

Limiting The Holy One Of Israel (Part 1)

Examining Ourselves by God's Standard

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It is nice to see spring is on the horizon, and as I look out in my yard at the beautiful flowers that are coming up, it makes me appreciate what God has done in His creation and the power that it would take to be able to create such things. Then we pan out, and we look at the earth as a whole. We were looking at some pictures that were taken from the space station recently. They were very clear and the earth was in the background, and it was absolutely beautiful and breathtaking. Then if we are able to pan back from there and see the solar system and what God has created in that, we would see the fine-tuned clock that it is, and then even spanning back into the galaxy, and then the many galaxies, and then into the universe, and who knows what is beyond there.

If God has the power to do anything that He wants, is there any limit to what He can do? Is there anything God cannot do? Well, actually there is. God is limited to His character. He cannot sin. Therefore, He cannot lie. In Titus 1:2, the apostle Paul reinforces this fact. He says, "In hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before the world began."

Let us rephrase the question. Other than the limitations that come with God's character, can God be limited? Of course not! Let me ask a few rhetorical questions:

1. Can God be limited by mankind?
2. Does God need our worship to be God?
3. Did God need our faith to create the universe?
4. Does God need our permission for anything?

Of course not! God is not dependent on us; we are dependent on Him. But He has imposed certain limits on Himself, requiring certain actions from His creation before He will allow Himself to act. So when we talk about limiting God, we are actually talking about self-imposed limits that God has placed on Himself. And from this, we begin to understand our dependency on our God. God's self-imposed limitations become obvious when we go contrary to His way of life, because then He starts withholding such things as blessings.

Israel's history of frequent rebellion stands in harsh contrast to all the evidences of God's goodness on their behalf. Humanly speaking, the people of Israel, as God's children, caused great trouble to their heavenly Father in the wilderness. Israel rebelled against Him, caused Him grief, tried His patience, tested Him, and provoked Him to righteous anger. God was limited in how He could allow Himself to respond.

Psalms 78:41 Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel.

This is the pivotal scripture for the sermon, and the key phrase is "limited the Holy One of Israel." Look closely at the last phrase. The King James and New King James Versions, use the word "limited," the New International Version uses "vexed," and others use "provoked." For our purposes today, we will follow the implication in the original Hebrew word that Israel "limited God," which carries with it the implication, or the understanding, that it is also a provocation of God.

Here in Psalm 78, the psalmist Asaph is reviewing the long history of the children of Israel. He is reminding his own generation, and those who would come later, of the special relationship that Israel had with God. As Asaph reviews ancient Israel's history, he reminds us that Israel did things that were terribly wrong. The men and women of Israel were the people of God, brought into existence in a miraculous way by God's calling Abraham, turning him into a nation, and giving them very special promises.

They were His own special possession, a people whom He had made for Himself, so that through them, and by the means of them, He could manifest Himself finally to the whole world and reveal His great glory. Therefore, the responsibility of these people was to praise God, and to be a true and reliable witness for Him, and His way of life.

The psalmist reminds them, and reminds us also in reviewing Israel's past history, that they horribly let God down. It is sad and discouraging to see them grumbling, rebelling, complaining, defeated by their enemies, and disgraced by their own sins and decadence. They were very much like our nation is today. We can look at the ancient Israelites and see what God wrought upon them in His righteous wrath, and know that this nation too will receive similar wrath.

Asaph gives us various events in the history of the children of ancient Israel, and as he does this he gives the reason and the explanation for it all. His purpose is to show why it was that these people, who were meant for such different and greater things, were

always found to be in this miserable, unhappy, and defeated state.

My goal here is to focus on the specific reason that Asaph gives in the second half of verse 41, because it is one of the most serious things that is regrettable in the Israelites' long and unstable history. The defining accusation that he brings against them is that they were guilty of limiting the Holy One of Israel. Some translations translate this as, "they provoked the Holy One of Israel," which means the same thing. They provoked Him in this way: In their faithlessness and in their failure to receive the promises and to believe them and to act on them, they stood between themselves and the many blessings that God had offered them and promised them so freely.

