



Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 22, Number 4

July-August 2013

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july/august 2013

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Time may be the most significant element of human life. It is certainly an ever-present reality, one that we all have to deal with constantly. We try to manage time, even control time, but it frequently gets away from us. For a Christian, the swift passage of time need not be such a burden because God is sovereign over time all the time. This is a major theme of the book of Ecclesiastes.

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This free publication is made possible through the voluntary tithes and offerings of its subscribers and members of the Church of the Great God. All American and Canadian donations are tax-deductible.

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Ecclesiastes and Christian Living

Part Three: Time

For those with sincere desire to please God by living by faith, Ecclesiastes 3 is one of the truly great, encouraging, and inspiring chapters in the entire Bible. But for us to understand the depth of its teaching more clearly, chapter 3 needs the concept found in the final three verses of chapter 2 to provide a helpful lead-in:

There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This is also vanity and grasping for the wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)

Not only are these verses the conclusion to the thoughts in chapter 2, but they also provide a smooth bridge to the instruction in chapter 3. They are the first, positive, solid, clear instruction that Solomon has given about both God and life in this book. They pave the way, as it were, for accepting what is truly thrilling instruction about God in relation to time and a Christian's life of faith. The

central themes of this article involves time, the depth of God's involvement with us, and most especially, our overall attitude as we move closer to Christ's return.

A Glimpse Inside That We Might Look Up

Solomon, to this point, describes life as a waste of time and energy, seemingly meaningless, monotonous, repetitious, and difficult to endure. And this occurs even though one's life may be busy, just as Solomon's surely was. To those of this world who have little or no relationship with God, and therefore have no clear knowledge of His purpose, what Solomon has written to this point is a realistic assessment. Recently, while in a supermarket, I saw a young woman wearing a shirt that proclaimed, "Life is divided between miserable and horrible." To many, it seems as though life has no object except to bring difficulty and pain.

Ecclesiastes, however, provides a message directly from our Creator through Solomon as to what our attitude *must* be if we are going to make the best use of the awesome opportunity He has given us—and especially make the most of the instruction in chapter 3.

In chapters 1 and 2, Solomon's approach to life is completely "under the sun." "Under the sun"

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implies that his teaching has not positively considered God; it is an entirely earthy view, thoroughly self-centered and carnal. God is mentioned only in Ecclesiastes 1:13, where Solomon calls life “a burdensome task God has given the sons of man.” His assessment closely parallels the words on the woman’s T-shirt in the supermarket.

In these final verses of Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon takes a sudden, sharp turn to an “above the sun” approach, strongly advising that we should enjoy good in our labor because this is from the hand of God. His statement, “This also, I saw, was from the hand of God,” is important. He is counseling us that our attitude toward labor should be that it is a gracious gift from our Creator. Laboring is a God-designed and -assigned responsibility of man.

Apart from angels, we are the only created beings who can labor in this manner. We can work using creativity, objectivity, and purpose, but no animal can do such a thing. Solomon is saying that we need to give thanks for such a circumstance because it places mankind in a category that no animal can ever enter. We are still less than God but so far above animals that there is no adequate comparison.

Is there a reason such a disparity exists? He adds two verses later that God gives gifts like wisdom and knowledge to those who are good in His sight, another positive reason for a person to approach life in a different attitude than Solomon showed previously. Can an animal by reason appreciate life? Does a beast have the knowledge and wisdom to add value to its life?

Our attitudes and demeanors, however, are often highly variable. Overall, without directly using the terms at this time, Solomon is saying our attitude should be that we *must* be thankful and content. Why? Foremost, for the very fact that we even have life. Directly tied to this is that we have been given a mind that can think about God, that can look forward to the future on a basis of truth within His purpose, that can realize that we are the called of God, that can think spatially, and that can read and understand. We should be thankful that we can be given even more gifts because of these factors.

Thus, he is strongly hinting that we can have this outlook because God is already involved in the lives of those whom Solomon is instructing. Paul addresses I Thessalonians 5:16-18 directly to us, and its commands can greatly affect our attitudes during trials so that we make the best use of them without getting down on life, as Solomon seems to be in the first chapters of Ecclesiastes: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” These are quite challenging! But since God commands them of us, they are things that He will enable us to accomplish. Therefore, they are not impossible tasks.

These are attitudes and actions that we can control. Other scriptures reveal that God permits us to be saddened or disappointed about what is happening. For example,

the gospels say that Jesus sorrowed about various things. Here, Paul’s concern is that, in our relationship with God—as the mention of prayer establishes—we will not remain depressed for an extended time because of our contact with God. We should be able to come out of our funks. If we do not, it is because we are too focused on ourselves.

These commands guard against allowing ourselves to sink from an upbeat, positive, and hopeful attitude of a child of God to a discouraged and self-centered one. How? By doing spiritual work directly in relation to God, holding onto God in the midst of *all* circumstances in life. Peter writes that if God is our hope, He will lift us up (I Peter 5:6-7).

I Timothy 6:6-8 reminds us of an important reality: “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.” This passage’s central issue concerns wealth. Great discontentment and discouragement are generated through coveting wealth. However, the attitude of a reasoned, faith-based contentment, regardless of economic circumstances, causes great spiritual gain. Solomon speaks of contentment as a major attitude that we need to prepare for the instruction given in Ecclesiastes 3.

Within a relationship with God, this faith-based attitude greatly assists in enabling a Christian to live an “over the sun” life. In a converted person’s mind, because he is living such a life, God is the Central Figure, and he accepts whatever life throws his way. A Christian with that focus works his way through his trials, overcoming the pulls toward self-centeredness because he knows God is with him.

Without God being the beacon that provides guidance and encouragement, a person can much more easily drift into an easily discouraged, discontented, covetous, “life is down on me,” self-centered existence. When that happens, spiritual progress grinds to a halt.

Time Is Vitrally Important

Chapter 3 is among the better-known chapters in the entire Bible, and it is likely the best-known chapter of Ecclesiastes. It holds these distinctions partly because of the poem that begins it. Its subject is of great consequence to us.

