Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 23, Number 4 July-August 2014

CHRISTIANS & COURTESY

july-august 2014
volume 23, number 4

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The world we live in moves so fast that the simple courtesies are oftentimes forgotten in the rush of activity. Increasingly, children show little respect for their elders, people speak rudely to each other, and inappropriate dress is common. Such discourtesy fails to show respect for others, part of God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves. In this area of life, Christians should lead. ***iStockphoto***

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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 Eight: Death

Ecclesiastes 7 is another chapter of comparisons, that is, it essentially states that *this* is better than *that*. Recall that we should not take these comparisons as absolutes, which is why Solomon uses the term "better" rather than giving a direct, dogmatic command. Why does he do this when we would normally expect a direct command from God? Sometimes conditions alter cases.

We can see a clear illustration of this in Solomon's statement in verse 1 that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. It should be that way, but in real life, it is *not* always so. Some foolish people absolutely waste their precious gift of life from God, so their deaths leave no room for hope.

The implication of Solomon's thought is that his statement reflects the way it should be, and those who believe God's Word can take steps to ensure the conclusion of their lives will be that way. That better conclusion to life largely depends on the choices made in life.

Chapter 7 begins on the heels of the five questions that end chapter 6, as though what Solomon writes in chapter 7 contains some thoughts relative to those questions. However, we will not focus on that connection at this time. Even so, because wisdom is so frequently mentioned in the next three chapters, we will briefly review some points regarding it.

The ancient Hebrews associated wisdom with our modern term "skill," even though "skill" is not a direct translation of the Hebrew term. "Skill" implies what wisdom is in actual practice: excellence in quality or expertise in the practice of one's occupation, craft, or art. People may acquire many skills in life, but the Bible focuses on human life and its God-given purpose. Therefore, a practical definition of biblical *wisdom* is "skill in living according to God's way of life."

To refine it further, biblical wisdom is unique to those truly in a relationship with God. That biblical wisdom is a gift of God reinforces this fact, and according to James 1:1-8, we should ask for it and He will give it. James cautions that we must be patient because God gives it through the experiences of living within a relationship with God. Living requires time, and in some cases, a great deal of time because we are often slow to learn. God gives wisdom for us to make the best practical use of all the other gifts He

gives, enabling us to glorify Him by our lives. As it is used, it displays a host of characteristics similar to the fruit of the Spirit (see James 3:17-18).

Proverbs 1:1-7 helps to clarify wisdom by showing that it consists of such other godly characteristics as knowledge of God Himself, the fear of God, understanding, discernment, discretion, prudence, justice, judgment, equity, etc., all of which, melded together and used, produce a skill in living that—this is important—is in alignment with God's purpose and way of life.

Undoubtedly, some people are worldly-wise. However, biblical wisdom and worldly wisdom are not the same skillset. Biblical wisdom contains those spiritual qualities that are in alignment with and support God's purposes. Though wisdom may provide a measure of worldly success, that is not its primary purpose.

Death and the Human Heart

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:1-4:

> A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of one's death than the day of one's birth; better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

We revisit these verses because of their focus on the heart, death, mourning, sorrow, and mirth, all of which are involved in the comparison. In terms of wisdom, Solomon unmistakably comes down on the side of sorrow and mourning as the more important. They are to be preferred because mourning motivates a person toward sober contemplation of his own mortality, which tends to affect the wellspring of our thoughts, words, and conduct effectively and positively. The wellspring of conduct is the heart, which is why "heart" is mentioned four times in these verses.

The heart is truly the center of a human being. Recall that Jesus reminds us that our words and conduct spring from our hearts (Matthew 15:18-19). Therefore, we need to search out and reinforce some important truths regarding death and its direct connection to our hearts and thus our conduct in life.

A number of years ago, *The Denial of Death* won the Pulitzer Prize for the best of nonfiction in a certain category. In it, the author, Dr. Ernest Becker, made this telling comment, confirming what the Bible clearly states: "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man" (p. *ix*). Here in Ecclesiastes, Solomon is subtly urging us to take steps to confront the truth of death's influence on our overall conduct in life.

Death was set in motion during the Creation Week. The way things now are in this world, it is an almost daily factor in life. It has become the curse of curses, the last enemy to be destroyed. As we will see shortly, it dogs our existence.

The specter of death is so dominant in some people's minds that it virtually destroys their lives. Their actions are focused on avoiding death and overcoming it by somehow denying that it is the final destiny for man. These people are really downers in their affect upon others.

Conversely, many people, while living, do not prepare for the obvious reality of death. It and its accompanying sorrows are major events of life that everyone must deal with. Solomon exhorts us to face in a balanced way what this issue means in terms of God's truth so we are prepared for its inevitability.

He does this partly because he understands, perhaps as well as anyone ever did, that pursuing laughter, as he shows in chapter 2, and relishing enjoyable situations are easy compared to experiencing sorrow. However, mirth is almost useless in terms of leading a profitable life. A person must almost be forced to seek out involvement in sorrowful circumstances. Paradoxically, death and its sorrowful circumstances have far more to teach us about what is valuable to a meaningful life compared to mirth and laughter, passing pleasures that are here today and gone tomorrow.

In verse 2, Solomon mentions a "house of mourning." In those days, and in fact right up to the time of my childhood, people often displayed dead family members in their homes, holding the funeral service there or at the grave site, whereas today, it is routinely held at a funeral home. My first memory of seeing a dead person in a casket was in the deceased's home. It was my first grade teacher, who had died during the school term.

Author Susan Sontag wrote, "Death is the obscene mystery, the ultimate affront, the thing that cannot be controlled. It can only be denied." Our language of death clearly shows society's attempts to soften, hide, or even deny it by using euphemisms, such as calling the dead person "the departed" or by saying that he "passed away" or "is not with us anymore." This is done to avoid saying the words "death" or "dead."

