:15, “There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness.” This verse presents a Christian with a paradox about Christian living. A paradox is a circumstance, statement, activity, or conduct that is contrary to expectation. It is an inconsistency, a sharp irregularity, that often produces a conundrum, which is a riddle or puzzle. In Solomon’s paradox, the righteous person may ask, “Why should such a situation exist? Where are the blessings God has promised? Where is God in this picture? Has He not promised prosperity and long life if we obey Him?” Yes, indeed He has.

In the previous article, we saw the potential for one of two possible problems arising from this experience, both of which involve misjudgments made by the righteous. The first is to misjudge God and accuse Him of being unjust, assuming we know a better way than He does. Not much humility is shown in coming to this conclusion! We need to spend no more time on this one.

The second problem arises when one misjudges, not only God, but also the self, the circumstance, and the possible “solution.” This

combination can lead to making the paradox truly destructive to one’s spiritual health.

A Quick Warning of Danger

From the vivid description in Psalm 73, we learned of the spiritual and emotional agony of a converted man experiencing a situation similar to what Solomon describes. The author survived it because he responded in the correct way. God intervened to ensure his rescue, or he might have slid “right out of the church,” as we might say today. The author never slid into the “righteous over much” mode, as the King James Version phrases it in Ecclesiastes 7:16, or into “super-righteousness,” as some modern commentators call it. Solomon warns us that this reaction is destructive.

In Ecclesiastes 7:16-17, Solomon gives a warning right on the heels of his mention of the paradox, making a clear connection between the paradox and the possible reaction of a righteous person. He does it with a strong admonition: “Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: Why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: Why should you die before

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your time?” A stern caution indeed. Super-righteousness is a misguided response that seems to arise from our judgment that we are having all this trouble because we are being punished.

Is Punishment Really the Cause?

Psalm 73:12-14 shows the anguished complaint of the righteous man:

Look at these men of arrogance; they never have to lift a finger—theirs is a life of ease; and all the time their riches multiply. Have I been wasting my time? Why take the trouble to be pure? All I get out of it is trouble and woe—every day and all day long. (*The Living Bible*)

The author’s distress is evident. At this point, he was clearly puzzled too. How quickly he seemed to have forgotten earlier outpourings of God’s benefits. Did he allow his anguish to lead him into believing that he was being picked on unfairly? In this state of mind, a person can easily come to a wrong judgment about how he should respond.

Why would a righteous person believe God was punishing him? In one sense, it is easy to reach such a conclusion because in our calling we are educated to see sin in ourselves. Why? If we do not first see our sins, how can we repent of them? And, if we are not overcoming our sins, how can God be glorified in us?

In addition, at the same time we are also being educated about the holiness of God. Together, the two of them serve to emphasize how wide the contrast is between Him and us, sharpening our awareness of our sinfulness. How can we possibly live up to that standard? We conclude, then, that we are being punished. Seemingly confirming our conclusion is the apostle Paul’s statement in Romans 7:24 about his own sinfulness, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

However, this is not the end of the story on making this judgment, for it is indisputably unbalanced. We must emphasize and believe another characteristic of God’s nature more profoundly. Exodus 34:4-9 records an episode following the Israelites’ rebellion after receiving the law at Mount Sinai. Moses returned to the mountain and asked to see God, that is, literally see Him in person with his own eyes. God granted His request, permitting him to see His back. When God passed by, He proclaimed:

The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity

and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.

God emphasizes His mercy, patience, goodness, truth, and forgiveness. Why do we not think first of His grace and run to Him, rather than fear His justice, accuse Him, and run from Him? He is our help. He gives us salvation. He provides us with a Savior. He called us and gives us His Holy Spirit, empowering us to learn and grow. He is creating us in His image.

The author of Psalm 73 used this positive insight to come to a better solution. He went to the sanctuary and prayed, and God gave him a balanced, quiet, faithful spirit. The accusations stopped and praise for God began because he could now understand the entire picture in a more sound-minded, less self-centered way.

A Bridge to Clearer Understanding

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:13-14:

Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider; surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find nothing that will happen after him.

These verses are akin to a bridge: They provide a conclusion to the teaching that precedes them, and at the same time, they lay a foundation to understand the teaching that follows. In both cases, they essentially say, “Whatever you choose to do, for the best understanding do not leave a correct understanding of God out of the picture.”

The Living Bible translates them in a picturesque way, adding considerably to our understanding of the paradox’s lesson by bringing God clearly into the picture before we even see the inconsistency:

See the way God does things and fall into line. Don’t fight the facts of nature. Enjoy prosperity whenever you can, and when hard times strike, realize that God gives one as well as the other so that everyone will realize that nothing is certain in this life.

This translation clearly reflects on the subject of Ecclesiastes 3—“To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven”—then proceeds to show God’s involvement in all that is happening. Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 is saying that God *is* involved, therefore we should accept the circumstance we find our-

selves in, exercise faith, and learn to roll with the punches life is dealing us! The “punches” include paradoxical situations.

Thus, when faced with a situation that on the surface seems unfair, the first element in reaching a proper conclusion is to avoid bringing God into a negative judgment. God is aware; He is involved. He loves us; He is not cruel. He is always fair in His dealings. This sets us on the path to a righteous solution.

This approach is reinforced by Solomon’s description of the situation as “what He has made crooked” (verse 13). This verifies God’s involvement. Certainly, the paradox is a crooked situation. We consider things “straight” when events are clear and going well. “Crooked” happens when things are going contrary to our expectations.

God’s governance of His creation contains absolutely no complacency. He creates circumstances for our benefit both to test us and to strengthen our faith. We need to exercise our faith, and He needs to know where we stand. We must understand that, as the apostle Paul states in I Corinthians 13:12, we sometimes “see in a mirror dimly.” So the question facing us is, “Do we trust that He is faithfully carrying out His creative actions even when we fail to see the entire picture?”