A major lesson for us in this chapter is that we live our lives within time, and therefore, we make our choices in life within time. However, to make the best of life, we must recognize that God is sovereign over time—*all the time*. His rulership, His dominance, His sovereignty, over time is never relaxed. He oversees what happens within time all the time. His relationship with His children is very personal, making His calling personal and individual.

As Creator, He has goals that He set before the foundation of the world. They will be accomplished within an already set time. His goals also include what He desires to accomplish in and through us. A reality we must face is that time is *always* moving; time is running out for all of us. This fact is not intended to make us feel a sense of desperation, for God is so perfect and dominant over His creation and labors that He always has enough time. We, though, do not—a fact that God always takes into consideration. We can deal with this truth in our relationship with Him. This is where the issue of contentment can be quite helpful.

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 3:1, 9-10:

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: . . . What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied.

An important issue for us in verse 1 is that, because God is sovereign over time all the time, He will be overseeing and working to make the most and best of every situation for us. Time is important to us, but with God, it is not an overriding issue. There is time because He is involved and wants the most and best for us.

In listing the merisms (pairs of contrasting words used to express totality or completeness) in verses 2-8, Solomon is not saying everybody has to go through each of the fourteen pairs he lists, though that would do us no harm. They do, however, give us an overview of major events of virtually every life. Once they are listed, verse 9 asks, “What is to be gained by experiencing these events?” The question is rhetorical at this point. Answers are to be gathered from what Solomon teaches within the larger context of the book.

By way of contrast, understanding verse 10 is quite important to our well-being. Solomon assures us that God is deeply involved in these issues and events of life. In fact, he writes that they are God-given, implying that God has assigned them as disciplines for our development as His children. The dominant fact here is not whether God personally put us in them, since we may have gotten ourselves into them through our choices. The important factor is that we are indeed in them, and God is involved in them with us because at the very least He allowed us to fall into them.

We must not allow ourselves to forget that He is our Creator (II Corinthians 5:17); we are not creating ourselves. Thus, we can be encouraged that He has most assuredly not abandoned us (Hebrews 13:5). Are we accepting and patiently rising to meet these challenges, or are we resisting them in despair and frustration?

The instruction of verse 11 now becomes exceedingly

important to our attitudes in meeting the challenges of living by faith. Solomon writes, “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” This should be tied directly to the truth of verse 1: “There is a time for every purpose.” The key word, of course, is “time.” In life’s challenges to our faith, in which God is involved with us, some purpose is being worked out. In verse 11, we learn that both the timing and what is being worked out are “beautiful.” The event might be very challenging, but God, who is involved in the Christian’s life and in this challenge, calls it “beautiful.” With that hopeful knowledge, what should our attitude be?

The root of the Hebrew word translated *beautiful* literally means “bright.” The Hebrew word can be translated “fair,” “comely,” “beautiful,” “suitable,” “appropriate,” and “timely,” depending on the context. In Job 42:15, the same Hebrew word is translated “beautiful” when describing Job’s daughters. Does the word illustrate something ugly, bad, detrimental, unsuitable, or inappropriate? Absolutely not! The word indicates something good and admirable, a blessing.

Timing and Intensity Considered Together

When that knowledge is applied to this verse, we find an encouraging truth. God’s timing, His oversight of events, and what He wants them to accomplish are something good! They are not merely broadly good but also suitable, fitting, appropriate, and timely.

Consider this question: Was the scattering of Israel and Judah beautiful in its time? If we read Lamentations without considering God’s entire purpose, the situation appears very ugly indeed. However, over the long haul, the answer is undoubtedly, “Yes, it was beautiful and good!” It was suitable for that occasion.

What about the scattering of the church? Was it beautiful? The same is true. Our going through it may have been stressful, requiring painful adjustments while enduring to the end, but in the long term, it will most certainly be beautifully good.

Is correction good? Do we really want to continue doing things wrong? If God had not done what He did when and how He did it, how many serious spiritual character and attitude flaws would have gone uncorrected? How disastrous would they have been to the salvation of perhaps many others?

How many nice people have we fellowshiped with in the past but who have seemingly been swept overboard and appear lost? The reality may be that they were “nice tares.” They indeed may have been fine people with many social graces but completely unconverted. Perhaps they no longer fellowship with us because God delayed their true calling, sparing them from the Lake of Fire.

Peter states clearly that God is “not willing that any

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should perish but that all should come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9). There used to be a television program called *Father Knows Best*. Yes, He does! And because of the way God has acted, many more will enter God’s Kingdom in His image than if He had not intervened. It is even possible to consider that we may all have been lost except for His rough intervention!

It is critical for us to keep in mind *always* that God knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10). His overview captures the entire span of events; He sees the entire picture. We, though, live in a time-bound, material universe, and all we have is a mere point of view (I Corinthians 13:12). For the most part, we are restricted to grasping things from our narrow perspective. This is why faith is required of us and why Solomon states in verse 11 that we cannot “find out the work that God does from beginning to end.” So how can we meet life’s challenges in the right spirit?

If we think the scattering of the church has been difficult to accept in a good attitude, we need to be patient because prophecy reveals that things will become much worse as time moves on! I am personally becoming ever more aware that time is moving on for me. My mother, who lived to be almost 93, said to me once, “Getting old is not for sissies.” She was saying in her unconverted way that, regardless of age, the trials of life never do really end. It is almost as if a person’s age is not respected. As one gets older, the trials simply morph into another form.

Trusting God to Work Things Out

To help us through our current spiritual trials as well as the intensifying times ahead, we must come to know God through a personal relationship and trust Him to work things out. We must use our faith, knowing that we do not see the entire picture.

What does God require of us? What pleases Him? What makes Him look upon us with affection and satisfaction as we experience our difficulties? God’s Word provides us answers.

Written during a difficult period in Israel’s history, Micah 6:6-8 gives this simple instruction about what pleases Him:

With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Isaiah 66:1-2 adds:

Thus says the LORD: “Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all these things My hand has made, and all those things exist,” says the LORD. “But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.”

What pleases God? Simple humility and obedience to His Word as we follow through, overcoming the challenges God sets before us.