God deals with it in His Word by showing that it is best for us to deal with it directly. This allows us to understand more fully that death is indeed the way of all

flesh and to lay it to heart, shifting the balance of our thoughts about its reality toward more serious thinking on it.

God wastes no time confronting the issue. He mentions death as early as halfway through Genesis 2, as if to emphasize its meaning and importance to us. In addition, before Genesis 4 ends, the first literal death occurs as the result of a murder.

Helping to Reshape the Heart

By asking God for help regarding its reality, Moses makes a vital statement about preparing for death: "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). The phrase, "number our days," suggests that we put our use of time in order. Death and its reality play an important role in Christian life, for God fully intends that it have an overall positive effect on the lives of His children. Everybody dies. It cannot be avoided, but not everybody prepares for death.

Martin Luther also made an insightful observation on preparing for death: "It is good for us to invite death into our presence when it is still at a distance and not on the move." The time to learn about rock climbing is not when hanging from the edge of a precipice but well before starting up the side of the cliff. It seems, though, that many do most things on the spur of the moment, a practice that is not good, especially concerning something like death that absolutely no one escapes.

God gives some insight and counsel in Ecclesiastes 7:3-4. Death, He says, is good for the heart. The heart beats at our core. Attending one good funeral can shape a person's worldview more positively than a whole year's worth of parties. Verse 3 may be better understood if translated as, "By sadness, the heart is made better." His point is aimed at the soundness of the heart, which results from the honest thoughtfulness that sorrow causes a person to engage in. God is saying that sorrow tends to make us better people.

A specific and important sorrow is one Paul names in II Corinthians 7:8-11. In this brief passage, he uses "sorry," "sorrow," or "sorrowed" seven times. Why is it important? Because godly sorrow produces repentance, a change of mind and conduct.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon is clearly implying that, because we love to laugh, worldly mirth is attractive on the surface and momentarily focuses our attention. However, in terms of conduct, it frequently leaves an individual essentially unchanged. When this is combined with the godly truths of II Corinthians 7:8-11, it becomes clear that, by God's design, the discipline of sorrow tends to lead to improvement of conduct. Thus, God Himself sometimes afflicts us to produce sorrow in the hope that the pains and their accompanying sorrow make our hearts tender so that we change.

The result of a parent disciplining a child in a timely manner and in appropriate measure is a good illustration. Is not some measure of pain and its accompanying sorrow inflicted? Proverbs frequently tells us to spank our children. Why? Is not it to produce the sorrow of separation from one who is loved to accomplish a change in attitude and behavior?

God is saying through Solomon, then, that sorrow—in a morally and ethically beneficial way in which laughter cannot—penetrates and influences the heart, the very center of our being and from which conduct flows. So important is godly sorrow that II Corinthians 7:10 states, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."

A knowledge of death includes essential truths that we must know and believe if we are serious about not sinning and thus glorifying God. The book of Hebrews contains a passage that seriously affects our understanding of this issue. Knowing and believing these truths is essential to our lives of faith and salvation. A clear explanation of them will help us appreciate how seriously God wants us to be prepared for death. It will entail a rather long digression, but these statements regarding death in Ecclesiastes are so meaningful to our lives that such a detour is warranted.

Covering Some Pangs of Death

Scripture deals with the subject of death in several different ways. First, the Bible treats it as the normal end of life. It is as if a life has reached its full maturity, and when that point is reached, the person is plucked like a ripe stalk at harvest time. A second way the Bible deals with death is that it is simply the opposite of life. Life is respectfully associated as a gift of God, and with life, an individual is capable of relations with others, even God. However, it also suggests that when the individual dies, and life and God are gone, the body becomes impure and contact with it should be avoided.

Without any distinctions, we will approach the subject without any reference to either idea. Our focus will be on how important it is that we prepare for death because God has made it possible for us to live everlastingly.

Hebrews 2:14-15 states:

> Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy

> him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

It is true that in all of us exists a measure of apprehensive awareness of death that influences our attitudes and conduct. This fear affects everyone to some degree, whether intensely or feebly, because this particular fear has a spiritual source.

Notice that verse 15 says that through the fear of death we are held in bondage all our lifetime. It does not suggest a never-ending dread, but instead a vague influence on conduct, an uncertainty wrapped within a measure of hopelessness, because we do not fully believe God-given truths about death.

God does not put people in the kind of bondage implied by this context. What is being referred to here is bondage to sin. Thus, with a bit of understanding, we know that the source of this fear is Satan. Most of the world believes his many horrible lies regarding death: The living fear the thought of people shrieking in an ever-burning place that allows no spot of respite from fearsome pains. Some think of death as endless unawareness and others of wandering, always detached, in the vast emptiness of space.

Though humanity is certainly aware of death, it does not stop people from sinning, largely because most do not make a thoughtful, believing connection between their own sins being the direct cause of death and of Satan being their spiritual father, even as Jesus told the Jews (John 8:44). Thus, they are held in bondage to this deceptive, Satan-induced ignorance. As long as death seems far in the future, people generally do not pay it much attention. However, the fear still resides in their minds and influences their conduct because of not believing God's truth. Thus, most people do not fear to sin except for some social embarrassment because they do not make a clear, knowledgeable, believing connection between their personal sins and their own deaths.

In addition, Hebrews 2:14 tells us that Satan has the power of death. Again, people do not fear Satan very much either. In fact, many do not even believe that he exists. Nevertheless, their ignorance does not negate the fact of their bondage. They are not aware who their slave master is, but he is a person and has a name. Other foundational scriptures will help us make clearer sense of these verses.

