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HE LOVES FOREVER

THE MESSAGE
OF THE
OLD TESTAMENT



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Oliver Palmer

THOMAS H. OLBRICHT

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**THE MESSAGE
OF THE
OLD TESTAMENT**



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**A complete *Teacher's Manual/Resource Kit* for use with
this paperback is available from your religious bookstore or
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HE LOVES FOREVER

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1



The Steadfast Love of God

The story line of the Old Testament exudes love, excitement and hope. It tells how this universe was made, and how man, that inscrutable cipher, occupied such a prominent position. It asserts that the Creator, before the creation of man and the universe, spoke into existence the vast reaches of space. Then he created man in his image. It tells of the Creator's love affair with creation and man. It affirms an undying, relentless, unceasing love, but not from the human side. Man not only is inexplicable, he is unstable, fickle, vacillating, and often faithless. But God is not man. As the Old Testament tells it, he loves—intensely—forever. The God of the Old Testament is an incessant lover.

I have not always thought of the Old Testament as exciting. I can understand people who might say, "Well, I have read the Old Testament in parts, but I can't say I found it all that exciting. Some of it I didn't understand, some of it seemed terribly outmoded, and long stretches, like the detailed list

of rules for sacrificing, were downright boring." If you are among those who think the Old Testament is a vast wasteland, you are in good company. Among the detractors, you will find distinguished company from this century and also from times past.

I made my first serious effort to read the Old Testament the summer I became a Christian at age sixteen. In the southern Missouri community in which I grew up, the sentiment circulated that one should read the whole Bible when he became a Christian. I intended to complete my reading within a few months. Genesis went well. Parts were even exciting, such as when Joseph emerged as a powerful government figure in Egypt. Exodus also moved. But after a couple of nights in Leviticus, I got bogged down, lost resolve and stopped.

Months later, pricked by a bad conscience, I decided to "take the bull by the horns" and complete the task regardless of how slow the going. To get a running start, I went back to the beginning. Again, Genesis went well. In fact, it was even more exciting the second time around. And again I proceeded through Exodus with enough momentum to coast past the temple dimensions and the different metals in the vessels. Even the first part of Leviticus was a bit better. But about the middle of Leviticus, I ran out of gas. Part of the problem was that I couldn't make sense out of all the details. But most of all, I saw no relevance whatsoever to all those antiquated rules, and I wasn't familiar with anyone who really cared about them. Of course, I knew a few people who regularly read through the Bible, but they did it from a sense of duty. They didn't know what Leviticus meant either. It was several

years later that I began to make sense out of the Old Testament and even took up Leviticus in great anticipation.

The story line of the Old Testament is easier to follow if you are familiar with the basic contours. This book may help locate certain basic affirmations in the Old Testament and supply the thread which binds the whole together. We are concerned with the fundamental message of the Old Testament.

Readers usually understand and appreciate the Old Testament only after a basic orientation. My wife and I made a trip to teach in South America. We had never been there before, we knew little about Brazil and Argentina (where we were to spend most of our time), and, before we went, we were around people who only had a passing interest in such regions. But we didn't want to arrive disoriented and uninformed. We bought three books on South America to learn its geography, people, culture, history, and intellectual outlooks. When we arrived, we faced some problems we weren't prepared for, but we were not disoriented because we had a basic feel for the situation. Because of our perspective, we soon ironed out certain trouble spots. In this book we will basically work on only one facet of Old Testament orientation—the central viewpoint. You may call this the message of the Old Testament, or Old Testament doctrine, or theology. Having this particular approach in mind will be very helpful as you seek to make sense out of the Old Testament.

Love: the Foundation

Many artists have captured images of themselves in self-portraits. God did a self-portrait in

nis Son for all to see. "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18). But even much earlier God painted a verbal picture of himself. In those awesome moments, as God revealed himself to Moses on the mountain, he declared for all to hear:

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation.

Exodus 34:6-7

This passage links the two most basic affirmations about God in the Old Testament. Notice the sequence in which these appear in the text because the order is not accidental. First, God characterizes himself as a God of mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness. But second—and some think this negates the first—God punishes the guilty. The order and emphasis of God's declaration runs counter to a typical man in the mall understanding of the Old Testament.

It is commonly said that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and the God of the New Testament is a God of love. A favorite example of God's wrath is the fire which came from the Lord to destroy Nadab and Abihu as they presided at the altar in the tabernacle (Lev. 10:1-3). This example, however, is repeated in the New Testament by the death of Ananias and Sapphira,

who supplied false information on the piece of property they had sold (Acts 5:1-11). To show the love of God, the parable of the prodigal son is often cited as the supreme affirmation in the New Testament of God's mercy and indefatigable love for wayward man. But the love of God is also vividly portrayed by Hosea. Hosea depicts Israel as God's adopted son, raised by him from birth. Despite Israel's ingratitude and rebellion, God receives him back in mercy and forgiveness (Hos. 11:1-9). It is therefore unwise to declare that the wrath of God or the love of God is any more or less obvious in the Old Testament than in the New.

Despite popular opinion, the primary characteristic of God in the Old Testament is love. His love is intense and unremitting. His love is forever. This point cannot be stressed too much. The wrath of God is a secondary characteristic. The wrath of God neither supersedes love nor is independent from it. In fact, it is precisely because of God's intense love that his wrath pours forth on people who obstruct his efforts to achieve intimate communion with man.

Six Aspects of God

In Exodus 34:6-7, six terms describe God which we may classify under the English word "love."

1. *Merciful*. The root of the Hebrew word translated mercy (*rahm*) means womb. It depicts the compassion of a mother for the child she has carried in her womb. God likewise exhibits an inner feeling of compassion or love for his human child which is expressed outwardly in helping action. He is a God whose divine love is manifested in his loving acts of compassion.

2. *Gracious*. The Hebrew word basically means to yearn towards, or long for. Here again, God is described as compassionate and merciful. He not only reacts toward man as a mother toward her child, but he yearns for a close, intimate relationship.

3. *Slow to anger*. God's love is so momentous that his anger is long in coming. God's heart is always on his sleeve. His anger surfaces slowly and reluctantly.

4. *Steadfast love*. The Hebrew word *hsd* is not simple to translate. The King James Version often translates *hsd* "mercy," though on occasion "loving kindness." The New International Version simply uses "love," while the translators of the Revised Standard Version preferred "steadfast love." The Revised Standard translation is instructive because it more fully captures the sense of the term. Perhaps the best context from which to understand the term is Psalm 136. The line "for his steadfast love (*hsd*) endures forever" clearly shows that God's loving action on behalf of his people is inexhaustible. This term, more clearly than any other in the Old Testament, places in bold relief the central message. The God of Israel is simply a God who won't let up or give up. He is a God who loves forever, despite the rebellion and sinfulness of man.

5. *Faithfulness*. The word used here means firmness or steadfastness. God is the one who is firm in resolve and action. He can be counted on. This trait of God is perhaps most clearly affirmed in Jeremiah.

Thus says the Lord: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the

night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken

Jeremiah 33:20-21

God's love is never fickle. We can count on it just as we count on nightfall and daybreak.

6. *Forgiving*. The Hebrew word *nsa* means to lift up or remove. God is the one who, out of love, lifts up and pushes aside the sins of his people. On one hand, he removes the guilt of the wayward. On the other hand, he does not. There may be a problem here.

From these six descriptive terms, we learn first and foremost that God maintains a parent-like feeling for his children, and he is indefatigable in loving deeds of kindness on their behalf.

Man's Guilt and God's Love

Despite the fact that his fundamental characteristic is love, God "will by no means clear the guilty." What can we make of a loving God who still punishes those who defy his demands? We are now treading upon what I conceive as the profound center of the Old Testament understanding of the love of God. We will merely touch on it now, but later return to this concept more than once. It is clear that God won't "clear the guilty," because to do so would be to retreat from the intense love he has for creation. God loves his creation so much he desires continual, in-depth communion. He especially seeks an uninterrupted, highly personal relationship with man made in his image. The guilt of man is his incessant struggle to break free from the loving embrace of God. He is forever drawn toward alien relationships which

obstruct companionship with God. Perhaps he feels stifled, smothered, and suffocated by the intensity of God's concern and care. For whatever reason, man wanders off in an effort to escape the loving attention of God.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned every one to his own way.

Isaiah 53:6a

But God is always in hot pursuit.

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?

Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!

If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea
even there thy hand shall lead me,

and thy right hand shall hold me.

Psalms 139:7-10

God "will by no means clear the guilty" precisely because the guilty break the divine relationship. To live life by demands other than God's obstructs the personal relationship which God desires with each of his children. Therefore, he simply cannot "clear the guilty." To do so would be to give up on his commitment that his world be in intimate relationship with himself.

Understanding God's Plight

We might understand the plight of God by comparing his situation with that of a husband who has an unfaithful wife. (I certainly am not the first to use this analogy. It is used many times in the Old Testament, a stellar example being Hosea. Here we will merely modernize an ancient comparison.)

John meets Mary at a party. After a whirlwind

courtship, they marry in a picturesque rock garden on a rare June day. John works for Monroe Business Machines and travels during the week. One night as she returns from the supermarket, Mary meets David in the parking lot of the apartment complex. In a few weeks they strike up a friendship. About a month later John comes home from a business trip. The dishes are stacked high, the bed is unmade, and the apartment is in general disarray. Mary is nowhere to be found. Sometime later she arrives home and explains she has been with David. Now John could simply pass off the incident as an example of the liberation of modern woman. If he seemed indifferent to the whole matter, we would be correct in presuming that he didn't really love Mary after all. But if he introduced some sanction against her, such as saying, "Mary, I want you around when I get home, and if you aren't here next time, I will go out for dinner and not come home until midnight," we would assume that he really cared for Mary and wanted her home when he returned. If he simply "cleared the guilty," or rationalized her behavior with no sanction whatsoever, he would indicate that the relationship mattered little to him one way or the other. Likewise, God shows by his wrath that his love for wayward man is undying and deep. His sanctions against man are the result of his incessant desire to bring man back into his fellowship. (Amos 4:6-12)

God's intense love is the ground and explanation of his characteristics. In a real sense, this rousing declaration is central to the theology of the Old Testament:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,

his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22-23

The circumstances under which this declaration is made makes it even more decisive. These words were uttered after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Under the kingship of that powerful Babylonian, Nebuchadnezzar, the city was completely destroyed. The walls were pushed over, and everything combustible was put to the torch. In the long siege before ultimate defeat, young children starved in the streets (Lam. 2:12), and apparently mothers even ate their own offspring to avoid hunger (2:20). The conditions were so terrible that the author minced no words in expressing bitterness (Lam. 3:1-21). He ends the lament:

He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace,
I have forgotten what happiness is;
so I say, "Gone is my glory,
and my expectation from the Lord."

Lamentations 3:16-18

But out of the depth of these disillusioning circumstances, the author lifts up his heart in hope, "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end" (Lam. 3:21-22). Whatever traits God possesses must be seen from the perspective of his love, even his holiness, his righteousness, and his acting for the sake of his name.

Mighty Loving Actions

The love of God is obvious, not because of some misty sheen which hangs over his universe, or an ecstatic emotion which overpowers the human heart, but as the result of his concrete, dramatic acts of salvation on behalf of his people.

The psalmist in Psalm 136:1 makes it obvious as to how he locates the steadfast love (*hesed*) of God. "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever." He then goes on to pinpoint God's love in his action. First, God created the physical universe, the earth and the luminaries (Ps. 136:4-9). Second, he provided great victories for his people in Egypt and at the sea, and as they marched to the promised land and conquered it (136:10-22). These loving acts of God, though more dramatic in past crucial events, nevertheless continue. His salvific action endures forever (Ps. 136:23-25).

Since we are seeking the exciting story line of the Old Testament, it is imperative that we trace out these mighty acts of God. Psalms 105-106 and Nehemiah 9 clearly focus on those events. The mighty acts of God are obvious in his creation, in his concern for the fathers and, through them, the nations; in his bringing of his people out of Egypt; his supporting and sustaining them in the wilderness; his giving them the covenant and law through which he makes available goodness or blessings on a permanent basis; his evicting the inhabitants of the land and turning it over to these landless peoples; the promise he makes to David; and his reiteration of these actions and concerns through the Psalms, wisdom literature, and the elaborate depictions of new victories in apocalyptic mate-

rials. In each of these actions the intensive, unremitting love of God for man is obvious.

Through the years I have asked students to give their view about the story line of the Old Testament. I have been impressed with how many begin with man, not God. They focus on man as sinner, or man seeking to return to God through repentance and faith, or man struggling to keep the commandments of the maker. Of course, it is true that much time is spent in the Old Testament on wayward man. But it is disastrous to begin the story line with man. God in his love is central. Nevertheless, man enters the picture immediately and inadvertently because the love of God is directed, not toward some infinitesimal point in space or shotgun fashion throughout the universe, but specifically toward man. We cannot focus upon the love of God without immediately taking up the amazing but agonizing story of man because God's love reaches for and embraces man. When God acts for the sake of his name, he acts for the sake of his nature, which is love.