It Can Happen To Any of Us

Psalm 73:1-17 shows that the righteous man severely misjudged the reality of his situation for a time until God revealed the truth. This trap can catch any of us. The wicked appear to prosper only if we consider merely what appears on the surface. What God reveals to the psalmist is that the people he envies may appear to gain the whole world, but in reality, they are lacking something of immeasurably greater value. Through prayer and meditation, the psalmist is able to grasp this, and through God’s revelation, he returns to a better emotional and spiritual state.

However, while in that anguished state, he sincerely assumed God was plaguing and punishing him every morning (verse 14). There are times when that may indeed be the case, and we might need a firm spanking because we may have repeatedly committed a sin and need to be brought up short. But we must not allow this to be our only conclusion, as the Bible frequently shows that, in the case of God’s children, most trials are *not* given as punishment.

As a trial continues, a Christian tends to reason that, if he were not sinning, he would not be going through this experience. He therefore has a strong tendency to recall scriptures that say something similar to, “Therefore you shall be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Verses of this sort become our guide to correct the stressful condition. It is at this point that, all too

often, we make a significant mistake, assuming that we are being punished.

However, we need to understand a critical element that will make Ecclesiastes 7:15 a bit clearer. The Hebrew word translated as “perishes” (*’abad*; *Strong’s* #6) creates a misunderstanding. In its strongest sense, if the context calls for it, it can indeed indicate death. Its first definition, though, is simply “to wander.” It can also suggest merely slipping away or declining, not necessarily death. Solomon is indeed warning that danger is present, but it is not an emergency situation. He, then, is saying in verse 15 that the just man is declining in his righteousness. He is not saying that he is perishing because he is an evil sinner ignoring a character flaw.

The reality is that he is declining despite being righteous, which makes all the difference in the world. He is not perishing because he is not righteous enough; he simply is not handling a trial well. Punishment from God is not the issue here, just as it was not the issue with the psalmist, Job, Paul, or for that matter, Christ, in the midst of their deep trials. However, it is indeed a warning because danger is present.

Job, a righteous man, went through a great trial but not because he was a terrible sinner. Job 1:1 clearly states, “There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was *blameless and upright*, and one who *feared God and shunned evil*.” He was clearly not an evil sinner. However, his friends thought he was hypocritically hiding the fact that he was a sinner. Job did not judge himself as such, so he defended himself—vigorously. Job was correct. When he repented, it was of his lack of understanding, and God accepted it.

As he served God and the church, was Paul being punished through his trials (II Corinthians 11:22-33)? Did Jesus go through the horrible torture of the crucifixion and death because He was not righteous enough? He certainly did receive tremendously unjustified and painful punishment, but it was not for His sins but ours. Punishment from God is not the issue in this paradoxical circumstance either. It rarely is the issue with His children, and there are reasons why.

Testing, Salvation, and Works

When we are called into God’s Family and the church, our lives change radically because God’s creative activities intensify. He must prepare us for our change. He has allowed Himself enough time, but He will most certainly not waste any of it. Consider that God used Jesus, Job, and Paul, among others, for specific purposes in His great creative program. Their parts included difficult trials that were public enough to witness for God before the world and for us too. This factor will also be active in our lives.

Assuming the psalmist of Psalm 73 was a converted man, what would have happened to him if he had not done the right thing and appealed to God, or if, despite appealing to Him, God did not respond as quickly as he anticipated? The trial would surely have continued. One thing is certain: His envious attitude was of absolutely no help. It did not help to make the trial go away.

How often have we witnessed converted people go through seemingly never-ending trials? Have we had to endure such things because of our faith? Hebrews 11 witnesses to us of such trials, reporting events that may have ended only with the death of the saints.

In other words, paradoxes are not unusual for us. The stakes are high in our calling. We *must* be tested.

When a person is involved in such a scenario, in reality only three alternatives exist: First, with much prayer and steadfast submission to God's will, he can continue faithfully enduring. Second, he can give up in despair and slide right out of the church. Third, he can strive all the harder to impress God by becoming super-righteous so that He will take notice and bless him for his righteousness, relieving the stress.

It is the third alternative that Solomon addresses in Ecclesiastes 7:15-22, a "solution" that contains an element of danger. We may have lived through such a circumstance and been delivered, totally unaware of the peril. Super-righteousness is peculiar and dangerous because it is really a deceptive form of evil.

How does super-righteousness arise within a converted person? On the surface, it actually seems like a natural outcome unless the situation is controlled to prevent it. Though a form of self-righteousness, it is different from the self-righteousness we are more familiar with. It can develop from a resolve to obey God better, but those efforts are allowed to get out of control.

Two major abnormalities motivate super-righteousness: First, the misguided attitude is caused by a belief that one is being punished. Second, it tends to produce a subtle but spiritually cancerous fruit, making it spiritually dangerous.

We will examine the misguided motivation first: The natural solution, we think, is to pursue righteousness with even greater vigor to produce the prosperity, long life, security, and hope that God promises. We are tempted to become super-righteous to achieve these promises based on *our own works*, and there lies the dangers. Having a strong resolve to overcome is good, but it must be balanced by understanding and wisdom.

Super-righteousness all by itself is not the solution! Why? No matter how righteous we are through our works, we can *never* use them to force God to prolong our lives or prosper us. God knows what is in our heart of hearts. In reality, the goal of perfect righteousness has been beyond us ever since we first sinned. With that single

transgression, that goal was forever destroyed. It will never be reached. An impossible goal is trouble.

Pride Must Be Stopped in its Tracks

The apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that, no matter how intense they are, our works will never attain salvation for us. Notice what he writes in Ephesians 2:8-10 (*The Amplified Bible*):

For it is by free grace (God's unmerited favor) that you are saved (delivered from judgment and made partakers of Christ's salvation) through [your] faith. And this [salvation] is not of yourselves [of your own doing, it came not through your own striving], but it is the gift of God; not because of works [not the fulfillment of the Law's demands], lest any man should boast. [It is not the result of what anyone can possibly do, so no one can pride himself in it or take glory to himself.] For we are God's [own] handiwork (His workmanship), recreated in Christ Jesus, [born anew] that we may do those good works which God predestined (planned beforehand) for us [taking paths which He prepared ahead of time], that we should walk in them [living the good life which He prearranged and made ready for us to live].