That is the essence of the indictment that the psalmist brings against the people. Sadly, it is a very common charge in the Scriptures. In other words, the children of Israel, by their faithlessness, because of their state and condition, had not been living as God intended them to live. They had not made good use of the unique and wonderful opportunity that God had so freely offered to them.

But they would rather live in a state of misery and weakness, and sometimes sheer dejection, because of sins like idolatry and Sabbath breaking. In contrast though, they were meant to stand out as the people of God, reflecting His righteousness and glory.

We see the same theme in Psalm 81, where God speaks of what might have been true of His people if only they had listened to Him and walked in His way.

Psalm 81:11-16 But My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels. Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries. The haters of the LORD would pretend submission to Him, but their fate would endure forever. He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; and with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you.

This is how it could have been, but it was not like that. And everywhere in the Old Testament, in the historical summaries and especially in the Psalms, we see that in various ways God's people had been guilty of limiting the Holy One of Israel.

As far as we are concerned, the message to us is that we should be very careful to examine ourselves in the light of this indictment against the children of Israel—the

people of God. Because we, as the church of God, are the children of God, the same terms that are applied to the children of physical Israel in the Old Testament are applied "in type" to us, as the children of spiritual Israel—the church in the New Testament.

The apostle Peter, quoting what God said to the children of Israel just before the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, put it like this in 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." That is our calling as Christians, as God's people, and we are meant to offer His praises, His excellencies, and His virtues.

As we approach Passover, what do we find in our own lives as we look back and review the past year? We have attended Sabbath Services, we have read the Scriptures, but how much have we appropriated and used? To what extent are we enjoying all that God has offered so freely? Or are we guilty, in some way, of limiting God?

God is Almighty and Omnipotent, He is Sovereign, but it is possible for us, in one respect, to limit the Holy One of Israel and to cause God to say, in essence, what He said in Psalm 81:13, "Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways!"

We find Jesus saying a similar thing, just before His death, as He looks at Jerusalem. He says, in Matthew 23:37, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" He would have guarded and protected them as a hen does her chicks, but they refused, they were not willing. Repeatedly, this indictment is brought against Israel.

We know that ultimately God's purposes are sure, and will be brought to pass, but it is equally clear that we can rob ourselves of many of God's abundant blessings. If we are not careful and faithful, we can become guilty of what was, and is, true of the children of Israel, and in so doing be guilty of limiting God. It is of the utmost importance from the perspective of our own personal happiness and enjoyment of God's way of life to make sure that we are not guilty of this. And equally important, we have a tremendous responsibility as part of God's church, as a whole, to not be guilty of this.

Are we giving the genuine impression that with God all things are possible? Or, is it possible that we could be in some way limiting Him? Let us try to examine ourselves in light of this. But where do we start? There are certain things that we may initially recognize on a physical level intellectually, but there is no question that in order to apply

them in our lives spiritually, we must have the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul explains this here:

I Corinthians 2:9-14 But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Words are the verbal communication of thoughts. Since God designed His truth to be accurately expressed in human language, He inspired the words used in Scripture, which are contained in both the Old and New Testaments. He was very careful and detailed in His inspiration of the words so that they would accurately express the laws and principles He intended to communicate to us. Paul knew that the human spirit was only capable of understanding the things of the natural world. But once God gives the Spirit of understanding, spiritual things become very clear.

After His crucifixion, and before He ascended to heaven, Christ had to perform a miracle to open the eyes of His disciples before they could recognize Him.

Luke 24:31-32 Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?"

Before the church received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, it was necessary for Christ to perform another miracle which enabled the disciples to be able to understand the written Word of God, consisting of only the Old Testament at that time.

Luke 24:44-45 Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to

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you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

They received limited spiritual understanding through the Holy Spirit, but they were not filled with the Holy Spirit until Pentecost, when all of the disciples received it and the church was established.

Luke 24:49 "Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high."

