



"God has a complete right to direct all the actions of the beings He has made."

—Noah Webster

18-Oct-02

Lessons from a Stiff Neck

This has not been a good week, primarily because I have been enduring a stiff neck since last Friday. It used to be a rare occurrence, but lately, I seem to get them every few months. They must stop, so I am actively looking for ways to avoid them, and if I should get another, to treat them.

The causes of neck stiffness are many, from sleeping on a pillow the wrong way, suddenly turning the neck, whiplash from an accident, neck sprain, or stress to cervical arthritis, encephalitis, and meningitis. The first cause seems to be my problem, and so far, my experiments to avoid getting a stiff neck have all been failures. As for treatments, heat, massage, exercise, and various ointments have only brought minor and temporary relief.

However, these stiff necks have given me some experience to draw upon in commenting on the Bible's use of the description of Israelites as "stiff-necked." Such a description occurs five times in the [Old Testament](#), much as [Moses](#) uses in [Deuteronomy 31:27](#): "For I know your rebellion and your stiff neck. If today, while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD, then how much more after my death?" Plainly, a stiff neck illustrates stubborn rebellion.

The imagery comes from the honor one would give someone of higher rank. Many cultures have used various forms of bowing as a sign of submission or obeisance. The least conspicuous form of giving honor in this way was to lean the head forward, which is done by bending the neck. A stiff neck, then, is at least a refusal to give honor or deference to another. At its worst, it is outright rebellion.

What are a stiff neck's effects on a person who has one?

The most obvious effect is a feeling ranging from a frustrating ache to intense pain. Having a stiff neck hurts! The natural motion of the neck is from shoulder to shoulder and from chest to back, and when that normal range of movement is limited by muscle stiffness, we feel it! In the same way, stubborn rebellion only causes pain, especially when we are rebelling against [God](#), who only wants to give us good things ([James 1:17](#)). If we cross Him, however, the natural result is curses for our disobedience ([Leviticus 26:14](#); [Deuteronomy 28:15](#)), and they will cause us pain.

A second effect is linked to the first: A stiff neck is debilitating. When one cannot move his head normally, he is limited in what he can do. For example, when driving, a person must look left and right to make sure the road is clear before making a turn. Such a simple movement can become painful and awkward with a stiff neck. Spiritually, a stiff-necked person is limited in his actions and reactions too. His rebellion limits him to contrary choices; he is no longer free to choose to do right. He must first [repent](#) of his rebellion before he can once again please God ([Luke 15:11-32](#)).

The third effect is a product of the first two, what we can call tunnel vision. A person with a stiff neck often cannot turn his head from side to side; thus, he can see only what is directly in front of him. To see anything to the side, he must turn his whole body, much as a horse with blinders does. A Christian with a stiff neck cannot see the whole picture. In fact, he sees everything through the narrow field of his obstinate disobedience. Most of the time, he is so focused on himself and the "injustices" done against him that he cannot even imagine that God may be working out an even greater problem than his own (Jonah 4).

There are probably more spiritual lessons we could derive from the stiff neck, but the most important one is never to have one! The easiest way to avoid a spiritual stiff neck is to remember ourselves in comparison to the great God whom we serve: "But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter; and all we are the work of Your hand. Do not be furious, O LORD, nor remember iniquity forever; indeed, please look—we all are Your people!" ([Isaiah 64:8-9](#)).

If we keep this distinction clear in our minds, our heads will be always bowed and our necks never stiff.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Are You an Israelite?](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Most of ancient Israel, because of their rebellious hardened hearts, did not incur God's favor. With the stakes so much higher in the New Covenant, we need to soberly reflect on the consequences of their negative behavior, determining not to emulate them. Paradoxically, being an Israelite spiritually is something to overcome. Like our ancient forebears, we can't assume that our identity exempts us from overcoming our carnal nature. Three pitfalls we need to overcome are: (1) the proclivity to murmur and complain (2) the willingness to be misled, and (3) being prone to test, or tempt God.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Wandering the Wilderness in Faith](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The wandering of the children of Israel stands as an object lesson for God's people. Hebrews 3 testifies that a whole generation of Israelites died in the wilderness, failing to reach the Promised Land, because they lacked faith in

God. John Ritenbaugh examines this vital component of Christian living, exhorting those whom God has called to choose to trust Him and avoid the Israelites' lamentable failure in the wilderness.

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