This passage clarifies that God has willed the overall status of our relationship with Him because it is good for His purpose and for our character. Salvation is entirely a gift of God. Not one iota of it results from our having earned it because *He owes us nothing*. This truth impinges on this issue of super-righteousness because it is the gift of God's Spirit that enables us to do the works He requires for growth and overcoming. God created us as humans. God calls us and brings us to repentance. God gives His Spirit and educates us so that we have knowledge of what is required of us. Our relationship with Him is entirely one of *dependence*.

Prior to baptism, as we learn the legal aspects of our relationship to Him before making the New Covenant, we are cautioned about our position before Him. A covenant is an agreement, and our agreement is with God. The agreement is essentially that, if we will give ourselves with wholehearted understanding and repentance to His purposes, He will forgive our sins and actively create us in His image.

Concerning our part, Luke 14:26-27 relates the terms in a condensed form:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters,

(continued on page 13)

ready answer

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

Why Was Jesus Not Crucified as Passover Began?

*“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, . . .
and yielded up His spirit.”*

—Matthew 27:46, 50

Among the established doctrines of the church of God, certain questions arise on a regular basis, questions which—if not answered correctly—can lead people away from God and away from the rest of the Body.

One of these recurring questions is the correct timing of Passover. Historically, the church of God has observed the Passover just after sunset as the 14th day of Abib begins, as commanded in Exodus 12:1-14 (see also Leviticus 23:4-5; Numbers 9:2-5). However, it is also plain from Scripture that Jesus Christ was *not* sacrificed at that time—His trial and crucifixion took place during the daylight portion of the 14th, and He died around 3:00 PM on the preparation day for the first day of Unleavened Bread (Matthew 27:45-50; Mark 15:33-37; Luke 23:44-46; John 19:30-31). Since He is our Passover (I Corinthians 5:7), why did His death not occur at the time the Passover lambs were to be slain—at the beginning of the 14th day? Or should His death set the standard for understanding the instructions given to Israel?

To add to the complexity, the gospel accounts show Jesus observing the Passover with His disciples at the beginning of the 14th. Which of His actions should we use as our guide for observing Passover: the time when He *observed* it or when He *died*? And why are those events at different times?

“I Will Keep the Passover”

When the time of Jesus’ death is chosen above all else, the typical result is a change in the observance of Passover from the beginning of the 14th day of Abib, just after sunset, to the afternoon of the 14th or even into the 15th. Further, those who make this change must then find a different explanation for when the Israelites killed the lambs and later left Egypt, which frequently involves leaning on Jewish tradition for support—for those Jewish sects that follow Talmudic traditions promote this divergent perspective.

If the time of Christ’s death is the correct time to observe the Passover, what is the significance of the bread, wine, and footwashing that He shared with the disciples

ready answer *Why Was Jesus Not Crucified as Passover Began?*

the previous evening? Some suppose that it was some sort of pre-memorial dinner rather than the actual Passover, yet the gospel accounts belie this supposition. Notice, for example, Matthew 26:17-19, where there is a conversation between Jesus and His disciples about where they would keep the Passover:

Now on the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?” And He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, “My time is at hand; *I will keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.*”’” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. (Emphasis ours throughout)

(Verse 17 says this took place “on the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread,” which can be confusing. Mark’s and Luke’s accounts contain similar wording. This difficulty is explained in our article, “Is Passover on the First Day of Unleavened Bread?”)

There is no equivocation in Jesus’ words. The stated will and intent of the Son of Man was to keep the Passover with His disciples in the house of that certain man. He knew He would be betrayed and crucified, but He, God in the flesh, said with full assurance that He would be keeping the Passover with His disciples in that house.

When He was crucified, though, He was *not* in any man’s house, nor was He with His disciples—they had all fled!—so that was not when He or they kept the Passover. Did Jesus’ words return to Him void (see Isaiah 55:11)? If the Messiah’s words hold any weight with us, we can be confident that His will came to pass, and that the meal He shared with His disciples—including the bread and wine (Matthew 26:26-29)—was the Passover.

Mark’s account reinforces Matthew’s testimony and contains a couple of notable additions:

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they killed the Passover lamb, His disciples said to Him, “Where do You want us to go and prepare, that You may eat the Passover?” And He sent out two of His disciples and said to them, “Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him. Wherever he goes in, say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says, “*Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?*”’” Then he will show you a large upper room, furnished and prepared; there make ready for us.” So His disciples went out, and came into the city, and found it just as He had said to them; and they prepared the Passover. In the evening He came with the twelve. (Mark 14:12-17)

Whereas Matthew’s account has Jesus saying, “I will *keep* the Passover at your house with My disciples,” Mark’s clarifies the phrase “*keep* the Passover” with “*eat* the Passover.” This is an essential detail because some have tried to explain His words away by claiming He merely mentions *preparing* for the Passover. But Mark brings out the fact that on this same occasion He meant He would *eat* the Passover with His disciples, not simply make preparations.

We again see His intention to use the guest (or upper) room of that certain man’s house. Did our Messiah mean what He said? Are any words of God untrustworthy? If He did not mean what He said here, it means that either the sovereign God’s will was thwarted, or else Jesus duplicitously said one thing while intending to do another. As Paul says, God forbid!

Luke gives a third witness to this event:

Then came the Day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover must be killed. And He sent Peter and John, saying, “*Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat.*” So they said to Him, “Where do You want us to prepare?” And He said to them, “Behold, when you have entered the city, a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him into the house which he enters. Then you shall say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says to you, “*Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?*”’” Then he will show you a large, furnished upper room; there make ready.” So they went and found it just as He had said to them, and they prepared the Passover. When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, “*With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer;* for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 22:7-16)

As with Mark, Luke’s account emphasizes that Jesus would eat the Passover with His disciples, not merely prepare for it. In verse 15, He declares how great His desire had been to eat that Passover with them. His focus that evening as He sat with His disciples was on *eating* the Passover, not on *being* the Passover. He spoke of what He was doing then, not on what He would be doing later on the 14th.