The story line of the Old Testament is that God loves forever.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22

2



Goodness in Creation

Genesis 1 tells us that God's motive for creating lies in his goodwill, his beneficent attitude toward what he has created. God said, "Let there be light." And when it appeared, "God saw that the light was good" (Gen. 1:4).

How does God's proclamation that light is good show his loving concern? Light serves a practical, useful purpose in the created order. And at the apex of the created order is man. The goodness of creation is that its various features and functions are mutually beneficial for man and the rest of creation. This understanding of "good" is expanded in Genesis 1:29-30: the plants and trees provide food for both man and beast. God contemplated how the features of creation complemented each other, and the writer of Genesis concludes, "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). God himself is good ("O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good"), and the created order he has produced is good, because

his work in creation and history is evidence that "his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps. 136:1).

Creation as Praise

The Old Testament reflects on the physical universe in a much different manner than twentieth century natural scientists do. Today's students of the universe see it as impersonal, unfeeling, inanimate, cold, material, and deterministic. From an Old Testament perspective, the universe itself is not to be worshiped, but its creator is to be praised for his loving kindness in making the universe functional and beneficial.

Of course, Genesis also knows another side of the universe, a side which stands against man as his enemy. By willfully turning his back on God, man polluted and corrupted the earth and made it less than God intended.

The Old Testament reflections on creation were written after the events at the Red Sea. The Israelites stood frightened with their backs to the sea and the Egyptians charging hard toward them. Suddenly and miraculously the sea opened up, and Yahweh (the Hebrew's special name for God) rescued his people. Because of this deed, he was obviously a God of love. The steadfast love of God which Israel experienced cast a whole new hue over her response to the physical world. Love has a way of making a qualitative difference. A hypothetical story I often tell makes this point.

At the opening of the college year Steve sat by a girl in chapel.

"Hi. What's your name?"

"I'm Sue. Who are you?"

"Steve. Say-y-y Sue, where are you from?"

"Lueders. You probably never heard of it."

"No. Where is it?"

"Oh, it's about thirty miles north of Abilene."

"Small town, huh?"

"Yeah, about 600 people."

"I bet it's a real 'goat roper' place. They probably roll up the sidewalks by eight. Lueders-s-s. That's ludicrous!"

Steve continues to sit by Sue in chapel. One day he asks her for a date, then another and another. Finally, zap! It hits him! Now Lueders impresses Steve in an entirely different way. It is no longer Hicksville, but a quaint, rustic country village. The moon now shines romantically through the mesquite on the banks of the Clear Fork of the Brazos.

What was once contemptuous and ignoble is now warm and glowing. With a mighty hand, God opened a path through the sea. The harshness of the earth was never again the same. The one who spoke to the sea is also the one who earlier spoke to the waters, gathering them in one place so that dry land appeared.

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed
gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into
the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.

Exodus 15:1-2

Israel could not separate God as savior from God as creator. The experience at the sea cast a whole new perspective upon material creation. Our public school education leads us to see the uni-

verse through the eyes of twentieth century scientists. But as recipients of the love of God, we should also praise him for his creation. God met us with unutterable love in a place called Golgotha. Because he met us there, his world is forever warm, friendly and loving.

The Role of Man in Creation

The goodness of the created order centers on man since he is the apex of creation. Furthermore, among all the creatures he alone reflects the very being of God. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). As the result of that image, man carries a special assignment.

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

Genesis 1:28

Just as God has dominion over all reality, so man is given charge of the sphere in which God has placed him. Man therefore has been assigned a privileged position. But he is to exercise his dominion responsibly under God, protecting the interests of all the creatures as well as his own. As a result of our public school training, we are accustomed to thinking of man merely as the most highly developed and complex of the earthly mammals, with skills of thought and organization exceeding those of any other. But the Old Testament goes one step further and sees man as the purpose around which creation revolves. This is so because of his unique relationship with God (Ps. 8:4-8). Despite the fact that man is dust (Ps. 103:14, Gen. 2:7), he is "little less than God." He is the crown and glory of creation.

The order in which the creation occurs in Genesis 1-2 reflects not only chronological order, but also order according to rank. Many people have scrutinized Genesis to determine what it contributes to an understanding of how the earth and its creatures came about. Modern scientific thinking conditions us to take up everything in chronological order. We automatically read the Genesis account of creation from that perspective. Apparently, however, the chronology was not as important to the author as the rank. Man ends up as the apex of creation in either case. The real point of Genesis 1-2 is often missed because of questions put to the text by modern science. The author knew nothing of modern science. He was intent upon recognizing the goodness of God because man stands at the center of the stage of life.

Curtain Call Order

In Genesis 1-2:4a, the order moves from the lowest to highest or from least important to most important. It's like curtain calls when a play ends. The stage hands appear first, then the bit players from the cast. After these have taken their bows, the supporting actors and actresses appear. Last of all as the grand finale, the stars of the show appear.

God's first creative act was to speak the heavens and the earth into existence (1:1). They were in a very primitive state without order or structure (1:2). God set out to establish order instead of disorder, structure instead of chaos. He performed this great task to provide a comfortable home for the one later to appear. He challenged darkness by calling forth light (1:3), and he set boundaries for darkness (1:4). Next he harnessed the waters, separating them by a firmament (1:7). He also

cumscribed the waters on earth (1:9) so that dry land appeared (1:10). Once God had separated land from the chaotic waters, he spoke vegetation into existence (1:11). Light then was further refined and structured by the creation of the luminaries—the sun, moon, and stars—which determined the seasons, days and years (1:14-18). Now God was ready to signal forth creatures from the sea and air (1:20). On the sixth day the land mammals appeared. And last of all, as the grand finale, God created man and gave him dominion over the rest of creation. The reason for the order is therefore clear. God began at the most primitive level, then created higher and higher forms of existence until he came to man, the apex of creation. The early parts of creation constituted support units for man.

Commencement Order

In Genesis 2:4b-25, the story of creation is retold with a new purpose. The interest shifts from the decisions of God in his heavenly council to the earth itself. Primal darkness, water, and the heavenly luminaries receive no attention. But the condition of earth receives immediate notice (2:5-6). After he created the earth and heavens, God formed man from the dust of the ground (2:7). This time the features of creation of less significance than man are mentioned last.

The order is again rank rather than chronology—the order of the commencement processional. The first person to march in the commencement line is the university president, followed by officers of the board, vice presidents, professors, associate professors, assistant professors, instructors, graduate candidates, bachelors, and finally associates in arts. Should the order be chronological rather than

according to position, considerable changes would be required. A few bachelor candidates might come before the president because they are older.

In Genesis 2 man stands at the apex of creation just as in Genesis 1, but the order is reversed. In Genesis 2 his status is obvious not only because he is mentioned first, but also because he is the only being in whom God breathes the breath of life (2:7). After creating man, God made a garden paradise as a dwelling place which man would administer and in which he would labor (2:8-15). But none of the creatures in the garden was a proper companion for man, so God created woman from bone and flesh taken from the side of man. Woman appeared after animals, but ranked before them because her very being came from man who ranked first.

These two accounts make identical affirmations in distinctive ways. They declare that the goodness and steadfast love of the Lord are obvious in his work in creation. He has given man a distinctive role and created a realm which meets his many needs. Man is indeed the most blessed of beings when he lives by the rules of God. Creation itself declares that God loves forever.

The Roof Came Crashing Down

Even the best laid plans go awry. God created the physical universe so it would be a blessing to the creatures in it, especially man. But man decided to do it his own way rather than God's. He ate the fruit which God clearly stated he was not permitted to eat. His action was catastrophic not only for himself, but for the physical order. His decision is like a clumsy ten-year-old who knows nothing about watches but tries to make his

Christmas digital work by tinkering in it with a ten-inch screwdriver. Man didn't know what made the universe tick. God knew. He planned and executed it all. Man decided he could distinguish right from wrong as well as God, but he botched up what God had intended as a blessing. He brought creation crashing down around him.

Uneasiness about the material universe is justified despite the fact that it is a gift from a loving God. By his willful and unrelenting demands, man has polluted, corrupted, and emasculated God's physical creation. So it was from the beginning. According to Genesis 3:14-19, man's sinfulness caused snakes (and other animals, Hosea 2:18) to turn against him. He brought physical pain to women in childbirth (along with other illnesses). He caused the eking out of a living to be a struggle against thistles, weeds, droughts, and depressions. Because of man's decision to travel his own path rather than God's, this earth turned into a pale semblance of the goodness intended by God. But it is not that because of man's sin the world became impersonal, indifferent, and mechanical. The impersonal world is a creation of modern thinkers. Man, in his eagerness to do what felt good, turned a blessing into a curse. So creation is a mixed bag. It retains the loving attention of God. But, at the same time, it suffers the ravages of man's sin.

As a teenager, I thought of the physical world as alienated and estranged from God. Preachers emphasized the fallen state and undesirability of the world. The favorite church songs depreciated the world and longed for a more blessed existence beyond.

This world is not my home, I'm just a passing
through.
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond
the blue;
The angels beckon me from heaven's open
door,
And I can't feel at home in this world any-
more.¹
Living below in this old sinful world,
Hardly a comfort can afford;
Striving alone to face temptations sore,
Where could I go but to the Lord?²

When sin enters the world, the world is no longer ideal. This is true, however, not because the material order is evil. Man is bad. He has obstructed the goodness of God. The rest of creation is faithful to God. "Even the stork in the heavens knows her times; and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the ordinance of the Lord" (Jer. 8:7). Man gummed up the works. The universe was made by a loving God. It is not threatening, contaminated, or chaotic by nature. The universe only endangers man's existence because of his distorted use of it. The one who trusts God, while knowing that nature has been tarnished, recognizes in the material order the work of a loving being.

The Open Hand of the Lord

The love of God is obvious also in the maintenance of the physical world. In the Old Testament the steadfast love of the Lord is evident in creation itself because of God's continuing work in it. The universe exists moment by moment because of God's abiding presence. His word, his look, and

his work determine whether it is productive and fruitful. When his hand is opened, when he looks upon creation, and when his face shines upon the created order, all goes well. But when his hand closes and his face darkens and turns, creation suffers. The famous prayer of benediction (Num. 6:24-26) recognizes that man's welfare depends upon God's continued work in the created order. God did not bring the physical universe into existence, then rest forever after. He continues to give it existence. He is creator and sustainer.

Psalms 104 emphasizes God's sustaining relationship with creation. This psalmist obviously was not weighed down by how human sin reduced the goodness of the material order. He was convinced that through all the flaws and smudges, the work of God was still obvious (Ps. 104:27-30).

We live in a time when people search for scientific answers to any question about the physical universe. The reason, of course, is the amazing success of the scientific community in discovering the cause of smallpox, the air waves through which we receive television signals, basic features of the universe such as black holes and additional moons around Jupiter, and minute particles such as quarks from which all matter is derived. But there are certain questions which no scientist in his right mind even pretends to answer on scientific grounds. The psalmist, however, boldly steps in where angels fear to tread. He supplies the answer to such questions.

The questions I have in mind are like this: Why are there trees rather than none at all? Now botanists, in fact, answer the question: How is it possible that there are trees? They explain that roots

extract nutrients from the soil by molecular action. These nutrients are carried through the layers under bark to the leaves where photosynthesis occurs, building organic compounds from carbon dioxide and water. The basic scientific question is: How is that? The scientific community has provided many impressive answers to these questions. But to my first question (Why are there trees rather than none at all?), they have no answers. There are no apparent, inherent reasons why trees exist, though obviously they do contribute certain qualities which balance the ecological systems.

The psalmist was not really concerned with this sort of question. He does not tell us how trees grow. But he does tell us why they grow, a question which evades the expertise of botanists. There are trees because God created them for the benefit of the creatures which roam the earth.

Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the
cattle,
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine,
and bread to strengthen man's heart.
The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon which he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has her home in the fir trees.

Psalm 104:14-17

So a loving God created a world in which the basic features complement and assist one another. This world continues because God sustains it.

The loving hand of God is even obvious in light and darkness. God made the moon to mark the

seasons and the sun to provide daylight hours (104:19). Darkness is no absence or accident. God made the darkness (104:20) for a definite purpose. Light and darkness delineate the division of labor among earth's creatures. The lions prowl at night and obtain their food under the cover of darkness. Man is assigned the daylight shift. The lion's shift ends, and man gets up and goes to work. They do not get in each other's way because daylight and darkness prescribe their respective work periods (Ps. 104:21-23).

Even the creatures of the sea have their assigned role, including the dreaded Leviathan (Ps. 104:26), whom God created as a plaything. (For more on the Leviathan, see Isaiah 27:1.)