The purpose in this section of Hebrews is to provide us with a foundation of truth regarding how we are freed from the condition we were in before we were called, converted, and made Christians and part of God's Family. Hebrews 2:9-11 adds key information to clarify our understanding:

> But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He by the grace of God might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

These verses introduce the solution. Jesus is the means by which we, the many sons, are made perfect, that is, brought to completion and made free from this bondage imposed on us. Our Creator had to first become completely identified with us: human. This is important because Jesus is the means by which we are not only made free and holy at the beginning of our conversion, but this same One also keeps us free throughout our conversion. Those who are truly holy by God's standard are those who will escape death.

This holiness or sanctification is not a static, unchanging state but a growing, lifelong, continually forming one. It is helpful to be reminded of John 8:31-36:

> Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him. "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever, therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

We Have a Responsibility

The Son sets us free. However, a key element pinpointing our responsibility in this relationship is the word "abide." It means "to live," "to continue," "to go on." Thus, we must recall Romans 5:10 and be very thankful: "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." This truth confirms that we are saved by His life, that is, He is our living High Priest. "I will never leave nor forsake you," He declares (Hebrews 13:5).

Thus, our responsibility is to continue being faithful to Christ, striving to overcome sin, and as this occurs,

He, as our High Priest, continues to keep us free from backsliding into Satan's bondage. Thus, the work of Christ *makes* us one with Him and *keeps* us one with Him.

The author of Hebrews is stating that Jesus, our Savior, and His brothers and sisters all now belong to the same Family. Remember that Jesus, in order to be identified completely with us, became a mortal man, but He, by living a sinless life, escaped the mandatory death penalty. Because of God's calling and faith, we are now linked with Him spiritually and can look forward to everlasting life.

Hebrews 2:14 is saying, then, that in order for us to be freed from bondage to Satan and the fear of death, Christ had to become human and able to die because "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Thus, nothing less than the death of our sinless Creator, living as a man, could suffice for us to be freed from the death penalty by means of His substitutionary death on the cross. God paid a huge price for our freedom from the fear of death.

This was not His only great accomplishment. He also lived sinlessly, and in doing so defeated Satan, who has the power of death, as he lost the struggle to induce Jesus, the second Adam, the beginning of the new creation, to sin. The Adversary had won this struggle over Adam and Eve and all their children, but Jesus took the weapon of death from Satan's hands. Because we are one with Christ, that weapon no longer hangs over us.

We need to further clarify Satan's possession of this weapon. Genesis 2:15-17 informs us of the beginning of Satan's power:

> Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Notice especially that *God* originally pronounced the curse of death should sin be committed. However, Jesus says in John 8:44 that Satan was a murderer from the beginning. When was the beginning? It had to be when God created beings whose life was in their blood, that is, humans, subject to death if they sinned. This did not occur until Adam and Eve were created. Thus, when they sinned, death had its beginning.

Genesis 3:13 adds, "And the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'" Thus, from what Jesus says in John 8:44 regarding Satan's part in this episode, we find that God held Satan guilty of murder. His weapon was the deceit that encouraged her to commit sin. She did not completely overlook her respect for God but discounted it enough to give into Satan's persuasion. She did this on the strength of her desire, fueled by her lust for the pleasure of eating the forbidden fruit—but even more so to fulfill her desire to become wise. Then, Adam, though not deceived as Eve was, also discounted God's counsel in order to make sure he did not displease Eve. He was guilty of idolatry.

What does knowing these things accomplish? It shows that, even though their deaths did not occur immediately, at the very least God had delivered the power of death into Satan's hands by means of deceit just before he induced her to sin. Satan used this means to murder them, and he uses this means to this very day. Incidentally, Jesus clearly indicates in the Olivet Prophecy, as well as in Revelation, that we will witness a rise in the intensity of deceit just prior to His return.

God did not intervene to stop either Satan or Adam and Eve from following their desires. Adam and Eve had a test to pass. They failed, as did all their progeny. Only Christ has succeeded. Unless one is converted and under Christ's blood, Satan continues to hold this power even to this very day. But we are not defenseless; we have Christ to help us in this battle.

Satan's Power Is Modified

Zechariah 3:1-4 provides further insight:

> Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, "Take away the filthy garments, from him." And to him He said, "See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes."

What is going on here? Because of a valid accusation against Joshua, Satan stands ready to take his life due to his sins, symbolized by the filthy robes. This scene confirms that Satan still has the power to take life, but the story does not end there.

Job 2:5-6 adds more to our understanding. The cynical Satan asks: "'But stretch out Your hand now, and

touch his bone and his flesh, and he will surely curse You to Your face!' And the Lord said to Satan, 'Behold, he is in your hand, but spare his life.'" This example confirms that, even though Satan still has this power, he is nonetheless also subject to God. Satan can execute that power only on those whom God gives him permission to kill.

Nevertheless, his and his fellow demons' very presence surcharges this earth with a sense of death that creates a fear (Ephesians 2:1-3). Thus, we have the assurance that God is overseeing our lives, ensuring that we do not get in over our heads. I Corinthians 10:13 assures us that, if we believe and act on it in submissive obedience to God, He will not test us above our abilities.

Hebrews 9:27 takes us another step toward unfolding this truth: "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Everybody dies this death, including believers. At first, a person may think this says that Satan has supreme rule, and every human loses. However, we cannot forget Christ's death on the cross. His death wiped out the curse of death hanging over us due to our sins similar to Adam and Eve, and He remains our faithful High Priest. Thus, more remains to be understood about this verse.

How does this verse affect us? Paul writes in Colossians 2:11-14:

> In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

The apostle explains that a Christian is free from the bondage of death because Christ's death has removed the charges of sin against us. Jesus, in Revelation 1:18, adds another factor in our favor: "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death."