Recall Paul’s instructions in I Thessalonians 5:16-18: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks; because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.” This is another simple, clear instruction that brings us right back to the thought in Ecclesiastes 2:24-26.

We will most assuredly not be able to control every circumstance. We could not control the scattering of the church, and we cannot control the way each person responds to the scattering. We cannot control their attitudes, as that is a personal responsibility. We cannot control the horrible political, economic, educational, religious, and moral declines taking place all around us, but we can control our personal attitudes and responses. This is what God will judge in us. We can allow these challenges to become frustrating and depressing, or by using faith, we can trust God, being patient and learning to be content within His purpose.

Witness Jeremiah’s attitudes revealed in his account of his prophetic ministry. He is sometimes called “the crying prophet.” At times, he was not as content as he should have been, and God recorded those episodes for our benefit as examples we should not follow. The lesson for us is that God is always faithful.

Grace to the Rescue

Ecclesiastes 2:26 says that God gives gifts. We need to consider another wonderful gift God has given, not to His children only, but to all mankind. This specific gift is named in Ecclesiastes 3:11: “He has put eternity in their hearts.” This gift is wonderful, but it contains an aspect that can work against us if we are not careful. Unlike animals, we have thoughts of immortality. We normally do not want to die; we want to live forever. Yet, we also know that we are caught between time as it is for us right now and eternity. As God reveals Himself to us, to live eternally with Him and to be like Him become major desires for us.

The filmmaker Woody Allen is an atheist and certainly has no revelation from God. He nonetheless makes an insightful observation about mankind, which he learned

at least partly from his occupation as a writer and movie-maker:

The universe is indifferent, so we create a fake world for ourselves, and we exist within that fake world, a world that, in fact means nothing at all, when you step back. It is meaningless. But it's important that we create some sense of meaning, because no perceptible meaning exists for anybody.

For us, the most meaningful part of his comment is "it's important that we create some sense of meaning." Why is this important? Because our thinking is what creates a sense of purpose for our existence and therefore gives direction for our use of life. Will our conclusions be true or false? Our minds can only work with what they already have, which they accrue as we move through life and its events.

Woody Allen observes that the creation, the universe, tells us nothing about the purpose for life. While that is not entirely correct, it is close enough for the unconverted. How much spiritual truth does the unconverted mind really have to work with? Therefore, humanly, we attempt to create our own meaning and purpose, fitting ourselves into what we have imagined. What are the odds that a person will come up with exactly the same purpose and meaning that the Creator has planned for us?

In addition—and this is essential—what are the chances that a person will fit himself into that divine plan on his own? The correct answer is zilch, nada, nothing. Therefore, since the universe tells us nothing, the true purpose of life must be revealed through God's calling.

Of supreme importance to us, then, is whether our thinking creates a sense of meaning and purpose for our lives from what *God has revealed* in His Word. Ecclesiastes 3:11 reveals that God has given mankind thoughts of eternity, that is, of time both backward and forward endlessly. However, He has not yet given mankind *His truth* about eternity. Consequently, most of mankind believes that they already have immortality within them! In this way, their false thinking becomes their enemy!

Understanding and fully accepting what He has given to us are not always easy because our former, carnal experiences make us susceptible to the pulls of the world. We become sluggish in living by faith because we allow our former education from the world to lure us into self-centeredness. Our challenge is to focus on the purpose of life that God has revealed to us, not on what we have imagined for ourselves, as Woody Allen suggests.

When we add other truths gleaned from other passages of God's Word, then we realize that verse 11 is implying that we are being created for another world, an entirely different one within the realm of eternity. God's gift of His

Holy Spirit has given us an ability to transcend mankind's fixation on the present and the material. We are being created for the spirit world of the Father, the Son, and the angels that They have made to be ministering spirits for our benefit. We are being created for the Kingdom of God.

To find satisfaction and fulfillment, Solomon attempted many different avenues and thought deeply about life as he saw it. However, we must come to understand that God has ordained that we must live by faith while awaiting our change. That time must be spent within a relationship with Him so that we come to know Him and His way ever more fully. Now is the testing time, the time for trials to prepare us. We must learn that our satisfaction in life must come from an "over the sun" spiritual relationship lived by faith.

Those who pursue this relationship with God will be given eternal life because they know Him and He knows them. This is the overall task to which Ecclesiastes 3:10 alludes. God has given us this task to accomplish to be prepared for living in His Kingdom. In order to fulfill it, we *must* live by faith, trusting His sovereignty in every situation. That means being at peace, content, comforting ourselves with the truth that God is fully aware of what is happening in our lives, as well as being in control of the big picture. Satan could not endure this, so he attempted to throw off these restraints.

Recall that Ecclesiastes 3:1 states, "There is a time for every purpose under heaven." But is the timing right or wrong, bad or good, suitable or unsuitable, ugly or beautiful?

It depends on who chooses the timing. Paul writes in Galatians 4:4, "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." God set the time for this to occur. It was not happenstance; the timing was fitting. Mark 1:15 shows the same principle: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." Jesus means that the time *God set* to preach the gospel had been reached. Matthew 26:18, 27-29 contain similar thoughts: The timing of His crucifixion and even the timing of when Jesus will drink wine again was set. Mark 8:31 reveals that God set the length of time Jesus spent in the grave too.

Acts 1:6-7 adds an important fact:

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority."

God has sovereignly set the times, including appointing the times for our trials too. Are not times set by men for

(continued on page 14)

The Symmetry

Part One

To believe the old adage, “History repeats itself,” is to confess finding in history a certain symmetry, much like the iconic rooster on a kitchen tablecloth. As one surveys broad swaths of history, does he find patterns—recurring structures—appearing, like those colorful roosters—surely all siblings—on his tablecloth, standing proudly here and there, again and again?¹

Members of the Body of Christ are inclined to answer, “Yes.” Together, the unchanging nature of mankind and the dogged commitment to wickedness of the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2) work to create reduplicate events over a period of time. Today, as in olden time, mankind remains “desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9), and Satan is the same old worldwide deceiver (Revelation 12:9). This prevailing incorrigibility of man and demonic prince spawns historical symmetry.