Lovely for Me

Most of us were taught as young people to view creation as the loving work of God. God sends the rain. He makes the warm sunshine. He creates the beautiful flowers. He gives me my parents. He supplies my food. God loves me. My parents love me. The world is friendly and loving. But somehow we have lost that vision. Perhaps the conviction of the Old Testament writers can help us recover it. A popular child's song reflects the Old Testament approach to creation as praise. It might embarrass sophisticated adults, but it shouldn't.

Climb up the mountain, point to the sun.
Notice the grasses, count every one.
Measure the rainbow, sail o'er the sea.
God made the whole world lovely for me.

Open your ears the birds sweetly sing.
Open your eyes to wonderful things.
Look all around you, beauty you'll see.
God made the whole world lovely for me.³

So we reiterate:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness.
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

Lamentations 3:22-24

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³Source unknown.

3



Blessings through Abraham

The author of Genesis believed that God is loving and good and that He created the universe and man because of His desire to share His blessings. Also, the author declared that God intended to share his love with everyone. Even from the first, God was no respecter of persons. He had no favorites among his children. He treated everyone alike.

But if this is so, why did God go out of his way to tap Abraham on the shoulder? "Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many" (Josh. 24:3). Why did he specially bless Jacob (Gen. 30:30)? Why did he take land from the Amorites and the king of Bashan and give it as a "heritage to Israel" (Ps. 136:22)? Surely God exhibited favoritism in these instances. Why did God make special promises to the fathers, and through them to the nation Israel? "And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; I will give it to

you for a possession" (Exod. 6:8). The answer to these questions—because he loves everyone—is the focus of this chapter.

The Promise

The promise of God to Abraham is the central declaration in the book of Genesis, if not in the whole Old Testament.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves (*or in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*)."

Genesis 12:1-3

Notice three items in this promise. First, God singled out one man, Abram, for a special assignment. Second, he did this to bless Abraham and his seed. Third, this action of God did not constitute favoritism to Abraham and his descendants. God singled out Abram so that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Abram was selected (or elected) not just to elevate him to VIP status. Rather, he was singled out for a special assignment. He was to be God's blessed man, so that the nations would also be blessed. He was like a warehouse receiving the good gifts of God. In turn, he was to open the doors of that warehouse so all the people of the world could enter and also claim the gifts of God. He was called to be God's special servant. In the same way, the descendants of

Abraham received the identical assignment (Ps. 136:21-22, Isa. 49:6).

Through this promise God declared his intent to love everyone—all peoples and nations.

Events Leading to the Promise

To discover the reason and context for God's promise to Abraham, we need to backtrack to the beginning. Immediately before the promise, the confusion of language disrupts life (Gen. 11). Men can no longer understand each other. So not only are men estranged from God, they also are estranged from one another. As the story unfolds in Genesis, it is obvious that the promise is God's means of renewing his blessings to all men after they had been cut off by sin.

God lovingly created the heavens and earth, then plants and animals, and finally man. The earth was good and a blessing, especially for man made in God's image. God gave man the rules for enjoying creation. But man was tempted, and he decided to go his own way and make his own rules. The result was much like a locomotive deciding to wander off the tracks to visit the gushing springs and woodland flowers. Locomotives aren't made for running without tracks. The outcome for man was a similar disaster because he was created to run on tracks laid by God.

Man was evicted from the garden, and he brought down on himself problems and disasters. Things went from bad to worse. Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4:8) and became a fugitive (4:12). Humans lusted more and more (Gen. 6:1-4) and threw restraints to the wind. Finally, man turned so far from God that "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5).

At that point, God looked upon the human situation as almost hopeless. He had created man for fellowship with himself, but man ignored fellowship and set out on his own to pollute and contaminate the rest of creation. So God decided to rid the earth of the scourge (man) with a gigantic flood. Because of one righteous man (Noah), a remnant was preserved for a new start. God's action should have taught man a lesson, but soon he was back to his old tricks having it his way rather than God's. The youngest son of Noah observed his father's nakedness and was cursed. Later descendants determined to show God a thing or two and proceeded to build a tower reaching into the heavens so they could make a name for themselves. They hadn't learned the lesson at all. God had no choice but to disrupt their life, hoping that they would come to their senses and return to him.

After all these miscues, the situation seemed hopeless, but God had a plan. He still wished to bless all men and through them bless creation itself. How could he do it? The text tells us his plan entailed the calling of a man. Through that man and his descendants the nations would be blessed. How was God to bless everyone through one man and his family? Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament clearly provide the answer to that question. But why did God decide to do it this way? For example, why didn't God simply speak as he did later in the wilderness and supply man with all his needs? He supplied the heavenly bread, manna, and the quail on the winds from the south, and water from the rock. If God wants to bless creation, why doesn't he shower on it every want and whim for which man can dream? We do not

have a clear answer from the text, but there are hints, especially in the affirmation that God acts for the sake of his name (see chapter five). Simply passing out gifts often hinders rather than helps. It is common to walk down the street in an inner city and be accosted by a shabby man wanting a dollar for a meal. Anyone knows by sizing up the situation that the money will not go for a meal but for alcohol. Answering the request would not really help, but only compound a syndrome leading the man to disaster. The man really needs to get back on the right track of life so that the money can really contribute to his welfare. And when God distributes his gifts, he seeks out ways to point men in the right direction so they can genuinely use his good gifts.

Fulfilling of the Promise

Through these servants God renews the task of sharing his love and goodness with man and the universe. He will bless them and in turn bless those with whom they rub shoulders. We have examined the promise made to Abraham. The same promise is repeated to Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and Jacob (Gen. 28:13-14). God promises to form a "great nation" through whom the promise will be kept alive and fulfilled. It is an open-ended promise. Paul says Christ fulfilled the promise (Gal. 3:16). Christ is the ultimate fulfillment, but it is wrong to conclude that God did nothing to bless the nations between Abraham and Christ. Genesis makes it perfectly clear that even from the time he first spoke to Abraham, God was blessing the peoples through these chosen servants. Where God's man or God's woman is located, there God's good gifts are being distributed.

Abraham was blessed by God. "Now Abram was rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold" (Gen. 13:2). And his wealth rubbed off on those around him. Abraham had two brothers, Nahor and Haran. Haran died young and left a son Lot (Gen. 11:27-28, 31). When Abraham traveled west, Lot went along. Because of his relationship with Abraham, he too became very wealthy, so wealthy that Abraham and Lot had to separate their herds and flocks. No one region could supply adequate pasture (Gen. 13:6). Lot liked the Jordan valley, and he took his family in that direction to live in Sodom. That move caused problems since "the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord" (Gen. 13:13). But when a coalition of five kings attacked this region, Abraham came to the rescue. He took nothing for his service because God had called him to bless others (Gen. 14:21-24). The wickedness of Sodom later became so great that God determined to destroy the city (Gen. 18:17). Despite the sinfulness, however, destruction was delayed because of the promise to Abraham (Gen. 18:18) and Lot's relationship with him. Where Abraham and his descendants are found, there the blessings of God surface. From the loins of Lot came two nations, Moab and Ammon (Gen. 19:37-38). These nations were also blessed because of their relationship with Israel (Deut. 2:9, 19).

In a few instances, however, Abraham brought a curse on the nations—such as Egypt (Gen. 13:10-18) and Philistia (Gen. 20)—because of his deceit. But in these stories, we get the impression that when the deception was uncovered and a wrong relationship was righted, blessings followed the curse.

Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Genesis 20:17-18

Sharing in God's Blessings

Isaac himself later traveled to Philistia during a drought. The Lord appeared in Gerar and repeated the promise, "By your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 26:4). Just as Abraham became wealthy, so Isaac grew in affluence in Philistia. "The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy" (Gen. 26:12-13). After a time "the Philistines envied him," and they might have thought he was becoming wealthy at their expense (Gen. 26:14). So they harassed him and his flocks and herds and asked him to leave the country (26:16). It didn't occur to the Philistines that not only was Isaac being blessed, but they were also prospering because of Isaac's presence. Not only was he not getting rich at their expense, but they were also being blessed.

After a time, Abimelech sized up the situation and saw things as they really were. He realized that Isaac's wealth was the result of God's action. So Abimelech took some of his important men and went to talk with Isaac. He said, "We see plainly that the Lord is with you . . . You are now the blessed of the Lord" (Gen. 26:28-29). Abimelech had concluded that if he were to enter into a covenant with Isaac he too would be blessed and not cursed.

Isaac was God's man. And wherever there is a man of God, good things are happening. A community is blessed by the presence of God's woman or God's man.

A family of Christians lived in a community. Whenever anyone was sick, the wife baked a pie and took it over. If the ill person was in the hospital, they paid a visit. If a neighbor needed to borrow tools, to get advice, or to ask for assistance, the family always gave it willingly and freely. At holiday times they often invited neighbors over for a get-together. The reaction in the community was mixed. Everyone thought they were good people; everything seemed to go their way. Their children did very well in school. After they graduated from a religious college, they were able to get very good jobs. After some years, the company the man worked for transferred him out of state. It was only then that the neighbors recognized how blessed they had been. The people who replaced them spent their extra hours attending and giving cocktail parties. They didn't notice what was going on in the neighborhood. If anyone became ill or needed help, they were oblivious to it all. Their children were undisciplined. They were destructive to trees in the park, they damaged other people's property, and were cruel to animals. In general, they were "a pain in the neck."

After six months of the new neighbors, the community woke up and realized that, though they had secretly envied the family committed to God, they had indeed been blessed beyond measure by their presence. We need to realize that as God's people, wherever we are, there is a storehouse from which the gifts of God are being distributed. "I will bless

you, and through you will the nations be blessed." The servant of God may be envied and ridiculed, like Isaac was. But he has no reason for a low self-image. Through her or him the community is being blessed whether it recognizes it or not.

Jacob was a conniver. Perhaps he got it from his mother's side of the family since both Rebekah and Laban conspired to get ahead. Through a ruse involving both Rebekah and Jacob, Jacob received the blessing from Isaac that was intended for Esau (Gen. 27:5-29). Even though human deceit led to the reversed blessing, the text implies that the hand of God was involved all along. At the birth of the twins, the Lord told Rebekah that "the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). And according to Malachi at the end of the Old Testament, God said, "I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau" (Mal. 1:2-3). Is this story an example for us? Does the action of Rebekah represent the morals of a different age and time? No! In fact, such duplicity was likely even more shocking then than now, especially since Isaac was blind and old. Such persons were to be revered and helped, not duped (Deut. 28:18, Lev. 19:32). So what point is God trying to make through this text? The point for Israel apparently is that Jacob received his heritage as a gift, not by natural or legal rights. The people of Israel received their land for the same reason. And a Christian attains his or her status the same way. All of this shows that God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

Esau was exceedingly angry about the whole matter, as we might expect. Life at home became uncomfortable. Furthermore, Rebekah decided she wanted Jacob to take a wife from her own people

so she arranged for Jacob's departure (Gen. 27:41-46). So Jacob left Palestine for Haran, the home of Rebekah's family. On the way he stopped one night, put a stone under his head, and fell asleep. He dreamed about angels ascending and descending on a ladder reaching to the sky (Gen. 28:10-13). At the top of the ladder was the Lord, and he repeated the promise to Jacob which he had made to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac: "And by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves" (Gen. 28:14).

Jacob finally arrived in Haran and stopped at a well where the shepherds watered their flocks. At the well he met Rachel, the daughter of Laban, Rebekah's brother. She took him to meet the family and he fell in love with her. When Laban asked Jacob what his wages would be for working for him, Jacob was ready with an answer. He would take Rachel as a wife. So Jacob worked for seven years and the wedding day was set (Gen. 29:20). But Laban had concocted a way to get seven more years from Jacob. He slipped Leah in the wedding tent in the place of Rachel. So Jacob had to put in seven more years for Rachel. When the second seven were up, Jacob requested permission to return home. During all those years Laban had done very well. He wanted to know the source of his prosperity, and, through some sort of divination, Laban found out that "the Lord has blessed me because of you" (Gen. 30:27). Jacob agreed. "For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly; and the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned" (Gen. 30:30). And not only was Laban blessed, but when Jacob left, having

introduced a few stratagems of his own, Jacob had grown "exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, maidservants and menservants, and camels and asses" (gen. 30:43).

Blessings Follow God's Men

So, many nations were blessed because of the presence of God's people—and because they were related to Abraham. These were the Canaanites, Egyptians, Philistines, Ishmaelites, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and, through Jacob, the Arameans. But with Joseph all the nations were blessed. His presence as the man of God in Egypt not only brought a blessing on Egypt, but also the nations.

Joseph got to Egypt in the first place because his brothers were jealous that he was Jacob's favorite son. Furthermore, he went around reporting on dreams which indicated his brothers would be his servants. So the brothers sold Joseph to traveling slave traders and he was taken to Egypt. Joseph was God's man and wherever he went, the blessing of the Lord followed.