So the disciples were not filled with the Holy Spirit yet. They only understood the specific spiritual things Christ revealed to them for His purpose at that time. Then Luke reviews what happened and adds some details:

Acts 1:1-8 The former account I made [speaking of the gospel of Luke], O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me: for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 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 times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Prior to our calling, we may have a limited intellectual understanding of basic biblical principles. Then, when we are called, God gives us, if we are willing, help to respond in faith. Whether we respond positively or negatively depends on us. If we respond positively, He gives us the help we need to progress toward repenting of our sins, and

accepting Jesus Christ as our personal Savior.

Until we receive the Holy Spirit, we are very limited in how much we can comprehend. This was the case for the disciples when Christ told them, "You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." And, "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." We cannot come to recognize and understand true spiritual standards until we have that power of the Holy Spirit. "God has revealed them to us through His Spirit." And, "No one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God."

In examining ourselves, first we have to understand what the standard is. How are we to judge ourselves without a standard with which to compare? Obviously, we cannot do this without some means of evaluating ourselves. And, of course, we have this standard spelled out in the Bible. The Bible is God's inspired written way of setting the standard.

The Scriptures are held out to us. The apostle Peter refers to the exceedingly great and precious promises that they reveal. All things that pertain to life and godliness are given to us freely. But, to what extent are we experiencing them in our lives?

In addition to that, we have the further standard provided by the history of the church. We can read of those who have gone before us. This is another way that we can test ourselves. We should not compare ourselves among ourselves, of course, but we can certainly look at the heroes of faith, and glean from their efforts and examples, and from their failures and their successes.

The apostle Paul told the Corinthians, "Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith" and "Prove yourselves." It is good to look back and examine ourselves in light of these things, especially in this pre-Passover season.

Let us take a look at some specific ways that we find in Scripture that we can apply the standards and the tests to ourselves. Nobody can read the Bible without seeing there a very clear picture of the godly person, the saint, the true Christian. In the gospels, and in the epistles of Peter, John and Paul, as well as elaborations in other epistles, we find that they were all concerned about holding up before the saints the standard, the pattern, the norm for Christian living. They are always reminding us of what is possible for us, and they keep reminding us of our potential if we submit to God.

In reality, this reminder became necessary because of failure, because people were already slipping, falling below what they were meant to be. So the New Testament authors wrote their epistles as they were inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. Since they could not always visit the congregations spread out over hundreds of miles, they

sent letters instead. And what they did every time was to remind the Christians of whom and what they were, and the promises that God had provided to them.

They always start with the foundation of doctrine—the standard, the pattern. In effect, Jesus Christ, the prophets, and the apostles said, "Here it is; this is what is possible." The Worldwide Church of God used to have a phrase that they used, "The Incredible Human Potential." That is what God offers to us, to reach our human potential, and beyond that, our spiritual potential. Then the people were examined in light of that. They were told to conform to the pattern. "Put off the old man. Put on the new."

Paul had no reservations about telling us that we must not go on doing this or that, because he said we are no longer in the world. We have been moved out of that and into something entirely new. He tells us, "Instead, you should be living like this." And, throughout his letters he tells us what the standard is. These writers were always presenting the church with this standard, and as we all examine ourselves in the light of this, we should ask ourselves whether we are conforming to the pattern or whether we are, in some way or another, limiting God.

We know what God has done. We know that He has sent His only begotten Son into the world. He has done this to form a people for Himself. He has done this in a greater way than what He had done anciently through Abraham physically. Christ has been sent into the world so that He could be "the firstborn of many brethren." He established a standard that the world without God cannot reach, but we have been offered this opportunity. And if we are not benefiting from it, we are guilty in various ways of limiting God.

So let me bring out some things that should be true of us. They are positive characteristics that are unique to true Christians. First, there is assurance of salvation, knowing that if we are truly baptized members of God's church, our sins are forgiven and are continued to be forgiven as we repent of and overcome sin. The apostle John states the assurance we have from our faithful God:

I John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

That is a guarantee. That is an assurance. Not seeing the assurance of forgiveness, not believing we have it, puts a limit on what is possible. God means for His children to know that they are His children, and to know something of His love toward them. This is part of the assurance, that we recognize God's love.

This is meant to be the normal experience for every Christian. We should know that we have access to God, and there is a spiritual peace with that. We should never be doubtful about that. We are not assuring ourselves; our faithful and just God and Father assures us of this. It is not a humanly created thing.