OF PIVOTS, AXES, FULCRUMS, AND TIPPING POINTS

The historian and existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers seemingly denied the concept of reduplication in history in his assertion that one particular era was uniquely and discretely pivotal. A pivot is a point on which a larger structure turns. Think of a teeter-totter or seesaw; the support bar on which the board rests is a pivot. The pivot is the fulcrum on which the seesaw operates. By extension, a pivot is any vitally important thing on which other things are based or their proper function depends.

One good way to think of the extended meaning of *pivot* is to think of a tipping point, a point in time when (often uncontrollable) events begin to happen that dramatically change the outcome of a situation.² In modern parlance, we might use the adjective “crossover” to refer to the notion of a pivot point, as in the sentence, “A station wagon is a crossover vehicle, somewhere between a truck and a sedan.”

So, a pivotal time in history is a unique and an essential one, a time that is definitive to successive epochs. Jaspers conceived of the 600 years roughly from 800 BC to 200 BC as a pivotal period in history, using the German noun *Achsenzeit*, which literally means “axis time.” The thrust of the German term, however, is “pivot.” Jaspers’ English translators used the term “Axial Period” or “Axial Age” to refer to this 600-year period.

The actual pivot point, he argues, was around 500 BC, about halfway into this period.³ Jaspers writes in *The Origin and Goal of History*:⁴

It would seem that the axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 *bc* [sic], in the *spiritual process* that occurred between 800 and 200 *bc*. It is there (about 500 *bc*) that we meet with the most deep-cut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today (mankind and his present civilizations) came into being. For short, we may style this the Axial Period. (Emphasis ours.)

Jaspers argues that the ancient world underwent major changes during this Axial Period. For example, ten-tribed Israel fell to the Assyrians near the beginning of the Period, and Judah fell to the Babylonians about midway through. Empires that got their start soon after the Flood, as those in Mesopotamia and Egypt, vanished as significant power structures. The Persian as well as the Assyrian Empires went the way of all flesh, as did any number of other empires, including long-standing ones in India and the Far East. Replacing these empires were the ones that became seminal in the development of modern history, such as the Greek and later the Roman Empires,⁵ both of which were essentially inconsequential before 800 BC.

THE CHANGE OF ZEITGEISTS

The significance of the Axial Period, however, goes far beyond political and military matters, as Jaspers hints in

OF HISTORY

his use of the term “spiritual process.” To Jaspers, the defining characteristic of the Axial Period was the cross-over in *ideas* that it witnessed. Ideas, which have their source in the mind, in the spirit in man, are spiritual in essence. Jaspers saw the Axial Period as hosting *different*⁶ ideas in philosophy (as with the Greek thinkers) and law (as with Roman law).

The Axial Period also saw the rise of different views in the area of religion. For example, Jaspers believed that “transcendent” ideas replaced the earthy, salacious ones that we associate with ancient Babylon and Egypt. Jaspers argued (rightly or wrongly) that the idea of monotheism grabbed traction during this period, while concomitantly the idea of polytheism lost ground.

The rise of Judaism illustrates the change in religious ideas that this period witnessed. While the rabbis are quick to assert that Judaism has its roots in the most ancient of times, it in fact is a more recent construct, dating from the period of the Babylonian Exile. While in Babylon, the Jewish people slowly undertook a process of syncretism whereby they adopted many of the cultural traits of their captors.

The deadly infection of syncretism spread even to those Jews who separated geographically from Babylon and returned to Judah. These folk were the re-constructors of Jerusalem and the Temple. Sadly, their children were ultimately unable or unwilling to restore the worship of the true God. After the death of Ezra and Nehemiah, lesser leaders, reacting to the cultural forces of the Greeks, slowly built a religion—Judaism—that was far different from that of the Patriarchs⁷. Highly prescriptive, replete with rigid dos and don’ts, Judaism was a religion of ritual form without godly power (compare II Timothy 3:5.) This was the self-righteous, parochial religion to which Christ reacted repeatedly. Mark 7:6-8 records typical comments about Judaism by Christ:

Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

This people honors Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.
And in vain they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.

ANOTHER AXIAL PERIOD?

The rise of Judaism, the destruction of Jerusalem, along with Solomon’s Temple, the deportation of Israel: All these—changes in ideas, ideology, and governments—transpired during the period Jaspers termed the Axial Period. Werner Keller writes of the pivot year, 500 BC:

... The nations in the “Fertile Crescent” and on the Nile have grown old, their creative impulse is exhausted, they have fulfilled their task, and the time is drawing near for them to step off the stage of history.

The sun of the ancient orient is setting and its peoples are vaguely conscious of the approaching night.

About 500 B.C. darkness fell, imperceptibly but irresistibly, over the lands and the people who had within them the seed of all that would come after them—but in other lands.⁸

Was the Axial Period unique, a one-time event? Or was it only a pattern for another such period to follow later? Is it fair to speak of a Second Axial Period? And if so, what are its particular characteristics and ramifications? In Part Two, we will look to see if we can find one, and with it, evidence of some meaningful symmetry in history.

—Charles F. Whitaker

ENDNOTES

¹ An alternative metaphor is cycles. If history repeats, then it is fair to say it is cyclical, maybe in predictable frequencies. Some view history as linear, headed in one direction, where any cycles are inconsequential, more apparent than real. Others conceive of history as cyclical. Or is it both? Is the flow of history best compared to a bicycle tire, cycling around and around as it moves ever forward over new ground, headed for a stopping point, a destination?

The search for historical patterns, reduplicative events, can lead to some strange conclusions. For instance, some believe in the notion of “successor cities,” that is, that cities in antiquity have “successors” or counterparts in the modern world, often located on different continents. Babylon’s successor city becomes Rome—or is it New York? Some hold that London is the successor city of Jerusalem. Los Angeles was once supposed to be the successor city of Florence, Italy. In pop culture, this notion of successor cities manifests itself in sister-cityhood.

² This definition of *tipping point* is general. It is not related to specific (and sometimes vague) definitions of the term in physics, climatology, and sociology.