In Egypt Joseph was bought by Potiphar, a captain in Pharaoh's guard (Gen. 39:1). Because he was God's man, things went well. "The Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands" (Gen. 39:3). The language of Genesis 39:5 makes it certain that the author had in mind the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob:

From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had, in house and field.

But Joseph's stay in Potiphar's house would not last. Because of the illicit desires of Pharaoh's wife, Joseph ended up wasting in prison. But even in prison Joseph was God's person, and those who rubbed shoulders with him there were blessed. The imprisoned butler of Pharaoh received from Joseph a favorable interpretation of a dream and was returned to favor. But Joseph remained in prison two more years even though the butler promised he would remember him (Gen. 40:23—41:1). At that time, the Pharaoh had a dream and no one could interpret it. Finally, the butler remembered Joseph, and Pharaoh had Joseph brought in to tell him what the dream meant. Joseph explained that seven excellent crop years would be followed by seven years of drought, so Pharaoh assigned Joseph the task of storing up grain for the years of famine. When the seven good years were past, enough grain had been stored to carry the Egyptians through the famine. They also had enough grain for other countries. People came from everywhere seeking food. So in Joseph in Egypt it actually occurred that, through a seed of Abraham, all the nations were blessed. The author must have remembered the promise as he told of the coming of the nations.

So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.

Genesis 41:56-57

This distribution of the good gifts of the earth becomes a paradigm out of which Israel understands her function on earth. She mans the warehouse from which the good gifts of God are distributed to the whole earth.

No doubt there were periods along the way when Joseph wondered how anything of significance could turn up. He went from bad to worse, from his father's house to slavery, to prison. But finally a turn-around occurred, and when it did, he ended up controlling the food supplies for the whole earth. Joseph could see the involvement of the Lord (Gen. 50:20-21).

The Lord had in mind all the time that Joseph would be his servant through whom he would bless the nations. So we too, not knowing the outcome of our life's work, stand by faith knowing that when our life is over we can discern how God has worked through us to bless the peoples who inhabit this globe.

A Viable and Living Option

The prophets clearly envisioned Israel as a servant to the nations.

It is too light a thing that you should be my
servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the preserved of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of
the earth.

Isaiah 49:6

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the
Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;

that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in his paths.
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
Micah 4:2

Thus says the Lord God: On the day that I
cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will
cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste
places shall be rebuilt. . . Then the nations that
are left round about you shall know that I, the
Lord, have rebuilt the ruined places, and re-
planted that which was desolate; I, the Lord,
have spoken, and I will do it.

Ezekiel 36:33-36

In the promise to the fathers, God made known
his plan for distributing his good gifts. From the
beginning, man turned his back on the gifts of God
and contaminated the good order God established.
God, however, never gives up. Because of his per-
sistence, his love is always a viable and living op-
tion.

He is mindful of his covenant for ever,
of the word that he commanded,
for a thousand generations,
the covenant which he made with Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,
which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant.

Psalms 105:8-10

4



Protection in the Wilderness

In the course of those many days the king of Egypt died. And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

Exodus 2:23-24

About 600 years after the promise of God to Abraham, his descendants groaned under slavery in Egypt. Six hundred years is a long time. Not that long ago, Columbus sailed to America, and Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door. Less than 400 years ago the Pilgrims left England and landed at Plymouth Rock. Even after 600 years God remembered his promise to bless his people and through them the nations. God loves forever. God loves every man made in his image. God loves people in all kinds of circum-

stances. God even loves slaves. And he loves to free them from slavery.

But God's helping hand of love moves only where people cry out for help. The book of Judges makes this point clear. When the people were self-satisfied, thinking they had it made, God's help receded over the horizon. God stepped in only after they recognized they could not make it on their own and cried out to him (Judges 3:9).

Strange as it may seem, it is possible to help only those who want to be helped. Often a child trying to get a dress on a doll has all kinds of trouble. "Here, give me the doll," we say, and pull it away. We put the dress on, straighten it, and give the doll back. The child cries out, "I don't want it that way," and tugs at the garment, popping a button and tearing the dress.

God does his work knowing that people who insist on living on their own terms cannot be helped. "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity" (Rom. 1:24). God forever desires relationship with man. He is more than ready to help people who seek him out, people who realize that all human solutions are temporary and inadequate, if not ruinous. The helping hand of God always comes to aid his people when they have their backs to the wall and genuinely seek his aid. God loves people who are down and out and enslaved. He is eager to release the captive and break the yoke of bondage.

The Importance of the Exodus

In parts of the Old Testament where the mighty acts of God are heralded and reiterated (Deut. 26:5-11, Pss. 105-106), three events stand out: (1)

the promise of God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, (2) the events in Egypt and at the sea, and (3) the conquest of the land. The second event takes a central role because the Passover, a commemoration of the Egyptian event, was the most important of the feasts in some periods of Old Testament history. For example, in the restoration of religion under Josiah, the historian emphasizes an extensive celebration of the Passover (2 Kings 23:21-23). Also, the prophets often depicted the ingratitude of the people by charging that they had forgotten the exodus.

"O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer Me!

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of bondage;

and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

Micah 6:3-4

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more I called them,
the more they went from me
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and burning incense to idols.

Hosea 11:1-2

Finally, Yahweh identified himself in the covenant: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2).

The period of the exodus is a crucial time. In that period God (1) revealed his new name, (2) created a new nation of faith in himself, and (3) made believers out of the nations.

I Am Yahweh

After the death of Joseph, the descendants of Jacob remained in Egypt 400 years. As time passed, the Egyptians forgot they were being blessed because of the Israelites. Not only was their presence a blessing, but Jacob himself blessed the Pharaoh. "Then Joseph brought in Jacob his father, and set him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh" (Gen. 47:7). Now "there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8). This new king enslaved the people of God and became a curse to them rather than a blessing. "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3). But God prefers to bless, so he made plans to end the curse by calling a man, Moses, to lead his people out of Egypt to the land promised to Abraham many centuries earlier.

God appeared to Moses on a mountain in Midian. Attracted by a burning bush, Moses drew near to see the spectacle. God spoke out of the fire, revealed his plans, and told Moses he was sending him to Pharaoh. "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exod. 3:10). When God said this, Moses drew back in fear, probably not because he was afraid of the Pharaoh, but because he worried over the reception of the people when he told them the news. After all, some had already rejected his leadership (Exod. 2:14). So Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (Exod. 3:13). God replied, "I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14). This

English phrase is a translation of the Hebrew verb *hayah*, which is equivalent to the infinitive "to be." The next verse affirms clearly that from this Hebrew root comes "Yahweh," translated consistently in the Revised Standard Version as Lord. (For further information on the translation, see the middle section of the preface to the RSV.)

The standard Semitic word for God is *elohim*. It is often found in the Old Testament, (e.g., Gen. 1:1). The way Moses asks his question makes it clear, however, that he wants more than the standard name. He wants a special name for God. The God of the Canaanites had the special name Baal, the God of the Babylonians was Bel, and the God of the Assyrians was Asshur. Moses was told that God's special name is Yahweh. We are sure of the four consonant sounds, so the name is sometimes referred to as the "tetragrammaton," that is "four letters." The vowels are less certain since the early Hebrew texts did not contain the vowels, but it is thought that the name would have been transliterated Yahweh. In the postexilic period (after 538 B.C.), the Jews withdrew the sacred name from the popular pronunciation for fear it would be profaned. When the Massoretes added vowels to YHWH they used vowels from the word *adonai*, also translated Lord. The Massoretes did their work in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. The name Jehovah as applied to God is often attributed to Petrus Galatinus in 1520 A.D. The American Standard Version (1901) consistently uses this name, but the New American Standard Bible (1960), based on the ASV, dropped Jehovah and substituted Lord. Therefore, a preference for addressing God as Jehovah has no biblical basis. If

you wish to use the Hebrew special name for God, you should speak of Yahweh.

Exodus clearly affirms God reveals his special name to Israel in Egypt at the time of the exodus.

And God (*elohim*) said to Moses, "I am the Lord (*Yahweh*). I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, (*el shaddai*) but by my name the Lord I did not make myself known to them.

Exodus 6:2

The name "Yahweh" appeared earlier in the Old Testament, the first instance being Genesis 2:4. Genesis 4:26 has frequently been used to differ with Exodus 6:2 and locate the first instance of the use of Yahweh in the days of Seth. But perhaps the point of Genesis 4:26 is that in the days of Seth men first began to address God in prayer. The use of Yahweh therefore reflects the fact that even the earliest parts of Genesis were not written until Yahweh had revealed the tetragrammaton as his special name at the time of the exodus.

What is it that Yahweh makes known to his people at the time of the exodus? What is the significance of his special name? Some have taken *hayah* ("I am who I am") to refer to the eternity or essence of God. But this doesn't seem to be the intent of Exodus 3. God is of interest in the Old Testament not because he is eternal, but because he acts in the lives of his people in amazing ways. He is not so much the God who stands above time but who enters into it. In fact, the RSV supplies the alternate translation ("I will be what I will be"), which seems very attractive. This says that Yahweh is known by his action. Man cannot confine God and say this is His nature. God's future is

open. He is not boxed in by the Egyptians. He is not limited to his past actions. He will define himself by what he does, and what he will do in the future is not always immediately obvious. By what he did in Egypt with the plagues and at the sea, he proved his intent to fulfill his promise to Abraham. But the promise to Abraham did not reveal the amazing manner by which Yahweh would bring his people to the land. God's helping hand in Egypt was, of course, consistent with his promise. But what he did in Egypt shows that he is free to fulfill his promise in his own way. He will be what he will be!

A New Nation of Faith

Exodus clearly affirms that Yahweh was at work in the plagues in Egypt and at the Red Sea. What did God hope to accomplish in these actions? Exodus 1-18 shows that God had two purposes: (1) to create faith in his own people and (2) to convince the Egyptians and the nations of his might.

God exhibited many signs and wonders in Egypt to weld his people into a unified force who trusted him, who were ready to leave Egypt, and who would prepare themselves in the wilderness for the war to take the promised land. This was how God set out to bless these people, to mold them into a nation so that they in turn would be a channel of blessing to the nations. These signs and wonders were not only for those who first witnessed them, but for future generations. Faith would be created in them too by these earlier wonders. Faith does not come easily, and, once achieved, it does not necessarily abide permanently. The Exodus story tells us that faith waxes and wanes even in the hearts of God's chosen people.

God provided many wonders to elicit faith. Moses said about the people, "They will not believe me or listen to my voice" (Exod. 4:1). God supplied the power to turn a rod into a serpent, heal a leprous hand, and turn water into blood (Exod. 4:2-9). When Moses and Aaron arrived in Egypt, they performed these signs for the people. The result was faith (Exod. 4:31). Their faith, however, began to waver when Pharaoh refused Moses' request that the people be permitted to leave Egypt. Not only did they have to increase their brickmaking, but they also had to gather their own straw. Israelite foremen laid the blame squarely at the feet of Moses and Aaron, and once again they had reservations about following these men who claimed that Yahweh had appeared to them (Exod. 5:15-21). But God told Moses not to worry because the severity of Pharaoh would supply him the occasion for working mighty wonders in Egypt (Exod. 6:1).

God therefore proceeded to exhibit his wondrous might. At the appropriate action of Moses, God turned water from the Nile River into blood; flooded Egypt with frogs, gnats, and flies; brought on them and their animals plagues and boils; sent hail, locusts, and darkness for three days; and finally slew the Egyptians' firstborn and their cattle (Exod. 7-11). The people looked on in great wonder. Their faith was obviously growing, but it became intense at the sea. Pharaoh finally and reluctantly agreed to let the people go when the firstborn of the land were lost. But on their way out of Egypt, Pharaoh once again changed his mind. As the people reached the region of the Red Sea, they could see dust from Pharaoh's armies and chariots.

Again, their fear of the Pharaoh grew and their faith in God failed (Exod. 14:10-12).

Moses spoke words of assurance and conviction. "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord. . . The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still" (Exod. 14:13-14). Moses was right. The sea opened, and they walked across to the other side on dry land. When the Egyptians followed, the waters returned and they were drowned. That was a mighty day, a great victory, a moment of intense faith. "And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses" (Exod. 14:31).

But even that faith did not last. After a few days in the wilderness, they became thirsty and commenced murmuring against Moses (Exod. 15:24). They grew hungry and murmured about the lack of food (Exod. 16:2). But God still had work to do, and out of this motley crew he created a nation of faith through which he arranged to bless the nations.

These events were not only for people present then. They were for generations of future Israelites. Each year the Israelites were to reenact and remember those awesome times in the celebration of the Passover (Exod. 12:14). Faith was to be created in future generations by retelling the story.

And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage.'