Christ, because He paid the penalty for our sins and simultaneously defeated Satan, now holds the power of life and death for the converted. At this point, matters become clear. For Hebrews 9:27 to be true, Christ's blood does *not* cover the first death, which everybody faces, but it indeed covers the second death, eternal death of the Lake of Fire. Revelation 20:14 confirms a second death: "Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death." Revelation 21:8 adds detail: "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

Paul offers us assurance in Romans 8:37-39:

> Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

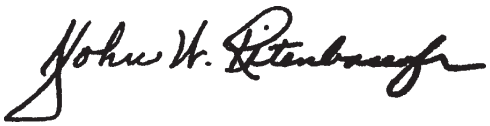
At this time, the unconverted face both the first and second deaths. They are still held eternally in Satan's slavery unless converted between now and the igniting of the Lake of Fire.

Hebrews 2:14-15 and its associated verses tell us that Christ died for us to break the hold Satan had on us and any that he still has on us through fear of eternal death that might remain within us. We do not die the hopeless second death that the unconverted are still held to. We are free to turn voluntarily to God, choosing to submit in obedience to Him.

To summarize, we do not have to sin in the face of Satan's powers. We still occasionally will, but we do not have to submit to the spiritual power that Satan uses against us. The enslavement is broken. Satan is no longer our father and master.

We can look forward to an ever-growing liberty to obey God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Solomon is encouraging us to fill our minds soberly and yet joyfully with these kinds of thoughts—even in the house of mourning—because these realties and promises are our hope! This reveals to us the lengths to which God willingly went: all the way to giving His own Son to pay the ransom for our liberty and to giving us freedom to use our free moral agency rightly.

In Christian love,



A Tale of Two COMPLAINTS

PART TWO

In Part One, we looked at Jeremiah 12, where we find the narration of the prophet's complaint that the wicked prosper, even though they destroy the land God gave to Abraham and His descendants as an eternal possession. God assures Jeremiah that He will punish the perpetrators of irresponsible environmental policies and practices.

Chapter 15 records Jeremiah's second complaint. Here, the prophet experiences a crisis as major—if that could be—as the crisis Judah's king and people were experiencing. Jeremiah's was a crisis in belief so dangerous that it threatened his position as God's prophet. Chapter 15 opens with what can only be characterized as a sensational word-picture of God's rejection of Judah:

> Then the LORD said to me, "Even if Moses and Samuel stood before Me, My mind would not be favorable toward this people. Cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth. And it shall be, if they say to you, 'Where should we go?' then you shall tell them, 'Thus says the LORD:
>
> "Such as are for death, to death;
> And such as are for the sword, to the sword;
> And such as are for the famine, to the famine;
> And such as are for the captivity, to the captivity."'
>
> "And I will appoint over them four forms of destruction," says the LORD: "the sword to slay, the dogs to drag, the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. I will hand them over to trouble, to all kingdoms of the earth. . . ." (Jeremiah 15:1-4)

Indeed, only a man after God's own heart, with a super-robust conviction of God's ultimate beneficence, could stomach such a mammoth calamity, seeing God's hand in it. Notice the intensity of the rhetoric of verses 6-8:

> Therefore I will stretch out My hand against you and destroy you;
> I am weary of relenting!
> And I will winnow them with a winnowing fan in the gates of the land;
> I will bereave them of children;
> I will destroy My people,
> Since they do not return from their ways.
> Their widows will be increased to Me more than the sand of the seas.

DEPRESSION—AND MORE

The intensity of rhetoric like this, the horrific images it evokes, brings Jeremiah to experience profound depression, as verse 10 indicates.

> Woe is me, my mother,
> That you have borne me,
> A man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth!

I have neither lent for interest,
Nor have men lent to me for interest.
Every one of them curses me.

Jeremiah is not even a banker, yet people all around him condemn him!

Consider that, to this point, God has as yet done nothing more than what He told Amos He would always do: He would do nothing until he has revealed His secret to His servants the prophets (see Amos 3:7). Yet, the information He has provided Jeremiah has overwhelmed him. The prophet mouths the same formula Baruch would later utter, "Woe is me." Is there anyone on "the whole earth" who understands what Jeremiah has gone through and who appreciates the work he is doing for God? Is he, like that mariner of old, alone in the wide, wide sea?

God's response contains three elements:

1. A message of hope, assuring the prophet that he is not alone (verse 11).

2. A powerful rebuke, complete with a threat (verse 19).

3. A reminder of the grace He has afforded Jeremiah from the start (verses 20-21).

God starts out with a message of hope, promising Jeremiah that He will provide a remnant, a group of people who will survive the siege and the destruction of Judah. Jeremiah is not alone and will never be alone.[1] By His use of the term "your remnant," God indicates that Jeremiah will "own" this group; he will be its leader. "Surely it will be well with your remnant; surely I will cause the enemy to intercede with you in the time of adversity and in the time of affliction" (verse 11).

WILL GOD BE AS A FAILING STREAM?

But Jeremiah is not satisfied. In verses 15-18, the prophet retorts with words bespeaking the depth of his dejection, the seriousness of his crises of belief:

O Lord, You know;
Remember me and visit me,
And take vengeance for me on my persecutors.
In Your enduring patience, do not take me away.
Know that for Your sake I have suffered rebuke.
Your words were found, and I ate them,
And Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart;
For I am called by Your name,
O Lord God of hosts.
I did not sit in the assembly of the mockers,
Nor did I rejoice;
I sat alone because of Your hand,
For You have filled me with indignation.
Why is my pain perpetual
And my wound incurable,
Which refuses to be healed?
Will You surely be to me like an unreliable stream,
As waters that fail?