³ Frankly, Jaspers’ model of a Pivotal Period is troublesome because he never, as far as the author can ascertain, posits a pivotal *event* or even a closely related series of events that form the actual axis of history. He speaks only of the year 500 BC, without explaining what it is about that specific year that makes it pivotal. So, Jaspers really gives us a Pivotal Period with no defined pivot point, an intellectually unsatisfying proposition.

Since a structure with two pivots does not metaphorically make much sense, the metaphor of a *tipping point* is preferred over that of a pivot point. Within Jaspers’ 800-year-long Pivotal Period appear two clear, biblically-based tipping points, both of which manifestly changed history. One tipping point is God’s imposition of a 2,520-year period of punishment on the ten-tribed House of Israel, around 722 BC. The other tipping point is His imposition of a 2,520-year period of punishment on Judah, taking place midway through the Pivotal Age. The “tipping point” model seems more meaningful than the pivot-point model with its lack of a single, defined pivot point.

⁴ Jaspers was a German. He entered tertiary school to study law, but soon moved to medicine, where he took a degree in psychiatry. He spent only a short time as a practicing clinical psychiatrist, however, preferring history and philosophy. He published *The Origin and Goal of History* in 1949, which was translated into English in 1953. He first used the term “Axial Period” in this book.

At least one active academic group today serves as a forum for Jaspers’ ideas, and interestingly, it is centered in America: The Karl Jaspers Society of North America, which publishes a scholarly journal called *Existenz*. Of most interest is an article entitled “Jaspers’ Axial Age Hypothesis: A Brief Restatement” (Spring 2010). The author, Michael Zank, makes some interesting comments about Jerusalem. He mentions Professor Joseph Margolis, whose commentary regarding Jaspers appears in the same issue: “Remarks on Zank, Monotheism and Its Discontents: Achsenzeit or Deus ex Machina?”

⁵ It may be worthy of note that both Greece and Italy (wherein is Rome) are west of the older empires, such as those in Egypt and Mesopotamia. God gradually moved the *locus* of history geographically away from the Levant. Later on, with the fall of Rome, God again relocated the locus of history, this time northward. In the tenth century AD, cities like Berlin, Paris, and London began to thrive as commercial and cultural centers, while Babylon, Jerusalem, and Memphis languished. The great cities of Western Civilization were taking shape.

⁶ Let us be clear: While Jaspers may have conceived these ideas as *new*, they were in fact only *different*. For there is actually nothing *new* under the sun, as Solomon avers at Ecclesiastes 1:9. Somewhere, sometime in the kingdom of man—perhaps before the Flood—the ideas that grew up in Jaspers’ Axial Period had already been posited, discussed, bled over, and finally espoused or rejected.

⁷ I Maccabees 1:12-16 describes the extent to which some Jews went in adopting Greek culture, their actions flying in the face of God’s laws. Money was found to build a stadium near the Temple (it was later destroyed as Herod enlarged the Temple precincts), where the young men participated naked in Greek games, even though nakedness was an effrontery to their fathers. More than that, they “made themselves prepuces” (verse 16), which they caused to be surgically affixed to themselves in an attempt to show themselves uncircumcised, that is, to demonstrate how much they were *like* their Greek opponents. Hence, “they departed from the holy covenant” (verse 16) of circumcision. In so doing, they rejected both the concept of, as well as the struggle for, holiness. (See Werner Keller’s *The Bible As History*, Bantam Books, pp. 345-346.) It may be said that the popular rush to “gay marriage” today is no greater abrogation of traditional values than the actions of these young Jewish athletes.

⁸ *The Bible As History*; Bantam Books; 1980; pp 320, 322.

ready answer

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

Crookedness

“What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered.”

—Ecclesiastes 1:15

Perhaps it is the same for all nations and cultures, but the modern-day descendants of Israel seem to exhibit an especially high degree of idealism and perfectionism. These are not inherently bad traits, because God indeed requires us to strive to be perfect and to live according to His ideals. Sometimes, though, we can create stress for ourselves when we have expectations of perfection because, as Solomon teaches, our world is not perfect: “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered” (Ecclesiastes 1:15).

God has blessed the nations of Israel tremendously, and with those blessings comes the ability to overcome many obstacles. Yet there are aspects of our surroundings that are simply broken—words cannot be unsaid, deeds cannot be undone, and crookedness that cannot be straightened.

This axiom in Ecclesiastes 1:15 is connected to the previous verse, which speaks of “all the works that are done under the sun,” giving verse 15 its context. All the works of man—everything in this *cosmos*, this world apart from God—include a crookedness that cannot be rectified. The number of things lacking in all of man’s works is so great as to be uncountable.

By way of definition, the Hebrew word translated as “crooked,” *avath* (*Strong’s* #5791), is used less than a dozen times in the rest of the Old Testament. The basic meaning of the word is “to wrest,” which is “to forcibly pull something from a person’s grasp” or “to obtain by wrenching with violent, twisting movements.” In essence, it is the assertion of one person’s will against another’s, and the result is damage that can never truly be repaired. In other places, this word is linked with the perversion of justice (Job 8:3; 34:12). It can mean

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wronging someone or dealing perversely with someone (Psalm 119:78). It indicates turning things upside down or upsetting the natural order of things (Job 19:6; Psalm 146:9). Finally, it can refer to subverting someone in his cause and falsifying the scales (Lamentations 3:36; Amos 8:5).

Solomon is saying that, once the natural order of things has been upset by this willfulness, it is essentially impossible to make those things right again. The order of things cannot be *equalized* (which is what the word translated as “straight” means), even though there may be a salve that can be applied. When something has been wrested from another—when one person’s will has been asserted at the expense of someone else’s will—it sets things into motion that cannot be equalized. A measure of crookedness will always remain in man’s works.

Thus, because of human nature and human willfulness, anywhere we find human actions, we also find disorder and incompleteness. We see irregularity and deficiency. Not only that, but we also discover mankind’s utter inability to truly fix them or fill in what is lacking.