Exodus 13:14

It is common for young people to question why

parents do what they do. Each of our five children wanted to know why we ate bits of bread and drank grape juice from the small cup. That was our chance to explain that certain past occurrences were so filled with reality that they explain and give direction to life even now.

Our age has turned its back on the past. It has more or less agreed with Henry Ford's famous comment, "What do we care what they did 500 or 1,000 years ago? . . . It means nothing to me. History is more or less bunk. It's tradition."¹ According to Exodus, the only way to make any sense out of the present is to learn what the God of the present and the future did in the past. By doing so, we find our identity in the present and face the future with confidence and expectation.

The mighty acts of God created a community of faith. The actions provided the base for the community's identity, and they bonded the community to reality. How can people who turn their backs on the past hope to locate any roots in reality? Reality encompasses the past, present, and the future.

The mighty acts of God are also three dimensional, growing out of the past, spreading into the present, and stretching into the future. In fact, the people of God don't make their own future, but they are drawn to it by the one who stands even in advance of the present. "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed" (Dan. 2:44).

He Made the Nations Believers

As God affirmed in his promise to Abraham, his interests are wide-reaching. Some gods might have

a bad case of myopia, but not the Lord God of Israel. In what he did in Egypt and at the sea, Yahweh shows his desire not only to create a community of faith, but also to make believers out of the nations. Yahweh hoped to make known his ways to all men so they might share in his good gifts.

I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring forth my hosts, my people the sons of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.

Exodus 7:4-5

Have you ever stopped to ask why ten plagues rather than just one? Or have you made any sense out of the fact that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exod. 10:20)? According to Exodus, the answer to both questions lies in the fact that Yahweh wanted all the nations to hear about these events. For that reason he multiplied the plagues. One plague might be passed off as a fluke. But not ten.

For this time I will send all my plagues upon your heart, and upon your servants and your people, that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. For by now I could have put forth my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth; but for this purpose have I let you live, to show you my power, so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth.

Exodus 9:14-16

Yahweh had just revealed his special name at the time of the exodus. It was not widely known.

But by his multifold actions in Egypt, his name was on the lips of those who traveled to the outposts of civilization. God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that the people would be forced to stay in Egypt. God was simply confirming Pharaoh in his personal desires. "I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand" (Exod. 3:19). God did not change the course of Pharaoh's hopes or commitments. In fact, Pharaoh played into the hand of God because of his desire to retain the Israelites as slaves.

By his mighty signs and wonders, God made a believing nation out of the descendants of Jacob. Did he also achieve his second purpose? That is, did he make believers out of the nations? Yes! The great poetry in Exodus 15, which praises Yahweh as a man of war, tells of the reaction of the nations.

The peoples have heard, they tremble;
pangs have seized on the inhabitants of Philistia.

Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;
the leaders of Moab, trembling seize them;
all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.

Terror and dread fall upon them;
because of the greatness of thy arm,
they are as still as a stone.

Exodus 15:14-16

Not only have the peoples of the Jordan valley heard, but Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was made a believer. When a person impresses his father-in-law, that is something special. When I first met my future wife, I soon found out my father-in-law was not particularly fond of southerners or preachers. He considered me a southerner even though I was

born and reared one mile north of the Mason-Dixon line in southern Missouri. For that reason, any time he was impressed by me was indeed a serendipity.

The father-in-law of Moses was impressed. When he heard all that happened, he stated,

Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians, when they dealt arrogantly with them.

Exodus 18:11

All of a sudden Yahweh's name, previously unknown to Jethro, zoomed past all the deities he had heard of before. Because of his belief, he "offered a burnt offering and sacrifices to God." The name of the Lord was indeed being declared throughout all the earth.

All through the years in Egypt and Israel's exodus, God showed his love for his people. His heart reached out to a cursed, enslaved people. He secured their release to shower his gifts upon them. And through them the nations may know the name of Yahweh, take up his ways, and also bask in the warmth of his love.

¹ John B. Rae, ed., *Henry Ford*, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1969), p. 53-54.

5



Deliverance in the Exodus

The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God bore you, as a man bears his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place

Deuteronomy 1:30-31

The Israelites stood on the sand and sun-kissed banks of the Sinai Peninsula above the waters of the Red Sea. Egypt lay to the west and behind. The multitudes faced east, toward the land promised as a gift to their progenitor, Abraham, almost 600 years previously. God had launched his people, but a long voyage lay ahead for them through the treacherous sand seas before they could land safe in the harbor of the land flowing with milk and honey. Even the most faithless did not anticipate just how long and disaster-ridden that journey would be. The time in the wilderness was not

wasted, however, because it gave the people time to prepare for the days ahead. But above all, it was a time when the steadfast love of the Lord was explicitly manifest. In the wilderness, Yahweh daily showed how he loves to sustain his people.

According to the preacher, there is a time for everything under the sun (Eccles. 3:1). There is even a time for preparation. For Israel, that time was the years spent in the wilderness, between the flesh pots of Egypt and the grapes and olives of Palestine. The preparation reached out in various directions and on numerous fronts. It was often complex, perhaps seeming contradictory to people with small minds. But those are characteristics of the preparation of a school-age child. Should the preparation of the people of Yahweh be less complex and time-consuming?

From the Old Testament we learn that the preparation proceeded on several fronts: (1) preparation for war, (2) preparation for love, (3) preparation for trust, (4) preparation for punishment, and (5) preparation for God acting for the sake of his name.

Preparation for War

The route from the Red Sea to Palestine by "way of the land of the Philistines" was less than 200 miles. But that was not the way God directed his people (Exod. 13:17-18). The route he chose, even without detours and circumventions, was about 400 miles. Why did God send them on such a circuitous journey? According to the text, the answer is preparation. The land they were to take would not fall without resistance. They had to be ready both mentally and physically.

Before Israel set out, they had an orderly and strategic plan for marching. The meeting tent was to be the center of the camp. Marching on the east were the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun; on the south, Reuben, Simeon, and Gad; on the west, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin; and on the north, Dan, Asher, and Naphtali (Num. 2:1-34). The Levites were to be in the center surrounding the tent because it was their duty to transport and protect it (Num. 2:17). (This book will examine more detailed strategies for battles in chapter eight.)

Preparation for Love

In many church schools, the wilderness is referred to as the place in which God punished his people. Of course, it was. Even New Testament texts emphasize that. "Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness" (1 Cor. 10:5). But much more than punishment occurred in the wilderness. In fact, God's people experienced the love of God and its implications in the wilderness. As we noted, God's love occurs first, and his wrath grows out of his love. So in the wilderness, punishment did not come before the love of God, but rather it was the result of it. Before God punished the people, he loved them freely. And because he loved them, he punished them to create the soil in which love could grow and be intense and permanent.

The Old Testament describes the love of God for his people in the wilderness in two manners: as the love of a father for his son, and as the love of a husband for his bride.

God loved to sustain his son (Deut. 1:30), just as fathers love to provide the needs of their children. Honest fathers, if they become desperate enough, will even steal in order to put food in the mouths of their children. In the wilderness God provided for his son even while punishing him. God gave his children water, manna, quail, a remedy for snake bite, and clothing (Deut. 29:5-6).

Can a father love and punish his son at the same time? According to the text, God did. But don't we too? And if we can do it, can't God do it even more? Almost as soon as he could walk, my son liked to stray away from home without letting anyone know. We punished him in many different ways, but we never could get across to him the importance of our knowing where he was. When he was sixteen and had his driver's permit, he was gone for a couple of hours once, and we didn't know where he was. As a result, I told him he could not drive for a week. That was a bitter pill, but it made a point. We really wanted to know where he was. But even during his punishment we continued our love by sustaining him. He ate and drank as much as before, perhaps even more. In fact, while he was home I taught him how to take off a mower blade and sharpen it.

So even in the midst of punishment, God continued to love and sustain his son. Hosea's poetry says it vividly.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I
healed them.

I led them with cords of compassion,
with bands of love,

and I became to them as one
who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them
and fed them.

Hosea 11:3-4

Israel the Bride

The prophets liked to characterize the wilderness as a place where God treated his people as a husband treats a bride. Jeremiah said the wilderness was a honeymoon time.

I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.
Israel was holy to the Lord,
the first fruits of his harvest.

Jeremiah 2:2-3a

God loved his bride, and the bride returned the love. The bride, however, was not without guilt. Even during the honeymoon she proved faithless. " 'All who ate of it became guilty; evil came upon them,' says the Lord" (Jer. 2:3b). Even a husband sometimes loves and punishes his bride at the same time.

Hosea and Ezekiel also talk about God's nuptial love for the people.

Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.
And there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor
a door of hope.
And there she shall answer as in
the days of her youth,

as at the time when she came
out of the land of Egypt.

Hosea 2:14-15

When I passed by you again and looked upon you, behold, you were at the age for love; and I spread my skirt over you, and covered your nakedness; yea, I plighted my troth to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine.

Ezekiel 16:8

God was preparing his people for intimate, divine love. Despite the punishment, the wilderness is a prime example of the fact that the "steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end."

Preparation for Trust

Love relationships only grow where there is mutual trust. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:7). In the wilderness God disciplined his son Israel so that he would learn to trust him. Discipline comes in at least three sorts: (1) a training regimen to get ready for the battle or the big game, (2) obstacles placed in the path to bring a person to his or her senses, and (3) drastic punishment when all other avenues have been exhausted. Yahweh used all these means of discipline, but in the text it is specifically the first (a training regimen) which is called discipline.

Deuteronomy sees the wilderness as a time of discipline. "Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you" (Deut. 8:5). The eighth chapter begins

with the injunction to keep very carefully all God's commandments. The reason for keeping the commandments—so things will go well for them in the promised land—is the major theme of Deuteronomy (Deut. 8:1, 19-20; 6:3). What then is the point of the discipline in the wilderness? God is putting his people through a regimen so they will come out trusting his commandments and obeying them. Deuteronomy 8:2 says, "Testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not." What method will God employ to achieve this end? He will humble his people. But how will that prepare them for keeping his commandments? The way he humbled them was to make them utterly dependent on him.

Every parent with teenagers or everyone who has been a teenager knows what a humbling experience it is to be totally dependent on parents for spending money. Along with the money comes a felt obligation to pay deference to the source. But once the teenager makes his own money, he feels he has the right to do with it as he pleases.

God first of all put his people in circumstances in which they were totally dependent on him for sustenance. "He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna" (8:3). The people had to depend on God for food. They learned he was trustworthy. They didn't have to worry about the manna. They could count on it. When God supplied manna he didn't have to get up at 3 A.M., fire up the ovens, knead the dough, put it in the cutter, then into the ovens. He simply said, "Let there be manna." In a figurative sense, manna came from the mouth of God. So the writer says, "That he might make you know that man does not live by

bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord" (8:3). God's people learned to trust manna which came from the mouth of God. And they should likewise trust the commandments of God and obey them, for they also came from his mouth.

In the last part of chapter eight the author makes it obvious that when they get to the land and they have produced their own crops and gathered the fruit from their vineyards, they will be tempted to think they earned it themselves. They may think they no longer need to pay any deference to Yahweh by obeying his commandments (Deut. 8:11-14).

In the wilderness God trained his son to prepare him for the day when he would occupy the promised land. To prosper in the land, he had to keep God's commandments, ordinances, and statutes. We too are in the wilderness between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and our own resurrection. In this wilderness God also disciplines us. When we become convinced that we created our own talents and we ignore his demands, he humbles us to teach us that for things to go well we must trust everything that comes from God's mouth—his demands as well as his blessings.

Discipline by Obstacles

God also disciplines by putting obstacles in the way of his people. Amos makes this obvious. In the middle of eighth century B.C., the Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam II was doing exceedingly well politically and economically. But the poor were suffering. Amos came from the south with the message that their prosperity would be short-lived if they did not develop a heart of com-

passion for the needy. Amos insisted that God had been working with them through the years to develop justice and righteousness toward all the inhabitants of the land. But he had little success. He first of all gave them cleanness of teeth, meaning drought, hoping it would bring them to their senses and they would return. But it didn't faze them (Amos 4:6). Next he sent blight and mildew to waste their crops. But the results were the same. "Yet you did not return to me," says the Lord. He sent pestilence, and he sent enemy troops. But nothing worked. So drastic punishment remained. "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" (Amos 4:12).

God loves his people so much he will do anything in keeping with love to return them to his fellowship when they drift away. He will deprive them to help them learn to trust him for their needs. He will even let some seemingly harmful thing happen if it will bring them to their senses. Injuries do not seem to be acts of love, but they are indeed when aimed at restoring relationships.

"Come, let us return to the Lord;
for he has torn, that he may heal us;
he has stricken, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.