Romans 8:33-39 Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." 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.

That again is an assurance, a guarantee, and a promise. There is no hope for us in the conflict against Satan and all his powers unless we know God's love is directed toward us and is in us, and that His power is used for us and is in us. We just read that the love of God is in Christ. Jesus' prayer, in John 17:26, asked, "that the love with which you loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

But if we are uncertain about our relationship to Him we cannot stand and withstand in the fight against supernatural influences. In other words, an essential key to victory over Satan is the assurance of salvation. This directly concerns our relationship to God the Father and Jesus Christ. That love is essential to that relationship.

We cannot have an intimate relationship with someone we cannot trust, and with who we have little or no confidence in. If we are in any kind of doubt or uncertainty with regard to our salvation, then Satan has made great inroads to defeating us, because He has, in a sense, caused us to limit God.

We must be assured of our salvation. By assurance we are made strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. We are assured that nobody or thing can "separate us from the love of Christ," and nothing is "able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

There is no contradiction between Christ's love for us, and His allowing suffering to overcome us in this life. Separation from His love is no more thinkable than that the Father ceased to love His Son when He allowed Him to endure the agonies of the crucifixion, feeling forsaken. The Father's love never ceased or waned, not even when there was a separation between Him and Christ, and when all the sins of the whole world were placed upon Him. Christ predicted trouble for His people who are left in the world, but told us to be of good cheer because He had overcome the world.

There is so much encouragement, in both the Old and New Testaments, that show us this guarantee that we have, and this assurance of salvation. Christians have an immediate and a direct knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ. We find some wonderful promises about this in the Bible. At one point, near the end, Jesus turned to His disciples who were unhappy because He had announced His departure and said:

John 14:1, 20-21 Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.

When we read accounts about the faithful in the Bible, we find that they really knew God. They did not just believe things about God at a distance; He was real to them. The psalmist says in Psalm 27:10, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me."

Abraham was the friend of God, and we are all children of Abraham by faith. So the question is, do we know God the Father and His Son in this intimate way? We are meant to, and it is offered to us plainly throughout Scripture.

I am not referring to just getting on our knees and praying. I am talking about a realization of the presence of God—a walk with God by living His way of life with Him and His Son Jesus Christ on more than just the Sabbath. We are meant to enjoy that seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

These are some of the precious promises that God has held out before us, and my concern is that if we know nothing about this, then we are guilty of limiting Him. So we must know that we have this assurance of salvation, if we submit to God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

That leads us to another characteristic of a Christian, which is rejoicing. God's people are meant to be a rejoicing people. These are Paul's words to the Thessalonians: "Rejoice always." Or, as Paul expresses it to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I will say, Rejoice!" But is that possible always? It is according to Scripture! Paul also says that we even rejoice in tribulation—in the middle of it, in whatever is going wrong.

Sue and I were talking about this on the way to services. Sue was reading about the wrath of God, and I cannot remember the name of the book that she was reading, but it mentioned that even in God's wrath He is righteous and does not sin; therefore, we should rejoice in His wrath. An interesting thought—how can we rejoice in God's wrath? We can rejoice because His wrath is always done out of goodness as the end result.

The word "rejoice" is used by Paul to characterize the hope that we have for participating in the glory that will be revealed in the future. "Rejoice" also carries over to another area totally different in nature as well as in time—namely that of "sufferings."

Romans 5:1-2 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

When Paul mentions being justified by faith here at the beginning of Romans 5, he mentions it as an obvious fact. He is already of the mindset of having been assured of the first step in the process of salvation, and that is reality of justification for himself and for God's church.

Romans 5:3-4 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Peace with God does not necessarily bring peace with other human beings. The actual conditions of our lives in the midst of an antagonistic society are not easy or pleasant, but the knowledge of acceptance with God and of His grace being constantly supplied and the prospect of future glory enable us to rejoice in the face of sufferings.

The word "sufferings" is often rendered "tribulations," as it is here in verse 3. The word "tribulation" is used to emphasize the element of pressure. As a result, the usual

implication of the word is external suffering such as persecution, but it is used occasionally for "distress" because external events tend to affect our attitudes and emotions, whatever the pressures may be, whether at work, in the family, or anywhere else.