Crookedness and Sin

When Solomon speaks of crookedness, he is not specifically speaking about sin. In fact, as we will see, some crookedness is actually good! But in general, sin and crookedness overlap in many ways because, when one person is wrenching something from another, whether physically or metaphorically, sin is almost always involved. It is the “way of get”; it is an act of self-centeredness.

On a human level, the crookedness in the world began in the Garden of Eden, when Adam upset the order of things by heeding the voice of Eve rather than the voice of God. He made a choice, and that choice introduced crookedness into the relationship between God and man. What Adam made crooked could not be made straight by any subsequent human action.

In fact, the more people there were, the more crooked the world became until finally God intervened by, not only drowning most of mankind, but also by shortening the human lifespan. In doing so, He dramatically reduced the amount of time during which any single person could make things crooked. Yet, even with only his allotted three-score and ten or perhaps four-score, each man has plenty of time to make things crooked in his and others’ lives.

Crookedness began on a human level with Adam, yet it goes back even farther, to another being who was in the Garden. The crookedness in God’s creation began with a created being, Satan, whose heart was

lifted up, who thought of himself more highly than he should. After his own heart and will became crooked, he began wresting the wills of other angels, then those of mankind. He is the source of this *cosmos*, as well as human nature, and thus wherever those are found, we can also expect to find some crookedness.

What this means is that, even though God has redeemed us, any place in our lives that the world still holds sway, or any area where we allow human nature to get the upper hand, something will be made crooked. Our will will assert itself and be manifested in a perversion of justice, in wronging someone, in turning a matter upside down, in dealing deceitfully, or in upsetting the relationship with God by overlooking His will for us.

Crookedness and God

A few chapters later, in Ecclesiastes 7:13, another aspect of crookedness appears: “Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked?” This is why not *all* crookedness is sin. God also makes things crooked, but with Him, it is always done out of love and genuine concern for His creation. Thus, it is not sin.

He, too, wrests things out of our hands and twists our paths in a different direction, and we certainly cannot undo what He has done. He exercises His sovereign authority, and it turns things upside down. He upsets the natural order of the *cosmos*, and the normal course of events for mankind in general and for individuals. He subverts the cause of anyone He chooses, according to His goodness and what He knows is best.

Many people have a hard time with this aspect of God, often preferring to shy away from it. Yet He says Himself that He creates calamity (Isaiah 45:7). What is calamity if not crookedness on a monumental scale? He caused the Flood that destroyed all of mankind save eight. He removed a hedge around Job, which resulted in a tremendous trial. He decimated the nation of Egypt. When His people were obedient, He annihilated the armies of those who came against them, but when His people were rebellious, He fought *against* them and spoiled their efforts. He sent Israel into captivity, scattering them so thoroughly that most of them do not even know who they are.

Closer to home, He scattered His own church because He judged that our course needed to be upset—because it was not good. The normal course needed to be wrenched in a different direction in order for each child of His to examine his own ways to see what crookedness needs to be straightened out. And as Solomon rhetorically asks, who can undo what the

Creator has willed to occur? Only He can—and only when and how He ordains.

If it seems like our every endeavor turns sour, or similar events are conspiring against us, it is not necessarily because we are being punished for being the worst of sinners. Perhaps we are—but we have to remember that even if we have the very best spiritual walk, perfectly resembling Jesus Christ, we will always encounter things that are crooked because the world is crooked, because Satan is continuing to make things crooked, and because God, too, is making things crooked (at least according to human reckoning). The reality is that His actions are always good and will always produce good fruit in the end, but that does not change the fact that they may also turn our world upside down in a most uncomfortable way. And that is all before we add in the crookedness that we cause ourselves!

Even so, we should not despair. God makes things crooked, but He also makes things straight. He supplies what is lacking when we cannot. Recall the crooked hands and legs that He made straight during His earthly ministry and the healing He performs for us. Consider the resurrections that He performed and the crookedness that He straightened out in them. Ponder the food that He provided and the truth that He supplied when they were lacking. He came to a crooked world and began setting things straight.

He did not do it all at once, though He is nevertheless continuing to make straight the crookedness introduced into His creation some 6,000 years ago. The Father and the Son are always working (John 5:17), and they are working for our spiritual benefit. Part of Their work is making things straight for the firstfruits, intervening to bring us to a vastly different conclusion from the end we would reach on our own.

God, at times, grants His children favor in the eyes of others when the normal course would be for them to be despised. He gives peace, which can include straightening out an interpersonal conflict. He takes things that are out of kilter and wrests them to bring them into alignment. “Power belongs to God,” the psalmist says, and so it should be common sense to seek favor with Him, because then He is willing to upset the order of things in a way that will help us toward the Kingdom.

He does not make everything perfect all at once, but as we continue to walk with Him, He straightens out sections of our road that we cannot straighten. He does not take away all of the consequences of our crookedness, nor does He undo all of the world’s crookedness that impinges on us. Nevertheless, He straightens enough so that we can continue making

spiritual progress and even receive unexpected blessings along the way.

“Crooked Places . . . Made Straight”

It may seem like everything in this process is out of our hands, but there is still something for us to do. Notice this Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-4:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth.”

Verse 3 mentions “preparing the way,” one that God will be traveling: “make . . . a highway for our God.” This refers to the common practice of monarchs, who, before traveling into a new place, would send a party ahead of them to make sure that the road—the way—was easily passable. This crew would open up difficult passages, level out the road, make sure that it was as straight as possible, and remove any impediments to smooth travel. The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (Diodorus of Sicily) gives an account of the marches of Semiramis into Media and Persia that illustrates this practice:

In her march to Ecbatana she came to the Zarcean mountain, which, extending many furlongs, and being full of craggy precipices and deep hollows, could not be passed without taking a great compass about. Being therefore desirous of leaving an everlasting memorial of herself, as well as of shortening the way, she ordered the precipices to be digged down, and the hollows to be filled up; and at a great expense she made a shorter and more expeditious road, which to this day is called from her the road of Semiramis. Afterward she went into Persia, and all the other countries of Asia subject to her dominion; and wherever she went, she ordered the mountains and precipices to be leveled, raised causeways in the plain country, and at a great expense made the ways passable.