Jeremiah reminds God that he has taken of God's Word and rejoiced in it; he has called on God's name and avoided the gainsayers. Yet, his pain is ongoing. Like Baruch, he finds no rest (see Jeremiah 45:3). Will God be with him to the end? Will God abandon him? The *Jubilee Bible 2000* renders verse 18 this way: "Why was my pain perpetual and my wound incurable, which refuses to be healed? Wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar and as waters that fail?"

Strong words! Like Asaph, whose "feet had almost stumbled" and whose "steps had nearly slipped" when he became envious of "the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalm 73:2-3), Jeremiah is clearly experiencing intense spiritual doubts. Can God use such an individual as His spokesman, His prophet, especially in this time of national emergency, the approaching "worst of times?"

At this point, God continues His response to the prophet with a stunning rebuke, one which contains more than a veiled threat:

If you return,
Then I will bring you back;
You shall stand before Me;
If you take out the precious from the vile,
You shall be as My mouth.
Let them return to you,
But you must not return to them. (Jeremiah 15:19)

This translation masks the moment—the import—of God's words. He is warning Jeremiah that he must return, that is, repent, abandoning "this mistaken tone of distrust and despair," as *The Amplified Bible* glosses verse 19. God promises He will restore him as His prophet, the "mouth" of God, *only if* he comes to understand the difference between the precious way of God and that vile way of the wicked.[2]

The Living Bible better conveys the import of God's comments to Jeremiah with this paraphrase of verse 19:

Stop this foolishness and talk some sense! Only if you return to trusting me will I let you continue as my spokesman.

(continued on page 14)

Courtesy

"Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another, love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous."

—I Peter 3:8

Many years ago, I worked with a woman who described her philosophy on driving like this: "If I come up on the back of someone, and they are driving too slow, I ride their bumper until they move over. If someone comes up on my bumper, I slow down to annoy them because they are driving too fast." In her mind, she was the official arbiter of road speeds. Moving over to the right lane never entered her mind, evidently.

On a recent road trip out West, my wife and I noticed how many people seem to think the fast lane is their birthright, and no other lane will do—no matter how slow they drive. In Texas, a state with perhaps the best road system in the nation, every few feet, it seems, the highway department had set up a sign reading, "Left Lane is for Passing Only." In Utah, the signs read, "Stay in Right Lane Except to Pass." In Georgia, every so often one will pass a sign reading, "Slow Traffic Keep Right." However, the American school system has again let us down, having produced a huge number of illiterate drivers because few, if any, obey these signs.

These are small anecdotes, but they point to a lack of courtesy between people here in the States. Lest the reader think this is solely an American issue, while on this trip, I read a June 11, 2014, *USA Today* article, "Be more polite, Beijing residents told." It related that a summit will be held in Beijing in November with many world leaders in attendance, and some work needs to be done first:

> In China's sharp-elbowed capital, where people jump lines and exhibit brusque manners, the ruling Communist Party launched a campaign Tuesday to encourage Beijing's 20 million residents to behave better.

> Led by the Capital Civilization Office, the same bureaucrats who struggled to wipe out public spitting before the 2008 Summer Olympics, Beijing plans to "raise citizens' quality" before [the summit].
>
> Targets of the six-month campaign: people who are noisy, smoke in public, curse at sports events, fail to line up for buses, run red lights, drink while they drive and drive aggressively.
>
> Beijingers should also dress properly, show grace in speech and manner and say "hello," "thank you" and "sorry" more often.

It is not just Beijing residents who need to work on their manners; it is all of us. Countless times, I have held doors for women only to have them sweep through as if they were royalty without a "thank you" to be heard. What happened to our children saying, "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am"? When is the last time we saw a male of any age give his seat to a lady or elderly person?

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote: "It is a wise thing to be polite; consequently it is a stupid thing to be rude. To make enemies by unnecessary and willful incivility is just as insane a proceeding as to set your house on fire. . . ."

A Biblical Behavior

A short definition of *courtesy* would be "polite behavior that shows respect for other people." Does God have anything to say about courtesy? Remember the "Golden Rule"? Jesus exhorts His disciples in Matthew 7:12: "Treat others as you want them to treat you. This is what the law and the prophets are all about" (*Contemporary English Version*).

If we truly lived by this, we would *always* treat others with courtesy. Chivalry would not be dead. For those younger folks who may not know, chivalry was an ancient, knightly code emphasizing the virtues of service to others, honor, love, and courtesy.

Consider, for instance, how we treat the "hoary head(s)" among us. Leviticus 19:32 commands us: "Show respect for old people and honor them. Reverently obey Me; I am the Lord" (*Good News Bible*). There have been times when I have come up on the rear of a slow-moving car and muttered, "Come on, grandpa, let's go!" only to remember that I too am a grandpa!

In all seriousness, though, do we revere the older folks as we should? Do we encourage our children to go last in line at a potluck? Do we take the time to do the simple things like teach our kids to look an adult in the eye when they he or she speaks to them? Do we insist that they say, "Yes, sir [or ma'am]," not interrupt an adult conversation, hold doors for them, and generally, as God urges, "Show respect for old people and honor them"?

Why would we be impolite to the elderly—or anyone, for that matter? Why not move over on the road and let others going faster drive by? Why be rude to sales clerks and wait staffs? Why not use the simplest of courtesies like "please" and "thank you"?

The apostle Paul gives the answer in Philippians 2:3: "Don't be jealous or proud, but be humble and consider others more important than yourselves" (*Contemporary English Version*). Now that is truly a hard thing to do. I can hear it now: "Treat others more important than *moi?* How can that be? The left lane was built *for me*! All others must go around. Why, if I were to move over and let you by, then I would lose face. I would be admitting defeat. I would be a loser in life's rat race." Most people fail to consider that, even if they win the rat race, they are still a rat!