His words also reveal that the eating of the Passover was to be *before* He suffered (verse 15). His crucifixion began at “the third hour” (Mark 15:25), about nine o’clock the following morning, and ended after “the ninth hour” (Matthew 27:46). Jesus obviously knew when Passover was to be observed, and “with fervent desire [He had] desired” to eat it with His disciples *before* He suffered. There is no indication He said this in reference to a meal

the following afternoon or that He longed wistfully for the crucifixion to be put off until He could eat a late Abib 14 Passover.

The only conclusion is that He did in fact eat the Passover with His disciples that evening after the 14th had begun, prior to His arrest later that night and His appalling suffering, which began the next morning. These three accounts should leave no doubt that Jesus intended to, and in fact did, eat the Passover with His disciples at the beginning of the 14th day.

Clarification from Hebrews

So, returning to our question: Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover “when the hour had come” (Luke 22:14), yet our Passover Lamb was not killed until many hours later. To understand how this could be, we need to consider some things from Hebrews 9:19-26 (Phillips’ Translation):

For when Moses had told the people every command of the Law he took calves’ and goats’ blood with water and scarlet wool, and sprinkled both the book and all the people with a sprig of hyssop, saying: “This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you.” Moses also sprinkled with blood the tent itself and all the sacred vessels. And you will find that in the Law almost all cleansing is made by means of blood—as the common saying has it: “No shedding of blood, no remission of sin.” It was necessary for the earthly reproductions of heavenly realities to be purified by such methods, but the actual heavenly things could only be made pure in God’s sight by higher sacrifices than these. Christ did not therefore enter into any holy places made by human hands (however truly these may represent heavenly realities), but he entered Heaven itself to make his appearance before God as High Priest on our behalf. There is no intention that he should offer himself regularly, like the High Priest entering the holy of holies every year with the blood of another creature. For that would mean that he would have to suffer death every time he entered Heaven from the beginning of the world! No, the fact is that now, at this point in time, the end of the present age, he has appeared once and for all to abolish sin by the sacrifice of himself.

This passage contains a couple of points to help us. The first is that the entire sacrificial system, the Aaronic priesthood, and the Tabernacle system of worship were only copies of a spiritual reality. While the instructions given in the Pentateuch about these things are decidedly important in their own right—including the Passover instructions—they point to something that is vastly more significant. The physical rites were critically important for what God was doing with a carnal people, and they still

contain valuable principles for us, but they in no way supersede the spiritual, heavenly reality.

Secondly, Jesus perfectly fulfilled all the spiritual requirements on which these physical rites were based. But it is imperative to remember that what was most important is what needed to be accomplished *spiritually*. The Father and the Son determined what needed to happen to meet the spiritual requirements. This passage shows that the Father was perfectly satisfied with everything that Jesus did, thus whatever the spiritual requirements were for the various sacrifices and rituals, they have been met. Everything in the sacrificial system that was of consequence to God’s plan and His sense of justice has been fulfilled.

Yet, even though the physical rites *point to* the spiritual reality, they do not match up exactly. For example, the Israelites were required to make a morning sacrifice and an evening sacrifice. There is no doubt that Jesus Christ fulfilled all sacrificial requirements, including those. However, He was not crucified in the morning nor in the evening when those sacrifices were supposed to be made. He was not killed on a Sabbath, when special sacrifices were made. Nor was He killed on a new moon, when other special sacrifices were made. (The 14th day of the month is a full moon.)

Taking this a step further, the Day of Atonement is considered the holiest and most solemn day of the year. Only then could the high priest enter the Holy of Holies. The blood sacrifices for the sins of the priest and the nation were very detailed. In the passage above, Christ’s sacrifice is described in the imagery of the Day of Atonement, not of the Passover. Jesus, though, was not sacrificed on Atonement. His blood was never sprinkled on any altar, let alone the Mercy Seat. Our High Priest did not enter the Holy of Holies of the physical Temple. He entered the heavenly Temple, but if He did that when He ascended to the Father, He did not do even that on the Day of Atonement.

Clearly, the way that Christ fulfilled all of these things was not identical to the requirements He gave to Israel. Rather, the instructions given to them were only types of what He would later fulfill in His life, crucifixion, and death.

Passover Fulfilled

So, *how did* Jesus fulfill the Passover requirements? He ate the Passover with His disciples at the beginning of the 14th day of the first month. While they probably did eat roasted lamb with bitter herbs, what Jesus emphasized for His disciples was the bread and the wine. Through washing His disciples’ feet (John 13:2-17), He set the example of humble service, as well as forgiving others, because cleansing is symbolic of forgiveness. Most importantly, His sinless blood was shed on Passover day.

Yet, parts of the original Passover instructions were *not* fulfilled *in their letter*! Consider that He and His disciples left the house before morning, which the Israelites were forbidden to do (Exodus 12:22). Jesus was our

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“Lowly and Riding on a DONKEY”?

As we quickly approach the Passover season, it may be helpful for us to consider the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9, one whose fulfillment is recorded by all four gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The event they chronicled is called “The Triumphal Entry,” the ride of Jesus Christ on a donkey into Jerusalem just before He was crucified. Here is Zechariah’s prophecy:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your King is coming to you;
He is just and having salvation,
Lowly and riding on a donkey,
A colt, the foal of a donkey.

Matthew witnessed Jesus doing just this and recorded what he saw:

Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.” All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

Tell the daughter of Zion,
“Behold, your King is coming to you,
Lowly, and sitting on a donkey,
A colt, the foal of a donkey.”

So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. (Matthew 21:1-7)

Zechariah 9:9 seems to be one of those places in the

Bible where the repetition of an idea should make us sit up and take notice. He writes, “Rejoice. . . . Shout. . . . Behold”! This tells us something significant is about to happen, and we would do well to pay attention! The scribes and Pharisees, well-versed in Scripture, undoubtedly knew this prophecy, but they failed miserably to make the proper connection. As Luke’s account reveals, they were more interested in rebuking the disciples for “making a scene” and perhaps getting the Roman authorities involved.