In the gospels, Isaiah 40:3-4 is quoted in reference to John the Baptist, because this was his calling: He was to prepare the way for the uncrowned Monarch, and he did that by preaching a message of repentance. He told the people how to straighten out their lives to be prepared when the King arrived. He told the multitudes to bear fruits that indicated true repentance and

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advised them to be willing to share their goods with their neighbors. He warned tax collectors to stop being crooked and not to collect any more than was legally required. He instructed soldiers to stop being crooked through intimidating people, falsely accusing, and being discontent. While John did not actually use the word “crooked,” his message, in essence, was to equalize the areas of their lives that were askew (Luke 3:4-18).

We, too, are looking forward to the arrival of the King, and so we are also called to “prepare the way” within our own lives—though not, like Semiramis, to leave an everlasting memorial to ourselves. Isaiah 40:4 describes the preparation as bringing every valley up and every mountain down to the level of the road. The crooked places have to be made straight, and the rough places smoothed.

However, this prophecy does not say that the King will not arrive until we are ready. Rather, the King will arrive at the appointed time, and whether or not we have straightened our crookedness will determine if we face His wrath or His reward when He does.

We cannot straighten the crookedness of the world, but *through God’s power*, we can straighten our own paths. God has given us the gift of His Word, which will help us to evaluate properly whether something in our lives will make the path crooked or straight. He has

given us the example and teachings of the Messiah. He has given us inspired letters. He has given us laws, statutes, judgments, reflections, proverbs, praise, prophecy, and history. He has given us specifics and principles, all of which can be used to help us consider our ways: to consider whether a word or action is sin; to consider whether we are asserting our will against another; to consider whether something will make our path to the Kingdom more difficult; and to consider whether our attitudes, approaches, or activities will make someone else’s path crooked.

Another thing that God has given us in His Word is hope—because we can read about the future. We know that when God’s plan is complete, nothing will be crooked. God will wipe away every tear; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for—to paraphrase Revelation 21:4—the former crookedness will have been straightened out. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. There will be new spiritual bodies, and most importantly, new hearts.

God tells us, and shows us, how to be a part of that future. Right now, our responsibility is to make our paths as straight as possible—not just for our sakes, but also for the effect it has on others.

—David C. Grabbe

personal *Ecclesiastes and Christian Living*

(continued from page 7)

school tests? The proctor says, “You have 40 minutes, then the test is over.”

Understanding this principle helps us to grasp Solomon’s conclusions in Ecclesiastes 3:12-14:

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God. I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him.

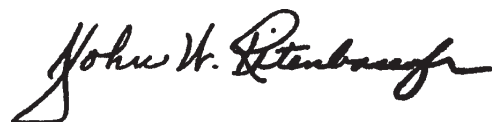
Some translations contend that the last phrase is best read as “that men should stand in awe before Him.” When will that take place? It will not truly occur until after the resurrection. Of what will we stand in awe? We will truly admire many things about His glory, but I believe that, after going through these experiences with Him so closely involved in our lives, what will

really strike us with mind-numbing awe is *what He has been able to create of us*.

God’s timing is always good, right, and appropriate. It is up to us to use our faith in Him to remain in a good attitude, using the time that He has set for us to grow, overcome, and meet the responsibilities our trials impose. In all of life, we deal with nothing as continuously as time. Every day, from the moment we wake up until we go back to sleep, we are watching time, setting times, meeting schedules, calculating how much time we have, etc. This highlights that *everything matters* because we have only so much time.

While our time is limited, we can live in faith and hope because of the overall message of this magnificent chapter: *God is in control of time all the time*.

In Christian love,



Chicken in the East China Sea

With little warning, China's Ministry of Defense announced on November 23 that it had established an Air Defense Identification Zone, or ADIZ, above the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku/Tiaoyutai island chain in the East China Sea. Since about 1960, many nations have used ADIZs to enhance their air security, requiring civilian aircraft flying into them to notify the ADIZ's controlling nation upon entry. Usually, an ADIZ covers areas just beyond a nation's territorial waters, providing a kind of early-warning zone in case of military incursion. China's new ADIZ follows this principle, but it has escalated tensions in the region because it stretches over territories claimed by China, Japan, and Taiwan, and overlaps ADIZs established by Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea.

While there have been no military clashes to date over China's provocative move, it has raised fears of Chinese expansion and militarism. The extension of the zone comes at an inopportune time. Japan is currently reshaping its defensive stance, becoming more aggressive as it shakes off its self-imposed, post-war pacifism. Over the past year, Japan has repeatedly scrambled aircraft—eighty times just in the past three months—in response to increasing numbers of Chinese warplanes and drones patrolling over the sensitive islands. In response to China's announcement, Japan has declared that it would continue its own patrols in the airspace and ordered commercial airlines to disregard China's flight rule.

Conversely, Taiwan's response to China has been relatively restrained, as it must be in its tenuous position. Taiwanese authorities have noted that China is so far not strictly enforcing the ADIZ against its military flights; in fact, there has been little change in China's activity in the new zone. To avoid provoking its much larger neighbor, Taiwan says it will refrain from holding military drills in the new zone.

China's new ADIZ overflies South Korea's Jeju Island. In response, South Korea has taken the opportunity to expand the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone, or KADIZ, which it has desired to do for quite some time. The KADIZ expansion now includes the disputed Ieodo Reef (Suyan Rock in Chinese), a small, sometimes-submerged rock where South Korea operates a research station and helipad. In addition, the enlarged zone covers the Marado and Hongdo islands, which to South Korea's displeasure, Japan also includes in its ADIZ.

The dispute among these nations is not just about the expansion of Chinese military oversight. China's new ADIZ covers the potentially lucrative Chunxiao natural gas field near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Both China and Japan have energy needs that the all-but-untapped, deep-water field could partially satisfy, and both want it exclusively. China estimates that the Chunxiao

field contains around 250 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, a claim that U.S. energy analysts believe is greatly inflated. Even so, if it contains only a fraction of that estimate, it is still a considerable reserve. In 2008, Beijing and Tokyo actually signed a pact to cooperate on energy exploration in the East China Sea, but the two nations have been unable to agree on how to make it work.