In Titus 3:1-2, Paul instructs the younger man, pastoring churches on Crete:

> Remind believers to submit themselves to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, and to be ready to do an honorable kind of work. They are not to insult anyone or be argumentative. Instead they are to be gentle and show perfect courtesy to everyone (*International Standard Version* [ISV]).

The ISV renders the Greek word *praiotes* as "courtesy," while other versions translate it as "meekness," "gentleness" or "humility." The ISV has taken some liberties, but it gives a sense, in today's English, of what Paul is saying. A humble attitude is necessary to show courtesy to others.

I Peter 3:8 Amplified

So, if the English "courtesy" is not literally in Titus 3:2, is it elsewhere? The Greek word *philophron*, which translates directly to the English "courtesy," is used only once in the Bible. It comes from two other Greek words, *philos*, meaning "friend," and *phren*, meaning "understanding," "perceiving," and "judging." These two words indicating "understanding a friend" are put together to suggest the idea of courtesy.

Philophron appears in I Peter 3:8: "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one for another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous" (King James Version). Many translations interpret *philophron* as "kind" or "humble," and this is correct as well. Both *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* and *Strong's Concordance* define *philophron* as "friendly" and "kind," but

Strong's goes a little further, saying it can be summed up as the English word "courteous."

In I Peter 3:8, the apostle uses only seven Greek words, whereas the King James employs nineteen to get the meaning across. English is a wordy language, is it not? At the risk of boring the reader, we will look at I Peter 3:8 in the Greek, as if it were in an interlinear Bible: *Telos pas homophron sumpathes philadelphos eusplagchnos philophron.* Here it is, word by word, with English equivalents and a note or two:

Telos (finally, in the end, to sum up)

pas (individually and all, each and every one of you, collectively)

homophron (of one mind, in accord with one another; used in the New Testament only this once)

sumpathes (suffering or feeling the same with one another; used only this once)

philadelphos (love as brethren, brothers and sisters, countrymen; used only this once)

eusplagchnos (compassionate, tender-hearted; used just twice)

and finally, *philophron* (friendly, kind, courteous; used only this once).

The apostle Peter is here summarizing his instructions from the previous 20 verses, going back to I Peter 2:17. That passage deals with relationships: how to get along with brethren, mates, and the world at large. Why did God inspire him to use words not previously used nor used again later? Four of these Greek words are used only once in the Bible, one used only twice, all in this single verse!

While there are probably some deeper reasons that my mind is too limited to perceive, Peter has a straightforward goal in writing this verse in this manner. It is likely that using these terms was a simple way for him to get across to his audience something that he had mentioned many times already. If I was writing about cars, I would not want to repeat "car" again and again. As in "I drove a new *car* today. It was a blue *car*. It was a nice *car*. This *car* went fast." It is doubtful that *Car and Driver* magazine would hire me with such an unsophisticated style. Instead, I could use "vehicle," "transportation," "sporty mode of travel," "a good way to get from point A to point B," "automobile," and so on.

Peter, then, to provide more impact, merely sums up his previous points using fresh words. It is a technique we should pay attention to. We could paraphrase I Peter 3:8 like this, which sounds a great deal like *The Amplified Bible*: "In summation, each and every one of you, individually and collectively, have compassion, sympathy, even empathy for one another, loving everyone as if they were your family; be compassionate and courteous."

Lovers of Themselves

The only way to do what Peter recommends is to consider others more important than ourselves. This can be quite hard to do in this competitive world we live in. We have to win in everything. We have to be in the fastest line at the bank or store. We have to ensure no one breaks in line ahead of us. We have to close up on the car ahead and not leave a gap to allow another car to cut in.

If we fail to do these things, what happens? We are life's losers, right? Of course not. There is no pain in living a courteous life. It does not cost us a thing to tell someone, "No, you go first."

Why has our society coarsened? Is it because our schools for decades now have emphasized how "special" we all are? We have many adults now who cannot read or write very well and who know little history or math, but they feel really good about themselves! They have high self-esteem. Anything that comes their way is deserved or owed to them because we have taught them that.

Or are we less polite because, as a people, we drift further from God every day?

The reason we have such a lack of courtesy in today's world can be found in II Timothy 3:1-2, where the apostle Paul writes: "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves. . . ." He goes on to list about eighteen more traits people will exhibit in the end time, but he leads the list with "lovers of themselves." If we are first and foremost in our lives a lover of ourselves, then we are *never* wrong. We are *always* first, and, we think, deservedly so! The left lane is ours! We are the direct opposite of "humble." We could not be courteous if we tried.

Consider verses 2-5 from the *Contemporary English Version*. Remember that Paul is speaking of the last days, and note how each of these traits relate to courtesy:

> People will love only themselves and money. They will be proud, stuck-up, rude, and disobedient to their parents. They will also be ungrateful, godless, heartless and hateful. Their words will be cruel, and they will have no self-control or pity. These people will hate everything that is good. They will be

ready answer *Courtesy*

sneaky, reckless, and puffed up with pride. Instead of loving God, they will love pleasure. Even though they will make a show of being religious, their religion won't be real. Don't have anything to do with such people.

Powerful words, indeed. Perhaps the reader thinks that I am making too much of the lack of courtesy around us. Maybe so. But it is something foundational, something basic, to a Christian life. A humble and God-fearing person will naturally be courteous. If we esteem others greater than ourselves, we *will* be courteous. If we are striving to live in accordance with God's laws, we *will* be courteous.