In Matthew 21:2, Jesus instructs His disciples to go into a nearby village, and there they would “find a donkey tied, and a colt with her.” This agrees with Zechariah’s prophecy, but the accounts in Mark, Luke, and John mention only one animal. Mark and Luke both indicate that Christ rode the colt, adding that the colt had never before been ridden. John, on the other hand, just says Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it and then quotes Zechariah 9:9. To them, this was yet another fulfillment of an Old Testament sign that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Few others, it seems, understood it or believed it.

A MISUNDERSTOOD BEAST

Why was a donkey the chosen means of transport? How much planning and forethought did God give to this one seemingly insignificant detail?

“Donkey” is a recent word, as the first known usage dates only to about 1785, and it probably originated as a description of the dun color of the animal’s hide. Before that time and for some time thereafter, the word “ass” was the normal word used to refer to this animal, but it is believed that the British and American slang term for a person’s rear end promoted the wider acceptance and usage of “donkey” for the horse-like animal. A similar process occurred with the word “jackass,” which refers to a male donkey, but once it began to be used as negative slang, “donkey” was more acceptable.

It is possible that the improper or negative connotation of the word “ass” has given many people a wrong

perception of the actual animal. In modern times, the ass or donkey has perhaps been judged unfairly, as many think them to be stupid, stubborn, or just a beast of burden. However, that is not the case.

They are anything but stupid. In fact, once their owner gains their trust, they can be willing and companionable partners and very dependable. It is said that they actually do not work their best unless they trust the one they are working for. Once they feel comfortable with the owner, donkeys will do almost anything within their limits, and as a bonus, they need minimal training.

Being surefooted and having excellent eyesight, they are able to navigate rocky desert terrain and find paths that the human eye may not even be able to see. They will actually lead the way without having to be guided.

Another trait the donkey possesses is an acute predator-detection instinct. For this reason, many modern farmers are adding them to their herds as “guard donkeys”! Having a keen sense of smell along with excellent hearing and the aforementioned exceptional eyesight, they are quick to sense predators and sound the alarm, baying wildly. Even more, they will position themselves between the predator and the other animals they are protecting. They have been known to kill foxes, coyotes, and even mountain lions with their sharp hooves and powerful kicks.

The donkey has been perceived as a stubborn animal, but many experts believe that it is because the donkey has such a strong survival instinct that it is difficult to get them to do something they perceive to be dangerous. Recall Balaam’s donkey, which saw the angelic danger ahead, but Balaam, ignoring God’s instruction and being spiritually blind, tried to force the donkey to move on (Numbers 22:22-33).

We would do well to learn the lesson Balaam’s donkey teaches. It is praiseworthy to be stubbornly against going forward with an activity when doing so is spiritually dangerous!

A LONG HISTORY OF USE

Researchers estimate that the donkey was domesticated around 3000 BC, well before the camel. The donkey is more efficient than the camel or the horse when used in transport duties because a donkey eats only about one-quarter of the oats that a horse does, and unlike the camel, its owner does not have to wait for it to chew its cud.

By 2500 BC, wealthy Egyptians owned over a thousand donkeys, and the Greeks and Romans later used them as well. More recently, they were used in World War I to carry wounded soldiers, and even as recently as the war in Afghanistan, they were employed as pack animals. In poorer countries, they are a common sight on the roads and in the fields.

Donkeys were used throughout the times of the Bible. According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, the riding of a donkey was a sign of royalty. From the archives dug up in the Babylonian city of Mari, it was learned that the riding of a donkey for entry into a city was an act of kingship. The donkey and the mule were a staple in the

Near Eastern royal ceremonies as well.

Many of the heroes of the Bible are mentioned in connection with donkeys. Abraham rode a donkey, as did Moses. Jacob’s sons rode donkeys. In the book of Judges, judges rode on donkeys as well. David was a king, perhaps the greatest in Israel’s history, and he rode a donkey. Sons of kings rode donkeys.

It is a traditional belief that Joseph, husband of Mary, had a donkey, and Mary rode it to Bethlehem while she was pregnant with Jesus. If this is true, then quite possibly Jesus’ first and last rides as a human were on a donkey!

Incidentally, the wealthy in those days tried to breed a pure white donkey for themselves as an indication of their high social status. They were only partially successful. They were able to produce a white donkey, but they were unable to breed out the gray spots.

In the giving of the laws concerning Sabbath observance in Exodus 23:12, God instructs that the donkey should be able to rest the same as the ox. The tenth commandment prohibits a person from coveting his neighbor’s donkey (Exodus 20:17). In the laws of consecrating the firstborn (Exodus 13:1-2, 11-13; 34:19-20), clean animals belonged to God, but the only unclean animal mentioned is the donkey. If an Israelite planned to keep the firstborn, it had to be redeemed by sacrificing a lamb in its place, and if it were not redeemed, it was to be killed by breaking its neck! In this instance as well, the donkey is the only unclean animal mentioned alongside the ox.

Near the end of their journey in the wilderness, the Israelites went to war against the Midianites (Numbers 31). Among the spoils of victory, they took 675,000 sheep, 72,000 cattle, and 61,000 donkeys (verses 32-34). Again, the only unclean animal listed alongside the clean animals was the donkey, and God provided His people 61,000 of them! So much for the wealthy Egyptians with their measly thousand.

AN ANIMAL OF PEACEFUL PURSUITS

Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem while riding on a donkey was not just an afterthought, using whatever beast was available. This was a well-considered part of God’s plan for a specific purpose. Although the use of the donkey was widespread in those times, Jesus’ riding on the donkey did not show Him to be a poor or common man but a King, just as the Mari archives show was commonly understood across the Middle East.

The *New Testament Commentary* makes an interesting observation on John 12:14-15:

The ass or donkey is commonly associated with the pursuits of peace (Judg 10:4; 12:14; 2 Sam 17:23; 19:26; Isa 1:3); the horse, with warfare (Ex 15:1, 19, 21; Ps 33:17; 76:6; 147:10; Prov 21:31; Jer 8:6; 51:21; Zech 10:3; and Rev 6:4). This king is meek (*prautes*), peaceful, gentle. He comes to bring salvation.