On December 2, citing increased risk of accidents, the United States urged China to lift its air defense zone procedures, a call the Chinese ignored. America has not officially recognized the new ADIZ, and even sent two unarmed B-52s through the zone without sending out an identification message. Unofficially, however, Washington has urged American commercial carriers to comply with China's new rules to avoid any unfortunate incidents. It appears that the U.S. attitude is to wait and see how China will enforce the zone, and if it does so reasonably, American officials will simply deal with it as circumstances dictate.

Can China enforce its new ADIZ? Doing so is a two-pronged endeavor: It must be able to monitor traffic in the zone and to defend it if an enemy incursion takes place. To fulfill the first part, it must have ground- or ship-based radar emplacements or air platforms to cover the whole zone. In terms of current technology, the Chinese have the capability to do this job, although coverage of the far eastern reaches of the zone may be spotty. However, if an enemy uses developing stealth technology, China's monitoring abilities will be greatly reduced.

As for defending the zone, though, the People's Republic may face a substantial challenge in doing so. Even though China's naval and air forces have grown and modernized significantly over the past decade, Beijing has so far not shown the ability to use its various pieces in a logistical, cohesive, and comprehensive fashion. While it may be able to run regular patrols of the ADIZ, it may have difficulty getting a rapid-reaction force to defend against a serious violation of the zone.

What seems to be taking place in the East China Sea is an international, multi-level game of chicken. By imposing an expanded ADIZ, China is daring its smaller, weaker neighbors to blink first, and by doing so, tacitly cede control over part of this strategic maritime area. So far, only Taiwan has backed down, because it must. Japan and South Korea, so intertwined in America's Pacific strategy, have called China's bluff, depending on U.S. naval power to keep China in check.

As J.R.R. Tolkien writes in *The Hobbit*, "It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him." The nations of the East China Sea know exactly what he means.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Healing a Stooped Woman (Part One)

Luke records one of the few miracles of Jesus Christ performed in a synagogue, His healing of a stooped woman (Luke 13:10-17). His Sabbath-day miracles picture the purposes of God's plan of salvation. The Sabbath incidents recorded in Luke 6:1-11 involve Jesus' lordship over the Sabbath, while this account illustrates its meaning.

The seventh day is a holy convocation (Leviticus 23:3), and Jesus used it to teach God's way. The Sabbath service's purpose is not for entertainment, as so many churches seem to stress today, but it is for vital and joyful worship of the one true God.

Jesus' adversaries closely watched Him, especially on the Sabbath, in hope of trapping Him in some breach of the law concerning it. In their unbelief and perversity, those blind leaders of the blind failed to understand that they were condemning the original Giver of the law. That they were supposed to be the religious leaders of God's chosen people exacerbated their sin. Instead, they burdened the people with humanly-reasoned restrictions and taboos.



1. How serious is the stooped woman's condition? Luke 13:11.

COMMENT: The woman has a severe and pitiful physical problem, which she has endured for eighteen long years. She is bent completely forward, utterly unable to straighten herself or to look upward. The phrase "bowed down" (KJV) or "bent over" (NKJV), found only here in the New Testament, is a medical term indicating a harmful curvature of the spinal vertebrae.

Her stooped posture aptly illustrates humanity's spiritual condition due to sin. Sin does not straighten a person up but bends him over so all he can see is the way of the world. The sinner, unable to look up into the face of God, cannot remedy his evil plight before being called (Psalm 40:12; Romans 5:6).

Her stooped condition is so severe that she has no power to straighten herself, and in this weak condition, she is thus unable to help herself. Unless Christ heals and saves, the condition will only worsen with time.

2. What is this "spirit of infirmity"? How was she loosed from it? Luke 13:11-12, 16.

COMMENT: The woman has a strange derangement of the nervous system, having its source in the mind rather than in the body. Her stooped condition results at least partially from psychological instability, making her depressed. Her strange malady, then, is partly physical and partly mental. Satan has had his hand in her disability to the extent that her mind is susceptible to his influence, and her body has malfunctioned, producing a severe case of an unhealthy, hunched condition.

Jesus' words in verse 16, "whom Satan has bound," do not mean that Satan's involvement here is demon-possession but more like demon-oppression. Luke does not indicate that Christ exorcised a demon from her, which would have been the case had she been possessed. Satan oppresses her in a way that affects her physical body, like Paul, who describes his affliction as "the messenger of Satan to buffet me" (II Corinthians 12:7).

God's people in every age—Job, for instance—have been aware of this work of Satan. "Whom Satan has bound"

reminds us that Satan does not free anyone; he only enslaves. Not only does Satan bow people down, but so do sin (Psalm 38:6), sorrow (Psalm 42:5), and suffering (Psalm 44:25). Only God can set a person free. While they create the illusion that breaking God's law liberates, sin and Satan never truly free anyone (John 8:34). In reality, evil habits grip people with terrible tenacity. Unbelievers sometimes criticize believers, saying that their church and religious convictions restrict their fun and freedom, but such an argument is the exact opposite of the truth.

3. Does the woman let her infirmity keep her from attending Sabbath services? Luke 13:10-11.

COMMENT: Though physically disabled and disfigured by her stooped spine, she, just like the man with the withered hand (Luke 6:6), does not allow her problem to keep her from formal worship of God on the Sabbath. Her physical condition makes it very difficult for her to go to the synagogue and sit through the service. It is also humbling for her, since people often feel awkward around those with disfigurements. She goes anyway.

Surely, she has prayed and asked God for help, yet she has not been delivered. However, God's seemingly neglectful and unconcerned lack of intervention does not make her bitter or resentful. She attends synagogue despite the obstacles, appreciating her spiritual opportunities and cherishing the worship of God. Her dedication and faithfulness do not go unrewarded.

How many blessings do people give up when they skip going to church? Spiritually and physically, we benefit by regularly attending where we can hear God's Word and worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). This woman learns that the best help she can give her body is to be first concerned about her spiritual health. Had she not been concerned enough about her spiritual needs to be in the synagogue in spite of her condition, she would never have been healed. As Jesus promises, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

—Martin G. Collins