So, does this mean that by simply saying "please" and "thank you," we will be in God's Kingdom? No, it is not quite that easy, but it is a start! Conversely, it is probably safe to say that those who are impolite and rude will not like their reward at all. As the sign says, "Keep Right."

—*Mike Ford*

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prophecy watch *A Tale of Two Complaints*

(continued from page 10)

The Message handles the same passage this way:

Take back those words, and I'll take you back.
Then you'll stand tall before me.
Use words truly and well. Don't stoop to cheap whining.
Then, but only then, you'll speak for me.

The *Good News Translation* presents this paraphrase:

If you return, I will take you back, and you will be my servant again. If instead of talking nonsense you proclaim a worthwhile message, you will be my prophet again.

It is clear that God is not mincing His words. In this time of crisis for Judah, God demands a servant in whom He can have confidence, one who will fearlessly warn in the face of persecution and who will remain committed to carrying out His work to its conclusion—no matter where that work may take him. God needs an individual of resolute and indefatigable faith.

Actually, God is telling Jeremiah that his office of prophet is on the line. He absolutely *must* overcome his doubts of God's fidelity. He must not fall back into the ways of the people of Judah. He can only continue to be separate from them by believing God.

As God so often does, He attaches encouragement to His rebukes:

And I will make you to this people a fortified bronze wall;
And they will fight against you,
But they shall not prevail against you;
For I am with you to save you
And deliver you, says the LORD.
I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked,
And I will redeem you from the grip of the terrible.
(Jeremiah 15:20-21)

God is in fact reminding the prophet of his original commission, as recorded in Jeremiah 1:18-19:

Today I have made you an armed city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall against the entire land—the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and all its people. They will attack you, but they won't defeat you, because I am with you and will rescue you. (*Common English Bible*)

It was the worst of times back then, yet not so bad as the coming Tribulation that we face today. God *demands* that His people be faithful. Should we come to doubt God's reliability and His faithfulness—should we come to feel He has abandoned us, His people—we may want to think hard about God's words to Jeremiah: "If you change your heart and return to me, I will take you back. Then you may serve me" (Jeremiah 15:18, *New Century Version*).

The ever-faithful God will not forget His plans for us, even though we may come to forget His promises to us.

—Charles F. Whitaker

ENDNOTES

[1] God's assurance of communion here is similar to His better known comment to the prophet Elijah, recorded in I Kings 19:18: "Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

[2] Compare this to the work of the Millennial priests, who teach "My people the difference between the holy and the common, and explain to them the difference between the clean and the unclean" (Ezekiel 44:23).

The Rise of the Caliphate

As the thirteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaches, a recent NBC News/*Wall Street Journal poll* finds that 47% of Americans believe the country is less safe now than before the terrorist attacks. It is a significant finding due to the fact that a similar poll, taken just before the attack's first anniversary, showed that only 20% of Americans felt less safe. The Obama administration insists that core al-Qaeda has been degraded to the point of insignificance, so what has changed to make Americans so afraid?

The answer: The Islamic State.

The group, formed in 1999 and commonly known as "al-Qaeda in Iraq," is a Sunni Muslim jihadist group with a hardline ideology and global jihadist aspirations. It follows an extreme "originalist" interpretation of Islam, encourages religious violence, and considers all who disagree with its beliefs as infidels or apostates. Known for its brutality and intractability, it played a substantial role during the Iraq War, but its harsh rule turned many Iraqis against it. Under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, it grew in numbers and regained support in Iraq, moving on to Syria and entering the civil war there, attacking government and military targets. Today, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claims that the Islamic State has about 80,000 fighters under its control between the two countries.

The Islamic State's avowed goal is clearly proclaimed in its name. It aims to gather as many Islamic areas of the world as it can under its political control, that is, into a caliphate, a state led by a supreme religious and political leader who would be the successor to Muhammad. It undoubtedly believes that it has progressed a long way toward its goal, having proclaimed a caliphate on June 29, 2014, and naming al-Baghdadi as caliph. He is now known as Amir al-Mu'minin Caliph Ibrahim.

The new caliphate is by no means satisfied with its successes so far. In fact, it took "Remaining and Expanding" as its motto. As Ryan Crocker in *The Wall Street Journal* opines, the Islamic State has its eyes on a bigger prize:

> The group on the march in the Middle East began calling itself the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS]. Then it chose the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL], the latter term including Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories as well as Syria. Now it's simply the Islamic State, geography unspecified. They already are a state, in that they carry out government functions in occupied territory. You can bet that their aspirations include Saudi Arabia and its holy cities of Mecca and Medina. With their gains in Iraq, nothing but sand separates them from the Saudi border. ("Islamic State Is Getting Stronger, and It's Targeting America," September 8, 2014)

As the article's title reveals, the Islamic State also has the United States in its sights, desiring nothing more than to carry out terrorist strikes in the heartland of the Great Satan. For the first time since the retreat of core al-Qaeda into the mountains of Afghanistan, a terrorist organization has the capability and security to plan and carry out multifaceted, long-range operations. It also has the means to enter the U.S. essentially undetected, as several thousand of its members hold Western passports, some of them American.

The Islamic State's sheer brutality—along with its willingness to use its violent behavior as propaganda on worldwide media—makes the far more humane Western nations nervous. Beyond committing war crimes and mass atrocities in the turmoil of civil strife in both Iraq and Syria, it compels everyone in the areas it controls, under the penalty of death, torture, or mutilation, to follow its interpretation of Islam and live under sharia law. It is especially cruel to Shia Muslims and Christians, and it has been accused of ethnic cleansing of the Yazidis in northern Iraq, a monotheistic people who worship a peacock angel. The group routinely carries out cold-blooded executions of enemy combatants and civilians who resist it, and it is not uncommon for women and girls to be abducted from their families and raped. U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel described ISIS fighters as barbaric, saying, "They have no standard of decency, of responsible human behavior."