So Jesus, riding on a donkey, fulfills the characteriza-

prophecy watch *“Lowly and Riding on a Donkey”*

tion shown in Zechariah 9:9, that the King would be “lowly.” The symbolic character of the donkey as an animal used for peaceful purposes stands in marked contrast to a horse, whose imagery associates with war. A man riding on a donkey is not looking for war, and in Jesus’ case, He came instead to save, carried on perhaps the lowliest of animals.

That Jesus chose a donkey that had never been ridden was yet another miraculous part of this prophecy. Given what we have learned about donkeys—that they will not work until they trust the one they work for—we would think that the colt would have balked. But when the disciples brought the colt to Jesus, the colt immediately trusted Him and instinctively carried Him down the path into the city. Would we be surprised if he did not even need to be guided?

With the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 certainly being fulfilled in Christ’s first coming, we should take a moment to consider another one as we close:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. . . . Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. (Revelation 19:11-13, 15)

In this prophecy, as heaven opens the first thing we see is a white horse. Unlike how the Bible refers to the donkey as animal of peaceful purposes, the horse’s only associa-

tion is with war. On this white horse, the “Faithful and True” Jesus Christ rides to earth, and this time it is to judge and make war! God’s purposes in the two comings are quite different.

The Bible mentions many animals that we can learn spiritual lessons from, and the donkey is one that we do not think much about in our day. When we do think about donkeys, we tend to judge them unfairly. Now that we understand them a little better, we can see that God made them part of His Word so we can understand ourselves a little better:

- Do we trust our Master and work willingly and pleasantly for Him?
- Do we conduct our lives in meekness, gentleness, and peace?
- Are we surefooted and know the path to our destination, or do we ignore the warnings signs and blunder into areas we should avoid, getting ourselves into trouble?
- Do we guard and protect the sheep of God’s pasture, or do we ignore their plight—or worse, prey on them?

Just like the donkey, we were unclean things living in sin, but the Lamb of God sacrificed Himself so we could be redeemed and be God’s firstfruits! We have to learn and display the characteristics of the lowly donkey before we are qualified to ride with Him the next time He comes: “And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean followed Him on white horses” (Revelation 19:14).

—Ronny H. Graham

ready answer *Why Was Jesus Not Crucified as Passover Began?*

(continued from page 9)

Passover Lamb, yet He was *crucified* rather than being *roasted* in fire (Exodus 12:8). His remains were not burned, even though that, too, is specified. His blood was not caught in a basin, nor smeared on any doorpost (see verse 7). And, as we know, He was not killed between sunset and dark at the beginning of the 14th day.

So did Jesus fulfill the Passover? We know He *absolutely did*, and our Father was satisfied. But He fulfilled it according to requirements that were *different* from what He gave to a carnal people.

Jesus set the example for us of *when* and *how* to keep it. It was during the night of the 14th when He said to partake of the bread and wine “in remembrance of Me.” In reflecting on that night, Paul instructs the Corinthians to “proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes” (I Corinthians

11:26). However, the timing of His death, which did not occur until the following afternoon, was about far more than just being the Passover Lamb—as pivotal as it was.

The death of the Lamb was planned from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). The timing was *not* an afterthought—it was deliberate, drawing our attention to something momentous. Jesus only died once to fulfill *all* the sacrificial requirements, including those for the Passover, the Day of Atonement and the other holy days offerings, the Sabbath, the New Moon—His one sacrifice satisfied it all. Yet, the date and time He was crucified do not correspond with any holy day, nor with any sacrifice that God commanded Israel to make! So why did our Father and His firstborn Son choose that particular day and hour? We will see the answer in Part Two.

—David C. Grabbe

personal *Ecclesiastes and Christian Living*

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yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.
And whoever does not bear his cross and come after
Me cannot be My disciple.

He then concludes by saying in effect, “If you agree to these terms for this relationship, we can move forward.” Thus, the covenant is made.

It must be this way, or it shifts our position in the relationship with Him to one in which He owes us for what we do. This is absolutely not good for our character because it shifts the balance of the relationship with God toward equality. Complete dependence sets the proper tone, leading to our willing submission to His commands, including the trials He has us experience to create us into His image.

Notice that Solomon agrees, stating in Ecclesiastes 7:20 (*New Revised Standard Version*), “Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning.” This includes even a super-righteous Christian. Could we imagine God, who never sins under any circumstance and has continued so for eternity, being expected by a mere creation to give a blessing for performing what is required of him as a matter of course? Such arrogance! Clearly, near equality with Him would generate pride!

Solomon continues his thought in verse 22, “For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others.” He is reminding us of how spiritually weak we are—that we cannot go a day without sinning in some manner! Thinking we can meet the terms we are setting for ourselves reveals substantial pride. Yet, by dedicating ourselves to super-righteousness, we are foolishly demanding blessings.

Solomon is not directly saying so, but such a course of straining for absolute, moral, spiritual, yet unattainable perfection leads to a frustrating dead end. Our resolve will not cause God to be persuaded to comply with our demands because it would not be good for us and our relationship with Him.

More New Covenant Realities

The New Testament records the legalities of making the New Covenant, as well as the experiences of many early disciples as they strove to live up to God’s requirements. Many of these testimonies are from the apostle Paul, as is Romans 7:13-25:

Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that

I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

Do we not believe that Paul was a sincere and dedicated example of a fully committed Christian? Yet, his testimony confirms that we have to face and accept the humbling fact that sin, as long as we are in the flesh, forever stains our character. We will never be rid of it until our change in the resurrection. Can we accept the fact that no amount of personal exertion to purge ourselves of sin will be completely effective? Paul did, and it led him to be thoroughly humbled and thankfully aware of God’s mercy.

However, it did not cause him to disregard whether he sinned. Paul resolved not to sin because he loved Christ for what He had already done and continued to do every day. As a former Pharisee, he understood that super-righteousness on his part would never work.