Hosea 6:1-2

Hosea suggests that sometimes the only way God can make our life better is by tearing something. When I was five, my uncle, who had learned gymnastics in college, threw me into a tree and broke my arm while trying to share some of his expertise. In those depression years in southern

Missouri, no X-ray equipment was available. The doctor set the arm, then applied wooden splints, gauze, and plaster. In four weeks the big day arrived to cut off the splint. If the arm was straight, there would be great relief. But if the arm was crooked, there would be only one thing to do: break it again and reset it. Fortunately this did not have to be done in my case, but had it been necessary, it would have been preferable to the other consequences. Breaking an arm does not seem like an act of love, but in the long run it is more desirable than a crooked arm.

To God, it is more desirable to break a life than let it grow crooked. "He has torn, that he may heal us." Unfortunately, in a number of cases the tearing makes no appreciable difference. After numerous tries, each resulting in failure, the only alternative is "prepare to meet your God." Yahweh's love is so steadfast that he never gives up. He is continually at work preparing his children and struggling to bring them back when they drift away.

Preparation for Punishment

Radical punishment is always a final resort with God. God did not want the people to spend forty years in the wilderness. But the situation became so desperate with so much murmuring and faithlessness that God exhausted all his options. The straw that broke the camel's back occurred after God gave his promise in covenant ("I will be their God and they will be my people"), and after the twelve spies, one from each tribe, had gone to search out the land. When they returned, ten said it was hopeless, but two believed that with God's help, it could be done. All that night the people

cried out and wept. They murmured against Moses and Aaron, and even proposed that new leaders be selected for a return to Egypt (Num. 14:1-12).

How could they be like that? They saw the power of God in Egypt and at the sea. They drank the water and ate the manna and quail. Now they had the audacity to complain that the challenge ahead was too great. What else could Yahweh do to convince them that no task was a challenge to Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth? They were a hopeless lot (Num. 14:11-12).

God did not carry out his threat because of the argument of Moses. God is a God of mercy, so he pardoned the people. But he could not let such a faithless generation go free.

... as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the proof these ten times and have not hearkened to my voice, shall see the land which I swore to give to their fathers; and none of those who despised me shall see it.

Numbers 14:21-23

That generation did not get to enter the land. Those under twenty-one at that time, however, were eligible (14:29). The generations coming on, who grew up in the wilderness, were trained by God to enjoy the blessing of the land. The rejected generation had no real desire to be in close fellowship with God. They wanted to return to Egypt. God does not force man. He gives him every opportunity. But if man persists in cultivating fellowship in Egypt rather than fellowship with God,

then God permits ultimate separation from himself.

God Acts for His Name's Sake

While Moses was on the mountain receiving the law, the people worshiped the golden calf which symbolized Baal, the god of the Canaanites (Exod. 32:1-6). God grew distraught and threatened to wipe them out. Later, when the people threatened to select new leaders and go back to Egypt, God again determined to consume them. In each case, Moses argued with God and brought about a revision in the action. It seems strange that a human could explain certain facts of life to God and win him over. But according to the text, that is what actually happened. Moses argued that it was in God's best interest to continue with the people, however faithless and rebellious they might be, not just for their sake, but because of how the action of Yahweh would appear to the nations looking on. Moses appealed to God to act for the sake of His name. What does it mean for God to act for the sake of his name? "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Ps. 23:3).

The sequence of events are similar in these two incidents. First, God becomes upset because his people spurn his love. The description of the anger of God reminds us of the anguish of a married person who has just happened upon a spouse in the embrace of a lover.

And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them."

Exodus 32:9-10

In Western philosophy we have been led to believe that such personal characteristics cannot really be attributed to God. But the God of the philosophers is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is personal as a human being is personal because man is made in God's image. God has the traits of a person, though God's attributes far exceed those of a human. God is a loving God, but his love is so intense that when his lover deceives him, he suffers just as a human. The author of Exodus has no qualms about depicting God as jealous. "You shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exod. 34:14).

Love involves freedom—freedom to love or not to love. Coercion is not love. But freedom also involves risk because the advances of the lover may be rejected. Rejected love brings on hurt, burning, suffering, and wrath. Therefore, despite the traditional Christian theology that rejects the suffering of God and affirms his impassibility, the God of the Old Testament suffers. He does not deteriorate; he does not dissipate. But he suffers because he loves. In both cases, God suffered as the result of the rejected love from his beloved.

God Sees the Human Perspective

Second, Moses argued with God and changed the expressed intentions of God. In Exodus, Moses used two arguments: (1) that the Egyptians would accuse God of malice and lose respect for him, and (2) God should remember his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. In Numbers, Moses argued that (1) the nations would question the power of Yahweh if his people died in the

wilderness, and (2) Yahweh is a God of steadfast love, slow to anger, and forgiving.

How can we account for the fact that Moses was able to change the thinking of God? Moses actually did not put any new ideas into the mind of God, as if he was brighter or more perceptive than God. He only pointed out an idea or commitment which came from God in the first place. God had told Moses that through his actions he sought to declare his name throughout the earth (Exod. 9:16). God had promised Abraham numerous descendants (Gen. 22:16, 18). And God had declared to Moses on the mountain that he was a God of steadfast love and forgiveness (Exod. 34:6-7).

Moses was not putting ideas into the mind of God but reminding God of the commitments he himself had made. Therefore, the arguments of Moses did not change God, they merely revised his specific course of action. Some might still be surprised but Christians should be the least so. This says that God has always been interested in how things look from the human perspective.

God sent his Son as another clear indication that he wants to know what it is like from the human perspective. Before God sent his son he did not know what it was like to live as a man. When my daughter told me she wanted to go away to college, she said one thing which was cutting at first. She said, "You don't really understand why I want to go away because you don't know what it's like to be the daughter of Tom Olbricht and be a student at the college where he teaches." That hurt. I first thought, "Why that ungrateful wretch. What does she mean I don't know what it is like to be Tom Olbricht's daughter?" I saw her when she took her

first step. I remembered when she told me she had learned to rest on her first day in kindergarten. I remembered her first date. I knew more about her than she did herself. But after I cooled down a bit, I realized she was right. I knew many things about her, things she did not know herself. But I did not know the experience of being my own daughter and attending the college where I taught. So I grudgingly said to her, "I guess you're right. I don't know what it's like. Tell me and perhaps I will be able to think about it with a new perspective."

God also did not have the experience of what it was like to be his child. To have that experience, he came in the world as man through the Son. And now the Son is seated on the right hand of God, continually explaining to God what it is like to be man (Heb. 4:14-16). God seeks the human perspective. That is what prayer is about. When prayers remind God of his commitment and show that if he acts in a certain way in this situation it will be in line with his commitments, then we can expect prayer to have an effect on the action of God.

God's Name is Cleared

Third, as a result of God's action, his people came off better than they deserved because God's name was at stake. Ezekiel tells of the continual rebellion of the Israelites against God. But after reflecting upon the situation, God did not destroy them (Ezek. 20:8-9).

God's people always come off better than they deserve because they wear the name of God. But if they drag the name of God through the mud and thereby profane his name, God will act against his

people to clear his name (Jer. 14:1-10). This action of God is not a separate characteristic of God from love. God has made a commitment to love all of his created order forever. Whenever any person tries to corner all God's love, God will resist. When God loves, it does not imply that he hurries to comply with every human request. In this text, when God acts for the sake of his name, he acts in consideration for all inhabitants of the earth. According to the Old Testament, the self-interest of God is the equitable treatment of all those who bear his image.

Finally, in each case God did not destroy his people on the spot, but he did not let them off easily. Exodus 32:25-29 says those who did not line up with God were slain, and the faithless in Numbers 14:20-38 were sentenced to spend their life in the wilderness and never occupy the land God promised to their father Abraham. What God did in the wilderness shows us, if nothing else, exactly how amazingly relentless his love is. We grow more and more amazed at the amount of attention he gives to drawing man to himself in intimate fellowship.

6



Promise through the Covenants

We live in a world of eroding commitment. Sometimes it seems like promises are made to be broken. Commitments to personal relationships are easily forgotten. A person's word is no longer his or her bond. We seldom hear praise for longstanding loyalty to one position, one spouse, one service club or one church.

However, Yahweh, God of Israel, loved commitment. He loved to make promises which would commit him forever. He thrived on permanent relationships. He didn't hesitate to put his promises in writing. He continually made covenant promises to his people. Yahweh was not one to reserve the privilege of changing his mind tomorrow. He freely entered into covenant relationships with his people which were to extend into perpetuity.

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting

covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.

Genesis 17:7

The Promise to Noah

The word covenant first occurs in the Old Testament in promises to Noah (Gen. 6:18). God once thought to rid his creation of perverse humankind. But he relented and instead promised Noah, "I establish my covenant with you, that . . . never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. 9:11). God's promise to Noah was much like Saul's to Jonathan (1 Sam. 19:6). Saul, a man with kingly authority, made a promise to his son. The promise bound only Saul. "As the Lord lives, he shall not be put to death." A greater person committed himself to a lesser person. And Saul didn't ask for any action or commitment in return. So Yahweh, the emperor of the universe, made a personal promise to Noah. By this commitment he affirmed the nature of his future actions and tied his own hands. In a beautiful statement he committed himself to faithfulness in regard to creation. "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Gen. 8:22).

It is most important that God's promise to Noah, to every living creature, and to all future generations, depended solely upon his goodness (Gen. 9:12). Unlike our contracts (covenants) in which the party of the first part agrees to sell a house to a party of the second part in exchange for a stated sum of money, God entered into an agreement with the created order but did not exact anything in return. God did not require any action from Noah

to either inaugurate or maintain the covenant. Although prior to the covenant he laid charges on him, they had no bearing on the covenant (Gen. 9:1-7). Nothing was conditional about the Noachic covenant.

God promised that the earth would never again be destroyed by a flood. As a sign that he would never again destroy humankind, Yahweh set his bow in the sky. Man had nothing to do but enjoy the grace and goodness of God in his promise, which will continue regardless of what man does. Our existence does not teeter on the abyss. We are not so threatened that every moment hangs by a thread. We know that as long as the earth lasts we are secure from the primordial waters.

The Promise to Abraham

When Yahweh decided upon a new manner in which to share his goodness with creation, he called a man named Abraham. Through him God intended to bless the nations. Abraham's relationship with God resulted from God's initiative, not Abraham's. Abraham probably served other deities until called. "Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods" (Josh. 24:2). But when the call came, Abraham responded. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (Gen. 15:5) and that he would give him the land (15:17-21). Neither of these promises were Abraham's by natural right; they were gifts of God because of His love.

The account of the ratification of God's covenant with Abraham may be puzzling until certain features are explained. To declare our commitment to

a contract, we merely sign it in the presence of a notary public. The ratification of an ancient covenant was much more complicated. Animals were killed and halves of the carcasses were placed over against each other (Gen. 15:7-11, Jer. 34:18). Then the parties to the covenant passed through the halves to signify their approval.

Once Abraham had prepared the animals as instructed, "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces" (Gen. 15:17). This gave notice that Yahweh, though unseen, passed through the halves to ratify the covenant. We aren't told that Abraham also passed through the halves. Only God had to ratify the covenant since he alone launched it and kept it in force.

Obviously God gave many specific commands to Abraham. He asked him to leave his homeland, take Isaac to the mountain as a sacrifice, and walk before him and be blameless. But God extended the promise to Abraham before he made these demands. Therefore, the covenant did not depend upon Abraham's obedience but upon the grace and love of Yahweh. The sign of God's promise to Abraham was circumcision (Gen. 17:11), which could be seen as a work demanded by God and upon which the covenant was conditioned. But the sign was worked upon the recipient. It was not the work of the one circumcised.

Some argue that a later covenant eliminates the authority of an earlier one. The covenant with Abraham, however, did not cancel God's promise to Noah. In fact, the promise to Abraham built on the covenant with Noah. God capitalized upon his commitment to Noah and his descendants that he would secure the earth in his declaration that

through Abraham he would bless the nations. God thereby set out to share his goodness with man to whom he had already guaranteed an extended existence. He carefully laid his plans from one covenant to another, demonstrating his undying love by the accumulative benefits.

The Promise to David

The promise to David supplied additional layers to the oral commitments of God. God promised Noah that the earth and its people would be around for a long time. He promised Abraham he would raise up a people through whom mankind would be blessed. God added to the stability of his people by declaring that a seed of David would always reign on the throne. Once God launches a plan or makes a commitment he sees it through. His love is forever.

The covenant with David followed the pattern of the promises to Noah and Abraham. First, the covenant was launched by the grace of God freely given. David declared to God that he would build him a house, that is, a temple for worship (2 Sam. 7). But God countered that he would act before David had a chance. Second, the commitment was made only by God. He did not call upon David or his descendants to do anything to secure the promise. There was nothing conditional: "Your throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sam. 7:16). Regardless of what David or his descendants do, the covenant will stand. Third, the covenant with David was not only for David but also for his descendants and ultimately all persons (Isa. 11:10). However, unlike the covenants with Noah and Abraham, no sign is mentioned this time.