In Philippians 3:8 and 10, as well as other places, Paul stresses that the sufferings of a Christian are the extension of the sufferings experienced by Christ in the days of his flesh, and it is right for us to experience suffering in our lives because we now make up His body. As individuals, in unity in the church, we make up the body of Christ and share in His sufferings. We can rejoice in, and by, our suffering, thereby showing our love and loyalty to our Savior.

Let me give you another quotation, from the apostle Peter this time:

I Peter 1:6-9 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

The English Standard Version (ESV) translates verse 8 a little more clearly: "Though you have not seen him [Christ], you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory."

To whom is he writing? Not his fellow apostles. He is writing to fellow saints scattered abroad throughout Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and various other places, most of whom he had never met. But though he did not know them, he was writing to them because he had been told that they had been called by God. He wrote this just a few years before the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. This was the time just before the church in Jerusalem had to flee to Pella to escape the destructive Roman army.

Their physical world was beginning to unravel, and doom was on the horizon. The society around them was about to collapse, and a paradigm shift of their way of life was about to take place. They were passing through a period of tribulation, and so Peter wrote to encourage them, and to help spiritually strengthen them.

They were ordinary and average members of God's church. They knew what it was to "rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." This is a glorious rejoicing that baffles words; it is so wonderful that it is beyond any human expression, and it stems from God's love for us.

So that is how we are meant to be as God's people. Christians were never meant to be miserable or unhappy spiritually. And if we are, half turning back to the world, whining about the fact that we cannot enjoy what the people of the world are enjoying, and that we cannot still be with them. Or, if we are thinking highly of ourselves for denying ourselves the pleasures of the world and taking up this hard and difficult life, then we are limiting God's work in us.

It means that we are proclaiming to the world that God's way of life is a miserable one; that for true happiness and joy we must go to the world and that we cannot attain it in the church. That is undoubtedly limiting the Holy One of Israel, the very thing that the people of Israel were guilty. There they were, miserable, even though God had held out miraculous possibilities before them. They limited Him in the matter of rejoicing.

Another characteristic of a true Christian is delighting in God and in His commandments. The apostle John says in chapter 5 of his first epistle, "His commandments are not burdensome." There is no quality of life in the light like the one that is guided and governed by the commandments of God. The other life is darkness.

Is it possible that, to a child of God, the commandments could be burdensome or grievous? Nevertheless, the children of Israel were always giving that impression. They said in effect, "Look at those other nations; they have kings, but we do not. Give us a king." In reality, they despised the fact that God was their King. They wanted to limit God's involvement in their lives. They envied those other nations, those people who could do whatever they liked, even sacrifice their children to Molech. That is what this nation has said when it comes to abortion and all of the other abominations that are committed.

Those Gentile nations did not have the Ten Commandments to cramp their perverse lifestyles. They did not have to set aside the Sabbath and not be able to do their own pleasures. They could eat anything they wanted including parasite-ridden animals like swine, and scavenger shellfish like crabs, that clean up and process through their digestive systems the most vile, dead things in the seas. The ancient Israelites believed that they were living a very confined life. They were always grumbling and complaining; that was the indictment brought against them.

Is that true of us? Do we find the commandments burdensome? If we do, we are definitely limiting God. Do we find the way that God has mapped out for us to be hard and difficult and trying? God means for us to enjoy keeping His commandments. Not just His commandments, but His statutes and His other laws as well.

Earlier in the sermon we read Psalm 78:41, "Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel." Psalm 78 summarizes what ancient Israel did in limiting God, despite His desire to give them every possible opportunity to turn back to Him.

In this psalm, Asaph puts together historical evidence to show that in spite of the foolishness, the disloyalty, and the disobedience of the Israelites, He still loved them and patiently watched over and provided for them, but within limits. Again and again they limited God!

Psalm 78:1-6 Give ear, O my people, to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children; that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children,

If we are not teaching this to our children, we are limiting God.