In I Corinthians 15:8-10, he makes a telling statement about how he judged his past before his conversion:

Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

Paul had a firm understanding that super-righteousness could not replace what Christ had already mercifully done in his behalf, and nothing he did could ever replace it. He used this as an example, as a prod to himself, so he would never forget exactly where he stood in terms of being gifted by God’s grace. It took a perfect Sacrifice to pay for his past sins and also those he continued to commit as a Christian! Despite sin still being a part of him, he says, “I am what I am by means of God’s grace.” He valued

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what was done on his behalf so deeply that he never let his appreciation lag.

He adds in Romans 4:4-8

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
And whose sins are covered;
Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.

Do we truly understand that we cannot add to the quality of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who lived without sinning His entire life? When His pure righteousness is accounted to us, we stand before God blameless because of His sinlessness. Even our righteousness done through our obedience following baptism and receipt of God's Holy Spirit lacks the purity of Christ's righteousness imparted and accounted to us, because our righteousness is still tainted by sin that remains within us.

I Corinthians 1:26-31 states a truth of supreme importance to us:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”

This is why our integrity must be guarded by humility because our obedience—given because of God's mercy and which He graciously accepts—is still flawed. None of this removes our responsibilities regarding our continuing sanctification; it does not do away with our accountability to obey God's law and grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We do not stop learning, obeying more perfectly, and maturing within

the relationship that we now have with the Father and Son. Nevertheless, we cannot add to the righteousness of Christ. It is futile even to think such a thing—and that is why it is dangerous.

Upon receiving God's Spirit, attitude is of major importance. Conversion is a matter of a changed heart combined with more perfect knowledge of His truth. It is a matter of knowing, believing, living in, and accepting our place within the relationship. It is a matter of submitting with all our heart to the Father's placement of us within the body. A person with wisdom will know he must not go beyond what the relationship will permit.

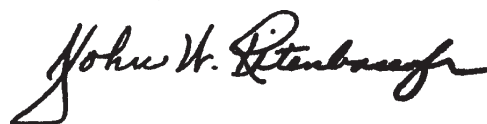
Not submitting to God's placement of him within His order is what led Satan to do what he did. In his rising pride, based on the glory God had already given him, he wanted more. When God refused, he lost his grip on reality and attacked.

Super-righteousness is destructive because one of its major fruits is a proud attitude of “God owes me” because of what we feel we have accomplished. Pride destroys humility before God and is therefore deadly. How destructive? Jesus began His preaching in the Sermon of the Mount with one of the most important of all of His sayings: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Humility begins and reinforces a right relationship.

Solomon charges us in Ecclesiastes 7:17, “Do not be overly wicked.” Does he mean we should aim at being just a little bit wicked? Of course not. He knows that we are already flawed, sinning creatures: “For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin” (verse 20). He is not counseling us in any way to add sin to what we already are. His words caution against choosing to sin deliberately, for it is highly likely to lead to death. It reveals a “what's the use” attitude. Sin is like a highly addictive drug. Solomon knows that some sin in everyone's life is inevitable because it dwells in us. But those who deliberately embrace it engrain it in their characters and are deliberately destroying the opportunity to be in God's Kingdom.

Thus, Solomon gives the solution, counseling in verse 18, “It is good that you grasp this, and do not remove your hand from the other.” *The Revised English Bible* translates this more clearly: “It is good to hold on to the one thing and not lose hold on the other.” What is he referring to? “Hold on to the one thing” refers to holding firmly to the counsel not to become super-righteous. “[Do] not lose hold on the other” refers to maintaining our grip in restraining ourselves from sinning. In other words, “Don't lose control of the character you have built.” More to come.

In Christian love,



Cold War Redux?

In December 1991, with the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Moscow grounded its air force, particularly its strategic bombers, due to a lack of fuel, spare parts, and the will to project power. The Soviets, returning to their traditional identity as Russians, began to look inward. The nation flirted with a form of democracy, endured a period of sparring oligarchs, and with the rise of Vladimir Putin as president, returned to a form of governance that it has historically favored: the strongman.

It took some time, but Putin has restored Russian power to the point that he feels comfortable going toe-to-toe with opposing nations both small and great. Under the guise of supporting Russian separatists, Putin won a military victory over Georgia in August 2008, receiving control over the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In March 2014, after Crimea broke away from Ukraine, Russia annexed it, and more recently, Putin has indicated that the Kremlin would not allow a military defeat of the ethnically Russian partisans fighting in eastern Ukraine. While America and the European Union protested and imposed sanctions, they did nothing substantial to curb Russian power.

Putin has warned the U.S. against taking action in Syria, saying Russia has plans in place should American forces cross that line. He also thumbed his nose at America when he granted asylum to traitorous National Security Agency leaker, Edward Snowden. When the European Union implemented its most recent energy package, which requires pipelines and the natural gas in them to be owned by separate concerns, the Russian president announced that his country would no longer pursue building a pipeline through the Black Sea into Bulgaria, and further, all future natural gas would be piped through Turkey rather than Ukraine. This move has sent European nations scrambling to find new ways to import natural gas reliably.

Perhaps his most concerning moves have been to threaten cyberattacks if NATO continues its build-up of a rapid-reaction force in the Baltic States, and to hint at a spectrum of offensive options, including nuclear World War III, if NATO tries to reverse his annexation of Crimea. In a March meeting between Russian generals and American officials, Moscow warned that it would respond “forcefully including through the use of nuclear force” should Western nations aim to wrest the region away from Russia. “The Russian people,” Putin’s deputy warned, “would demand a forceful response,” if NATO sent arms to Ukraine.

Further, the delegate added, “[T]he same conditions that existed in Ukraine and caused Russia to take action there” exist now in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which have significant numbers of citizens who identify ethnically as Russian. Putin hopes to entice these ethnic Russians toward the Motherland without giving NATO grounds to send troops to the region. If NATO did so, it would make the

military alliance “a potential co-aggressor against Russian-speaking minorities in Baltic states,” a situation described as “potentially more dangerous” than the one in Ukraine.