Although the initial clause of the covenant with David is unconditional, a conditional aspect exists in regard to individual kings. "When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men" (2 Sam. 7:14). God will not tolerate any foolishness or insubordination from the kings. If a king is faithless, he will be deposed. But the dynasty of David will not cease; a new seed will be elevated to the throne. Each king is to be judged according to the Mosaic covenant (Ps. 89:29-32). The blessing of God and his grace didn't come through the king's works. Yahweh had already promised his love and had given it freely. The blessing of God is not the result of human action or work. The keeping of the Mosaic rules did not secure the blessing, but indeed a king triggered the removal of God's good gifts by turning his back on the rules. The doors of heaven are never opened because of the works of men, but they are closed whenever man fails to obey the demands of God.

In examining the covenants with Noah, Abraham, and David, we notice certain verities. First, God, though superior to humankind, bound himself in covenant, not out of necessity, but out of love. Second, in these three cases the promises were unilateral. God made a promise but did not ask anything in return. Third, each promise built on preceding ones, rather than cancelling them. Fourth, God's covenants or promises always remain in force regardless of what man does or does not do. By his action, man can cut himself off from the benefits of the covenant, but the covenant remains as long as God decrees. God's promises are forever because his love is forever.

The Covenants as Unmerited Love

The Old Testament speaks of many mutual covenants, such as those between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 26:31), Jonathan and David (1 Sam. 18:3), and Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:44-54). But no covenant given by God is a mutual covenant. Who could consider himself equal with God to presume that he could initiate a mutual covenant?

I have a mutual contract with a savings bank for a house mortgage. If the bank withdrew the money, the contract would be broken. If I stopped making payments, the contract would cease. But even if Israel stopped making its "payments," all the covenants would remain. God initiated the covenants, and only he can withdraw them. When people made covenants with God, they did not presume mutuality—they did not lay claims on God. Instead, they committed themselves to live according to the covenant which God had made (2 Chron. 34:31). Their covenant was to keep the "commandments, testimonies and statutes"—language depicting the Deuteronomic covenant and law.

Too often we think our relationship with God depends as much on what we have done as on what he has done. But the covenants of the Old Testament tell us that we are in this relationship because of what God has done. All we do is reach out and receive it.

About twenty years ago I heard a sermon developed from this equation written on a blackboard: Salvation = God's Part + Man's Part. The preacher did not explain exactly what God's part was, only what man had to do. Perhaps it was not the preacher's intention, but we got the impression

that man's part is at least as significant as God's. Salvation was presented as a fifty-fifty arrangement. But in the Old Testament it wasn't fifty-fifty. God gave covenants out of his good graces. Man simply received what God gave.

When I taught at Pennsylvania State University in the 1960s, the Hershey Foundation of Hershey, Pa., gave Penn State \$50 million to build a medical school. Newspaper articles told about the foundation and its benevolences through the years. Pictures showed the president of the foundation presenting the president of Penn State a check for \$50 million. Nothing was said about what the president had to do to receive the check. The magnificent gift of the foundation far overshadowed anything the president did.

And so it is with the magnificent gift God offers to every man and woman made in his image. His gift is fellowship—a permanent relationship with him. This relationship is not a combination of God's part and man's part. In the words of the Christian hymn, "Jesus paid it all." But once the gift is received we must also live worthy of it, just as Penn State had much to do once it accepted the monetary gift.

The Mosaic Covenant

As the day approached for Israel to be a mighty nation, God gave his people a covenant in order to weld them into a nation living under rules and regulations. According to ancient analogies, in this act Yahweh was like a mighty emperor extending a covenant to a small and helpless nation. Through his mighty loving deeds God earned the right to

bind this nation to himself. He had every reason to expect the people to respect his demands.

The Old Testament covenants followed the standard forms of the times. God has always shown his concern by communicating with humans in their own language. The late A. D. Nock, a Harvard professor, told the story about the little old lady in Boston who, at 80, began studying Hebrew so she could speak to her maker in his own language. However, the Old Testament teaches the opposite. God did not teach man his own language. Rather man himself named all living creatures (Gen. 2:19-20). The ultimate revelation, the Son, was clothed in human flesh. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

The Mosaic covenant, in structure if not in concept, is much like the ancient suzerainty treaty, which nations utilized in the days of Moses. In a suzerainty treaty, a powerful ancient emperor (suzerain) extended a covenant to a small vassal state on his border. Before the covenant, he befriended the smaller country, often by declaring war against a large power. After he successfully defeated the enemy, he drew up a covenant and offered it to the smaller nation. He did not enter the relationship as a partner, but as a concerned superior. He did not ask the small nation to contribute its ideas about what to include.

In the covenant the suzerain promised to protect the small country. In return, he expected faithful allegiance to specific stipulations spelled out in the covenant. He concluded the arrangement by promising blessing to the small nation if it faithfully abided by its oath, and curses if it violated the oath.

In concept, the Mosaic covenant was much like the suzerainty treaty. Yahweh was a sovereign Lord who befriended a small band of people enslaved in Egypt. He acted powerfully and benevolently for the people by breaking the shackles of the Egyptian overlord. He eventually made them a nation in their own right. In the wilderness, where they set up camp, he extended his covenant. He did so out of love, not because of anything they had done (Deut. 7:6-12). "It is because the Lord loves you" (vs. 7). In the covenant he promised to be their God, guiding, loving and protecting as he did in Egypt (Deut. 4:37-39). In return, he expected them to fulfill his ways as stipulated in statutes and laws (4:39-40, 5:1-21). Unlike the covenants with Noah and Abraham, God expected his people to ratify the covenant, and he laid out specific laws for them to keep.

The Mosaic covenant included works for the people to fulfill—works of the law. But we need to see that in perspective. The people of Israel did not receive the covenant because of what they had done. God freely offered his covenant out of love. Israel did not keep the covenant in force by observing the law. The covenant remained because God loves to bless his people (Deut. 5:29, 6:24). As modern man often does, Israel cut itself off from God's blessings by failing to maintain its part. (Deut. 8:19-20). The sign of the Mosaic covenant was the sabbath (Exod. 31:17). God gave the sabbath. Man showed his support of the covenant by keeping the sabbath. The Mosaic covenant added to the promise to Abraham because God gave rules for the nation he originally promised to Abraham.

The Relationship as a Marriage Covenant

The prophets compared the relationship between God and his people to the marriage bond or covenant. Yahweh is obviously the husband and Israel the wife. Yahweh wanted his wife to be faithful and loyal to the marriage vows. "I will betroth you to me in faithfulness" (Hos. 2:20). But when his bride sought out the gods of other nations, she exhibited her unfaithfulness, playing the harlot (Exod. 34:13-16).

The marriage relationship is the most compelling, intense companionship known by humans. The prophets used this analogy because they believed the most profound relationship a person could enter was with God. Anyone who thwarts the divine-human relationship can expect the same wrath and fury given a wife who spends her time in the bed of lovers.

Hosea, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah especially depict wayward Israel as Yahweh's faithless wife. The use of the husband-wife analogy presupposes that God's rapprochement with his people is not simply a legal one, but a relationship of love in which promises are made to reserve oneself for the lover. Of course, marriage also has legal aspects, but the motivation to enter the contract grows out of love.

Hosea hammered out his theology from the crisis of his own marriage. He married a woman named Gomer who later sought other lovers. Hosea still loved her despite her waywardness, and he continually sought to restore her to himself. Yahweh did likewise with Israel, his unfaithful bride (Hos. 2:6-15). Just as Hosea was willing to take back his harlot wife, so Yahweh desired the return of his wife. He was willing to take her back,

no questions asked, but not without strings attached. "You must dwell as mine for many days; you shall not play the harlot, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you" (Hos. 3:3). Because of God's steadfast love for his bride, he tried everything to gain her back. "Come let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us" (Hos. 6:1).

Ezekiel used the marriage analogy in several places, especially chapters 16 and 23. Chapter 16 describes Israel as a young girl who, unwanted by her parents, is left exposed in an open field (vs. 5). But God took her, cleaned her, and entered into a pledge of marriage with her (16:8). God was a very loving, affectionate husband (16:10-14). But Israel was not content with the love of God. "But you trusted in your beauty, and played the harlot because of your renown, and lavished your harlotries on any passer-by" (16:15). Israel's lust was so strong that there was no discrimination whatsoever used in seeking out lovers (16:31-34). Israel's harlotry involved worshiping gods of other peoples and building altars to them (16:23-29). Because of such unfaithfulness, Yahweh threatened to expose Israel's lewdness to her neighbors by letting her enemies overrun the country (16:39). But the separation would not be permanent. God still loved his bride and planned to take her back through an everlasting covenant (16:60).

Jeremiah made the same analogy in chapters 2-5. He pictured Israel going to her illicit lover through worship at the Baal shrines on the high places (Jer. 2:20-22). He charged that the passion for worshiping Baal was so strong that it was just like a female animal in heat (2:24). "Who can restrain her lust?"

But since Yahweh was a God of mercy, he continually tried to woo back his wayward wife (3:11-14, 4:1-4).

The New Covenant

Because of Israel's perennial unfaithfulness, the prophets expected God to usher in a new age and change human hearts to cure his people's harlotry. Certain prophets spoke of a new covenant. The existing covenant and law were not inferior. The problem was man, the covenant breaker.

Hosea was among the earliest to herald a new day. According to Hosea, God will betroth his people to himself in faithfulness (Hos. 2:20). That covenant fails to speak of a new law, but it envisions a change of relationships between animals, man, and God (Hos. 2:18). In the new day the law of God will be written on the heart (Jer. 31:33), implying not so much a new law, but a new manner in which the law is to be appropriated.

The new covenant does not annul prior covenants, but renders them efficacious for human existence. Ezekiel also speaks of a new covenant (Ezek. 34:25). In the day of the new covenant man will be remade to keep the covenant. He will have a new heart (36:26), and a new spirit, which will be God's spirit (36:27).

7



Love through the Law

Because of God's steadfast love, he gives rules. Now that's interesting. In fact, it seems just a bit paradoxical. Why would someone who loves even want to give laws? After all, love and law are opposite, aren't they? Could it be that if love lasts it has to be based on law?

When my oldest daughter was eight she decided she wanted to be a doctor. As a junior in high school she met a senior boy who also planned a medical career. They went to different colleges, but their romance blossomed. They soon began plans for marriage, but without rules the relationship probably would never have worked out. Since Randy was a year ahead of Suzanne, the first decision involved which medical school to attend. The rule was that he apply to a medical school with an inclination to accept females. The second rule was that preferably the school have a three-year program including summers so they could graduate at the same time. Fortunately, they discovered a

school which met both criteria. After three years the day approached when they would graduate. Then they looked for a place to do their residency. They required a hospital with a record for appointing husbands and wives and giving them essentially the same schedule so they could have some time together. After considerable checking they found such a hospital. Because of the many hours involved in residency, it is difficult to see how the relationship could have lasted without these rules.

God loves to give rules so his people will be in a continual and rewarding relationship with him. Without rules they simply drift about, not benefiting from a growing, loving relationship. "And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day" (Deut. 6:24).

Law and Love

The loving action of God is obvious throughout the Old Testament. Even the law is a result of the love of God. God called Abraham out of love, then gave him various commands to follow so that he would be blessed and through him the nations would be blessed also. Later, God led the descendants of Abraham out of Egypt and through the wilderness and there offered his covenant. He extended his covenant because of his love, not as the consequence of their worth. He entered into a covenant because he was willing to commit himself forever.

Law is an integral part of the covenant. After God announced what he had lovingly done for his people, he gave them a list of rules to live by

(Exod. 20:2-17). Political covenants in the ancient world commenced with benevolent actions of a strong nation for a weaker nation. Loving actions precede the covenant offer. Since the covenant results from the loving kindness of God and since law is an integral part of the covenant, law itself is grounded in the love of God.

Sometimes we see law as obstructive, harsh, and impersonal. For example, I may want to build a high-rise apartment building in a residential section of town, but a local zoning law prevents it. The zoning law is obstructive because it presents a barrier to what I want to do. Consider the case of a Texas man who went to prison because he committed three minor offenses. His sentence was executed under the state "habitual offender" law. The severity of the law in this instance shocks us. Then there are the impersonal traffic laws. Suppose the speed limit is 55 miles per hour, but we are in a hurry and decide to go 60 mph. We do not really believe we are infringing on anyone's rights or hurting anyone. It is so impersonal. We feel no demands of love. If we obey the law, it is simply because we are law-abiding, afraid of being fined, or economy-minded.

It is difficult to see how God's law could be obstructive, harsh, or impersonal. It was created from the deep recesses of his love. Christians sometimes see Old Testament sacrifices as obstructive. Perhaps we have misread the New Testament. The Hebrews' writer, for example, does not think the sacrifices are obstructive, just inadequate when compared with the sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 9:26-28). The Israelites felt a joyful release through sacrifice.