Psalm 78:7-41 That they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments; and may not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright, and whose spirit was not faithful to God. The children of Ephraim, being armed and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle. They did not keep the covenant of God; they refused to walk in His law, and forgot His works and His wonders that He had shown them. Marvelous things He did in the sight of their fathers, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan. He divided the sea and caused them to pass through; and He made the waters stand up like a heap. In the daytime also He led them with the cloud, and all the night with a light of fire. He split the rocks in the wilderness,

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and gave them drink in abundance like the depths. He also brought streams out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers. But they sinned even more against Him by rebelling against the Most High in the wilderness. And they tested God in their heart by asking for the food of their fancy. Yes, they spoke against God: They said, "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?" Behold, He struck the rock, so that the waters gushed out, and the streams overflowed. "Can He give bread also? Can He provide meat for His people?" Therefore the LORD heard this and was furious; so a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also came up against Israel, because they did not believe in God, and did not trust in His salvation. Yet He had commanded the clouds above, and opened the doors of heaven, had rained down manna on them to eat, and given them of the bread of heaven. Men ate angels' food; He sent them food to the full. He caused an east wind to blow in the heavens; and by His power He brought in the south wind. He also rained meat on them like the dust, feathered fowl like the sand of the seas; and He let them fall in the midst of their camp, all around their dwellings. So they ate and were well filled, for He gave them their own desire. They were not deprived of their craving; but while their food was still in their mouths, the wrath of God came against them, and slew the stoutest of them, and struck down the choice men of Israel. In spite of this they still sinned, and did not believe in His wondrous works. Therefore their days He consumed in futility, and their years in fear. When He slew them, then they sought Him; and they returned and sought earnestly for God. Then they remembered that God was their rock, and the Most High God their Redeemer. Nevertheless they flattered Him with their mouth, and they lied to Him with their tongue; for their heart was not steadfast with Him, nor were they faithful in His covenant. But He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them. Yes, many a time He turned His anger away, and did not stir up all His wrath; for He remembered that they were but flesh, a breath that passes away and does not come again. How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel.

This is all a listing of all of the things that God had done for Israel, and how they had treated Him and reacted to Him by sinning and rebelling. They were seriously questioning God and limiting Him. I wonder if this is going to happen to Israel today. Someday God's wrath will come.

They did not delight in God which resulted in a limitation to God blessing them. The

encouraging thing in this passage is that God is so patient and tolerant, and this was with a nation that was flesh and did not have God's Holy Spirit, how much more is He patient with us? Much more, but then again much more is expected of us.

The idea is that, in their own minds, they set a limit to the power of God; by lying to themselves, and they convinced themselves that there was a boundary to His power that He could not pass, or that there were things that He did not have the ability to perform.

The original Hebrew word translated "limited" is *taawaah* and occurs only three times in the Scriptures; in I Samuel 21:13 it is rendered "scratched" (or, "made marks"); in Ezekiel 9:4 it is rendered "set," that is, "set a mark"; and in Psalm 78:41 it is rendered "limited." The implication of the word is that of making a mark for any purpose; also it implies to delineate, to scrawl, or to set a mark for a limit or boundary. In this context it is applied to God—as if, in estimating His character or His power, they set limits or bounds on it, similar to the way the property of a farm or a house's lot in a city is marked to determine the boundaries. They hedged God in to prevent Him, in their minds, from intervening on their behalf. This had the negative effect, as well of blocking the blessings that He was ready and willing to offer and give.

In their opinions they set a limit to the power of God, beyond which they believed He could not act; or, in other words, His power was defined and restricted, so that beyond a certain point He could not aid them or interfere in their activities, their desires, and their proclivities. Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel.

Another characteristic of a Christian is enjoying the peace of God. Notice Paul's words in Philippians 4:

Philippians 4:6-7 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Have we enjoyed the peace of God during the last year? Different things happen to us all—trials and sorrows, disappointments and failures. I do not know all the details of what has happened to you in the last few years, especially this past year. But I do know that we all have our ups and downs—things go well, and things go wrong in varying degrees.