Russia’s aggressive actions in the area have been ongoing for at least a year already. NATO warplanes had to scramble 400 times in 2014 in response to an increase in incursive Russian air activity not seen since the Cold War. In March 2015, a group of eleven Russian military aircraft was spotted by NATO’s Baltic Air Police Mission flying in international airspace near Lithuania. They were intercepted and turned away. More recently, the Swedish military identified and pursued two Russian bombers and two fighter planes near the islands of Gotland and Bornholm off the country’s east coast. Another group of four Russian planes flew over the Baltic Sea south toward the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad north of Poland and was intercepted by scrambled NATO jets.

Its games are not just aerial. Last October, Sweden sent minesweepers out onto the Baltic Sea to search for a suspected Russian submarine patrolling waters near its capital, Stockholm. Early this spring, Russian ambassador Mikhail Vanin warned Denmark that its warships could become the target of Russian nuclear missiles if the nation decided to participate in NATO’s missile defense. In recent months, Moscow has enhanced Russia’s military presence in the Arctic by arming the Northern Fleet, based in Murmansk, with new nuclear submarines; establishing a line of bases along its immense northern coast; and resurrecting mothballed Soviet-era military bases like the one at Alakurtti, close to Finland.

In response, Norway, which has slashed its defense budget in recent years, will increase military spending this year by 3.3% despite economic troubles caused by the collapse of the price of oil, Norway’s principal export. It is also restructuring its military to deal better with these new risks. Nonaligned Finland has floated the idea of joining NATO, a once-unthinkable notion that is gaining public support. With Russia’s Cold War behavior returning, all of its nearby European neighbors are having to shift out of their “rich, fat, and happy” mode to a more watchful posture.

It is uncertain what this means in terms of biblical prophecy—perhaps only confirming the turmoil and military aggression that the Bible predicts for the time of the end (Matthew 24:6). It certainly spotlights the current weakness of the U.S., as the Obama administration has no answer for the bold belligerence displayed by Putin. Yet, in the worst-case scenario, it could mean a return to Cold War hostilities that progress to a far more explosive and deadly conclusion.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Ten Lepers Healed

Jesus' miracle of healing the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19) begins with Him traveling from Galilee through Samaria and then to Jerusalem, going through Jericho on the way. This roundabout route on His last trip to Jerusalem before being crucified provided Christ with various opportunities for healing and teaching. During His earthly ministry, Christ healed many people of leprosy (Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22), but only two instances are recorded in detail and not this many at once.

As He enters a village, ten lepers approach Him, staying at a distance to avoid spreading their disease. They are a pitiful sight: ragged clothes and messy hair, slumped shoulders and drooping heads. As suffering outcasts with a shared need, they—nine Jews and one Samaritan—overlook their ethnic differences. In Scripture, the number ten represents completeness, just as the Ten Commandments cover God's complete law. Here, ten represents the sum of human need and hopelessness.

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1. What does leprosy picture spiritually? Luke 17:11-13.

COMMENT: The lepers "stood afar off" because leprosy was a dreaded, loathsome disease for which God gave Moses detailed instructions to deal with it. This was an incurable disease that would eventually disfigure and rot away the body. It was widely known that only God could heal it. So, when Christ healed the leper in Matthew 8:1-4, His divine nature was revealed to many. When the ten lepers saw Jesus, they were likely tempted to rush toward Him to be healed, but they obediently observed the legal distance of 100 paces (Leviticus 13:46; Numbers 5:2; II Kings 5:5).

In the Bible, leprosy illustrates the work of sin. Like leprosy, sin is a vile, contaminating, mortifying, unclean thing. It starts out as a spot that grows and festers until it takes in the whole person, condemning him to death. It is a type of the separation that sin causes, as well as representing how all people are alike in sin: "For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22-23).

2. What condition did the lepers have to meet before healing? Luke 17:14.

COMMENT: Christ responds favorably to their plea in the form of a command: "Go, show yourselves to the priests" (Leviticus 13-14). Notice what follows: "As they went, they were cleansed." The healing blessing came when the lepers obeyed Jesus' command. Blessings are contingent upon obedience. We miss many blessings because there is too little "as they went" in our lives. If we do what we can in obedience, God will do for us what we cannot.

Two great blessings came to the lepers through obedience. The first is that they were cleansed of the leprosy. The healing of leprosy is usually spoken of as being "cleansed" ("healed" is also used in verse 15). Lepers were unclean, so they had to be cleansed. Disobedience corrupts, but the commands and works of God purify.

The second blessing is that, by seeing the priests as He commanded, the lepers had their social restrictions cancelled. They were free to go wherever they wanted, reunite with family and friends, work normal jobs, and freely asso-

ciate with whomever they wished. Far from restricting us, following God's instruction grants us freedom. The world taunts believers at times by telling them that the Bible's commandments only restrict them from having a good time, but that is not true. It is sin that restricts, binds, and enslaves.

3. Is there both a cost and a result in praising God for His blessings? Luke 17:15-18.

COMMENT: "And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God" (Luke 17:15). The term "returned" (NKJV) or "turned back" (KJV) indicates that praising God requires effort and sometimes sacrifice. The healed leper was not timid or bashful about praising God. While being loud may show more dishonor than honor, in this case, his loudness showed his zeal in praising God. It also emphasized the completeness of the healing, as leprosy generally affects the voice (Psalm 51:15-17).

His zeal also showed that he was not a secret disciple and not ashamed to honor God in public. He "fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks" (Luke 17:16). In each of the 38 occurrences of this verb (Greek *eucharistēō*) in the New Testament, "giving of thanks" is always directed to God. We must always thank God for what He has provided (Psalm 107:8, 15, 21, 31).

4. How did the leper's faith make him whole? Luke 17:19.

COMMENT: Jesus informs the healed leper that his faith had made him whole, and because of his return to thank and praise God, more blessing would come as a result: spiritual healing. This added blessing of salvation is especially tied to the man's faith. His faith not only sent him to Christ for healing, but it also sent him back to praise and thank Him.

When we follow the will of God, we find our path taking many different turns. But we can take comfort in knowing that God has a purpose for each turn. The turns are not aimless and meaningless but are for our benefit and learning, as well as for our service to Him. No challenge in a Christian's life is without divine purpose and approval. God's providence is in control in every aspect of our lives.

—Martin G. Collins