However, the act that stunned Westerners was the beheading of American journalist James Foley on August 19, a cruel display of resolve to force President Obama to halt airstrikes against the Islamic State. A few weeks later, a new video showed the beheading of a second U.S. journalist, Steven Sotloff. The masked headsman spoke with a British accent, saying, "I'm back, Obama, . . . because of your arrogant foreign policy towards the Islamic State, because of your insistence on continuing your bombings and on Mosul Dam, despite our serious warnings. So just as your missiles continue to strike our people, our knife will continue to strike the necks of your people."

Americans want Obama to act. The same NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll reports that "61 percent of American voters believe that the United States taking military action against ISIS is in [the] United States' interest, versus 13 percent who don't." A U.S.-led international coalition is forming to confront Islamic State terrorists, but it is not clear how it will deal with them. To this point, Obama's record in confronting Islamic terrorism has been disastrous, and his failures give little hope that this effort will be any more successful.

If nothing else, in the Islamic State we are witnessing the virulent and violent spread of jihadist fervor backed by state power and resources. If it is not eradicated swiftly, the whole world may soon contract a plague of bloody terrorism and war that will make the Ebola epidemic seem insignificant.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Bible Study

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

The Resurrection of Lazarus (Part One)

About a month before His own death and resurrection, Jesus visited Bethany and performed His third miracle of resurrection, raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-46). No one knows how often Jesus visited the home of the sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus, but Scripture records some of His visits to their friendly, peaceful, and loving home (Matthew 21:17; Mark 11:11, 19; Luke 10:41-42).

This resurrection is the most extraordinary of all His great works while in the flesh. It foreshadowed His own resurrection, made a profound impression in Jerusalem, and in contrast, brought the wrath of the Sanhedrin to a head, stirring them to decide to murder Jesus. After performing this miracle, He withdrew to the wilderness of Ephraim for some private time with His disciples before the Passover and His final hours.

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1. Does God always shield His friends from sorrow? John 11:1-16.

Comment: With Lazarus' death imminent, they were to learn that the wisdom of godly love does not always shield its recipients from suffering, sorrow, and death (John 16:20-22; II Corinthians 7:9-10). Even the personal affection that His friends enjoyed with Him did not persuade Jesus to stray from His responsibility to glorify God in all that He did. So the family had to experience illness and grief. The gospels do not record the nature of Lazarus' illness, but it was serious enough for his sisters to request Christ's intervention, expecting Him to immediately heal the disease. The ease and simplicity of their message, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick" (John 11:3), shows the faith they had in His ability to heal.

2. Does Jesus desire His friends to have the same personality? John 11:20.

Comment: Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (Luke 11:5), choosing to love them in a more personal way than others, which shows that He loves different personalities. He loved *Martha,* a resilient and energetic woman, who was the keeper of their home, intent on looking after the physical comfort of her guests. *Mary* was different: contemplative and gifted with intuitive grace and kindhearted sympathy. Mary and Martha were devoted to Jesus and appreciated Him in their own ways (Luke 11:21-22, 32). Likewise, in His own kind and caring way, Jesus enjoyed dealing with each of them according to their temperaments. *Lazarus'* name is not mentioned nor is his voice heard in Scripture until his sickness, death, and resurrection. A man of few words, he was a quiet and unassuming friend.

3. Why does Jesus, delaying His arrival, permit Lazarus' sickness and death? John 11:6-7, 11-15.

Comment: Jesus already knew that Lazarus needed healing when the news reached Him. He assures His disciples that the sickness would not have death as its final result, however, God was permitting it for two reasons: the furtherance and accomplishment of the Father's purpose and His glorification, as well as the glorification of Jesus Himself.

His delay in going to Bethany must have puzzled His friends, especially when He allowed it to end in death. Yet, the distressed sisters were to learn that God's delays are not denials. Unrelieved suffering is sometimes necessary to perfect character—Jesus Himself "learned obedience by the things that He suffered" (Hebrews 5:8).

Mary and Martha were sure Jesus would come because He loved them. They had to learn that He was not neglecting them, but that His purpose in delaying was one of godly love. It was probably emotionally painful for Jesus to cause Mary and Martha grief, but He wanted to reveal to them—and to us—that despite our inclination to help our friends, even if we have power to do so, we must be guided by God's Spirit to prioritize His glory and our spiritual welfare, rather than gratify our feelings.

4. How does Jesus express death to show that it is temporary? John 11:11.

Comment: As Jesus leaves for Bethany, He gives those around Him a softened description of death, saying, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up" (John 11:11), to indicate that it is temporary. His disciples think He refers to natural sleep and that Lazarus would recover from his sickness. Then Jesus tells them plainly, "Lazarus is dead."

We must learn to see death from God's perspective. Christ has power over life and death. In this case, He was willing to resurrect Lazarus from death to physical life. He used Lazarus' death to perform a miracle that would glorify God and identify Himself as the Messiah, the Savior of mankind.

Job shows that he knew the answer to his own rhetorical question: "If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait, till my change comes" (Job 14:14). When a person dies, he will be resurrected at the appropriate time. Jesus prophesies in John 5:28-29: "[T]he hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation."

The lesson of this breathtaking miracle is that Christ is the regenerator of the dead, spiritually and physically. He is able to regenerate the hearts and minds of those who are spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins. He brought the body of Lazarus back from corruption, and so He is able and willing to deliver people from their abominable sins. His life-giving miracle of grace is as truly remarkable as His powerful and miraculous ability to resurrect.

—Martin G. Collins