I do know that some of you have had car accidents, some have been diagnosed with cancer, and some continue fighting it from previous years. Some of us suffer from severe headaches and some have relentless allergies. When the trials come, often we are distracted and distraught, possibly with a certain amount of disorientation. It is common for people in this condition to ask, "Why is God doing this to me?"

God often lets us suffer physically in trials for the reasons I covered earlier, but the peace of God should be guarding our hearts and minds from spiritual suffering. Or, are we limiting Him?

The children of Israel were always unhappy and restless, not knowing the peace of God, and it was because they were limiting the Holy One of Israel. They did not know His comfort because they would not let Him give it. They turned away from Him instead of turning to Him.

If we are not experiencing something of the peace of God which passes all understanding, to that extent we are limiting God. This peace is not relief from pain and suffering physically. It is the peace that comes from a content, humble, thankful mind that does not limit God's comforting Spirit of power and a sound mind.

But if we really are in an intimate relationship with God, then whatever may happen, we can know this peace that nothing can disturb. This peace is as possible to us as it was to the apostle Paul. Paul told the Romans the same thing that we should understand and know, "that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Not to know this is to put a limit on what God has made possible to us.

Colossians 3:15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Being thankful is an important element in having the peace of God. This peace exists when a person's mind is calm, not ruffled by hardship, not overclouded by sin, or not disturbed by the fear and the approach of death. It is the peace of Christ because it is the peace He gives. It is peace that comes from obedience to Him. The apostle John quoted Jesus saying:

John 14:27 Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

Are we limiting God by not letting Him put the peace of Jesus Christ in us?

The final characteristic of a true Christian that I have for you today is reliance on Christ to strengthen us. These are all very simple principles, but they are essentially important to our spiritual lives. Paul spoke of this in Philippians 4:

Philippians 4:11-13 Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

It is a matter of faith and confidence in Christ. From the experience Paul had in various circumstances of life, he draws the conclusion that he could stand up to any trial, perform any responsibility, and subdue any wrong tendency of his human nature with the strength of Christ, not with his own. To paraphrase, remember Paul said, "Those things that I want to do, I do not do, and those things that I do not want to do, I do." That is a typical summary of human nature.

It is significant that Paul had to learn to be content. Contentment is not natural to most humans. The implication here is that before Christ could fully strengthen him, he had to learn to be content with his circumstances. A person's discontentment limits how God will work with a person.

Paul knew that his faith and confidence in Christ was not in vain. He understood that with whatever he was required to do, in the name of Christ, would be accompanied by the strength to do it. Paul states this as a principle similarly applied to temptation.

I Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

A trial in the form of a temptation, a trial in the form of serving beyond our ability, and a trial in the form of suffering because of a sickness or accident, can be faced with faith and confidence in God, through Christ, who strengthens us to be able to bear it. With that strength He also gives us that peace of mind that helps us to be able to be calm spiritually.

This means that Paul's thorn in the flesh was not enough to stop him; it actually benefited him by helping him to keep a proper humble perspective of the weakness of his flesh. So Paul was not self-reliant, nor was he solely relying on his own experience. He knew where his spiritual strength came from to do all things. By the strength which Christ imparted to him, he was enabled to bear cold, fatigue, and hunger, to face temptations and persecutions, and to perform demanding responsibilities.

We can learn several things about not limiting God from Paul's example:

1. We do not have to worry about sinking under any trial, because Christ strengthens us.
2. We do not have to worry about giving in to temptation, because Christ makes a way for our escape.
3. We do not have to worry about not being able to resist improper thoughts and wrong desires, because Christ enables us to cast out such thoughts.
4. We do not have to dread what is to come, because Christ will help us to bear it.

Trials, temptations, poverty, and persecution may await us; but we do not have to sink into hopelessness and depression. At every step of life, Christ is able to strengthen us and will bring us victoriously through.

It really is quite a blessing and a privilege to be a member of God's church, and to know that in the trials of life we have God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ who are faithful, unchanging and Almighty, and who can always strengthen and help us. This alone should cause us to cheerfully serve Them and meet the trials that are before us. There is no excuse for us to shrink from responsibility; there is no reason to dread persecution; and there is no cause for us to fear death, as long as we do not limit God, the Holy One of Israel.