And now my head shall be lifted up
above my enemies round about me;
And I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Psalm 27:6

The sacrifices may have been stopgap, but they were the best the people had. For that reason, they could rejoice.

Some rules in the Old Testament seem harsh, such as those concerning an obstinate son (Deut. 21:18-21). Despite how it may strike us, such a law was common in the ancient Near East in lieu of a prison system. Society finds it extremely difficult to function with exceptionally disruptive persons who roam about doing as they wish. Ancient man exuberantly praised the law of God because he believed it protected him from dangers lurking on all sides. The law of a loving, caring God must be praiseworthy.

Oh, how I love thy law!

It is my meditation all the day . . .
How sweet are thy words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth! . . .
Thy testimonies are my heritage for ever;
yea, they are the joy of my heart.

Psalm 119:97, 103, 111

Least of all could Israel look upon the law of God as impersonal. God's mighty loving acts preceded his law. The violation of his law was therefore a personal affront to God. It was to bite the hand that fed. To disobey the law of God is not simply to break the law of the land. It is to infringe upon a loving relationship.

Human laws relate to both impersonal and personal crimes. If I broke the 45 mph speed limit on my way to teach class, I would not feel I had violated any loving relationship. But suppose my wife, daughter and I visited friends in Dallas who took us to Bennigan's for lunch, the Ports O'Call Restaurant for a Polynesian dinner, and Fair Park Auditorium Saturday night for a musical. Then Sunday afternoon they took us to Texas Stadium to watch the Cowboys play the Steelers. By this time we would really feel indebted for their many kindnesses. Before we left, suppose my wife hid silverware in her handbag, my daughter packed their electronic game, and I put three expensive commentaries in my briefcase. We would have broken a law, but more than that, we would have shown contemptuous disregard for the loving hospitality of our hosts.

So it is when we break the law of God. From our birth he has continually showered us with gifts. When we break his laws, we are violating a close, intense, warm, personal friendship. We are the scum of the earth. Who would do such things to a friend? Yet some of God's "friends" have very little compunction about violating his continually loving relationship. It is no surprise that he becomes so distraught with ungrateful sons and daughters.

The Law is God's

Yahweh gives his law out of love. He reveals to man what he cannot discover on his own. Man does not force the love of God by keeping His law. God gives his gifts and his love freely. Israel is told to keep the law so she will not be cut off from the

gifts which God always grants. The law does not stand apart from God. It is his. He does with it as he pleases. The law of God is not some abstract universal principle located in nature or beyond. The law is God's because he gave it. He gave it because he desires a faithful, continual, and regulated relationship with the works of his hands, especially man made in his image.

Sometimes people visualize the law of God as having a life of its own. It stands apart from both God and man for their scrutiny and interpretation. These people see God as bound by his law. Of course, God is faithful because he does with his law as he pleases and it always benefits man. Certain Israelites once came to Jerusalem to worship in the days of Hezekiah. They were from the north, and that kingdom had already fallen. They had a problem. They had not been in Jerusalem long enough to go through the regular cleansing ceremony. "Yet they ate the passover otherwise than as prescribed" (2 Chron. 30:18). They did so, however, without impunity, for Hezekiah prayed to the Lord on their behalf. "And the Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people" (2 Chron. 30:20).

When God desires, he can waive punishment for law-breaking. He can make decisions about his law as he goes along. Man is in no position to make those decisions for him. Man has no right to declare when God will or will not enforce his law. We have only the assignment to proclaim the ways of God. We have not been given the license to declare when God might waive the requirements.

The word "legalism" is not found in the Bible. However, if the word is used to describe an improper way of viewing the law from a Biblical

perspective, it might be a useful term. Legalism obviously carries an unfavorable connotation. Legalism is a mistaken position on how strictly the law must be observed. But from an Old Testament perspective, what is an overly strict interpretation? One "legalistic" position condemned in the Old Testament is that law is universal and impersonal and stands even prior to or superior to God himself. Instead, law in the Old Testament always refers to the loving rules provided by a merciful God. They do not inhere in the universe or stand apart from God. They are his. He issued them. Therefore, it is "legalistic" to talk about God's laws as if they are impersonal as are the laws of motion or the laws of gravity.

Sometimes, however, people disdainfully refer to others who see value in law as "legalists." In the Old Testament there is delight in, and respect and love for the law of God. The Old Testament certainly does not denounce the law of God, only a mistaken understanding of it. For example, Amos decries sacrifices and tithes because people in his time thought they had fulfilled God's demands in this way. Amos made it clear that God demanded a total life which involved justice and righteousness (Amos 5:21-24). From an Old Testament perspective, the term "legalist" cannot refer to anyone who takes the law of God seriously. It can only apply to the person who has a mistaken approach to the law of God.

God's Love Through His Law

Why were specific collections of Old Testament laws given? In determining the reasons, we discover the hand of a loving, beneficent God. There

are basically four collections of law in the Old Testament: (1) Exodus 20-40, (2) Leviticus, (3) Numbers 1-10 and (4) Deuteronomy.

1. Exodus 20-40. The covenant with the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 is followed by a number of specific regulations for living in the land. The rest of the laws in Exodus pertain to the construction and furnishing of the tabernacle.

In the first section (chapters 20-23), it is clear that the basis for the law is the loving action of God. Yahweh's people are requested to behave in a certain manner because of the way Yahweh has behaved. In other words, like God, like people. Therefore, the laws are given so God's sons can be like him and enjoy his familial love. The sabbath rest is to be observed because God himself rested (Exod. 20:8-11). Israel is to treat strangers lovingly because, when they were strangers in Egypt, God treated them lovingly. "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 22:21). Because God has looked after the welfare of his people, they are to look after the welfare of others (Exod. 22:22-31).

In the New Testament, the expectations of God are much the same except that they grow out of the action of Christ. "As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col. 3:13). "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Heb. 12:3).

Yahweh gave detailed instructions to build the tabernacle so he could dwell among his people. What greater boon could we receive than that God, maker of heaven and earth, dwell in our

midst? "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Exod. 25:8). (See also 25:21-22, which declares that God will appear above the mercy seat.) When the tabernacle was completed, "The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exod. 40:34).

Out of his goodness God gave his people rules so he could dwell in their midst. Should a President decide to build a summer home in a specific location, the community would receive a list of rules pertaining to the security and privacy of the President's family. The people, however, probably would not see the rules as oppressive because they would consider it an honor for a President to vacation in their town. So the ancient people of God received the rules for the tabernacle as reflecting the beneficent concern of God. They were given so he could dwell in their midst. Christians likewise have such rules for the presence of Christ. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). The gathering must be in his name, and according to his ways.

2. **Leviticus.** The laws in Leviticus are basically concerned with the tabernacle, sacrifices, priests, dietary laws, and feasts. Why did God give all these laws? Sometimes people read the food regulations and justify them on the basis of modern nutrition, diseases, and hygiene. But Leviticus has its own reasons: "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:1-2). God wants his people to be holy so he can be in close fellowship with them. "You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine" (Lev. 20:26).

The rules for sacrifice enable God's people to be holy because they provide for the forgiveness of sins. "Whatever touches its flesh shall be holy" (Lev. 6:27). "So the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin, and he shall be forgiven" (Lev. 4:26). The food regulations prevent man from eating what is foreign to the nature of God. The forbidden creatures were basically those which ate carrion (dead flesh), such as vultures and catfish. God is the living God. Death is opposite his nature. For that reason, anyone touching a corpse had to go through a cleansing ceremony (Lev. 21:1-6, 11:44).

The laws in Leviticus were not arbitrary rules. The law provided rules so the Israelites could be in fellowship with a holy God. Some say the blessings of the Old Testament are physical while those of the New Testament are spiritual. There is a seed of truth in this generalization since Abraham became wealthy but Peter did not. But what is meant by spiritual blessings if not close fellowship with God? God gave the regulations in Leviticus out of love to enable his people to walk daily with him.

According to the scriptures, God's laws are never arbitrary and without explanation. Baptism, for example, has a beautiful meaning. It shows our commitment to Jesus, who died and arose (Rom. 6:1-12), and that we have been washed clean to be acceptable to a holy God (Titus 3:5-6). "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

3. Numbers 1-10. The early section of Numbers gives instructions for marching and for the role of the Levites. The rules are crucial because the welfare and victories of God's people depend on the presence of the tabernacle and the Levites. By

their presence the people are kept from sinning and hence incurring the wrath of God. "But the Levites shall encamp around the tabernacle of the testimony, that there may be no wrath upon the congregation of the people of Israel" (Num. 1:53, 8:19). The rules for the Levites were for the welfare of the people. God's people therefore delight in his laws because God is good and his laws are for their benefit. People who keep the ways of God always benefit others around them. "The unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife" (1 Cor. 7:14).

4. Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy we learn that God gave the law so man would know what to do in the land God gave him. If man does what is proper, God will ward off the enemy and provide rain for the crops (7:12-16; 6:20-24; 11:8-17). The laws are for man's good. "And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day" (Deut. 6:24).

Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them; that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Deuteronomy 6:3

In contrast, if the Israelites are not faithful to the law, they will lose all they received (Deut. 8:19-20). Failure to keep the law will result in a small harvest (28:15-19), disease and pestilence (28:25-27), and other trouble (28:28-35). God gave his law out of love. Without it his people perish rather than obtain the good life in his land. Even in

the New Testament, God's rules enable man to live a longer and better life (Eph. 6:1-4).

Law for Other Nations

Other nations were also subject to the rules of God, though they did not receive law by special revelation as Israel did when Yahweh thundered at Sinai. Many of the prophets condemned other nations, showing that God held these nations subject to his ways. The grounds on which these nations were held accountable were not always obvious. In wisdom literature, all men were accountable to God because he built his ways into nature itself. They could therefore determine his ways by observing and learning from nature (Prov. 8:22-36).

It may be that Amos had in mind these rules implanted in nature when he condemned the nations. He denounced Damascus for inhuman viciousness in war (1:3), Gaza for selling captives as slaves (1:6), Tyre for selling their brothers as slaves (1:9), Edom for harsh war techniques (1:11), the Ammonites for killing women with children (1:13), and the Moabites for burning the bones of the king of Edom (2:1). How did the nations know they did wrong? Apparently Amos believed that certain rights should be universally known, much as presupposed by the United Nations Bill of Rights. But is not clear whether Amos had in mind a natural law within nature or an inner law of the conscience. Nevertheless, if followed, these rules would improve the quality of man's life.

Christians live under rules growing out of Jesus Christ. The rules are specifically for people who have committed their lives to him. But other people are also subject to the ways of God. "God

judges those outside" (1 Cor. 5:13). Therefore, our basic aim should be to bring people to Jesus Christ and encourage them to live by his rules (1 Cor. 5:12). But we also must tell people who reject our Lord that God holds them accountable.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure, making
wise the simple;

The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing
the heart;

the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes.

Psalm 19:7-8

8



Victory in the Conquest

Yahweh opened up the Red Sea and his people walked through. After this great victory they praised him, "The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is his name" (Exod. 15:3). Yahweh fought and won battles for his people, not because he relished blood and slaughter or continually sought vengeance, but for the sake of his name. Through people who know and respect him, Yahweh brings about his blessings (Exod. 15:13-18). He replaces people who contaminate and pollute his earth with people who inhabit it responsibly. The replacements may be far from perfect, but they are improvements over previous residents (Deut. 9:5).

From the Old Testament it is clear that God's efforts to woo and win man to his way is more than simply a focus on individuals. God is concerned with nations. As the nation goes, so go most of the people in it. God therefore gets involved in the rise and fall of nations and in the migration of people. He fights for people who treat their fellows aright

and who respect the rights of others. He defeats those who tread upon the weak and the poor and who ride roughshod across the globe defacing the earth. The Old Testament constantly reminds us that God battles, struggles with, and persuades nations and groups of people as well as individuals. To counter the hordes of men on earth, God leads forth his heavenly armies. He goes before them as commander. He is Lord Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts. "Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his host!" (Ps. 148:2).

The Way to Canaan

God loved his people. In the wilderness "the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light" (Exod. 13:21). The Lord always protects people who are his. He sees to it that the obstacles they face better equip them to be his people. They form the warehouse from which God distributes his good gifts to the people of the earth. God remained with his people, all through the turbulent years in the wilderness. But he did not consign his people for wilderness living. Instead, he wanted them to sink their roots deeply into a land that would be their own. Not only did he consign the land, but he fought for and with them. He directed his heavenly hosts and his people on earth as a general. "You shall not fear them; for it is the Lord your God who fights for you" (Deut. 3:22). Many years earlier God had promised Abraham the land. Now the promise was about to be fulfilled. God loves to give gifts. He loves to give his people victory.

The first great victory of God's people in Canaan

revealed that behind the earthly scene God's heavenly hosts are at work. The falling of the walls of Jericho was no natural phenomenon. It was the action of mighty heavenly armies. The story of Joshua, as he stood in the vicinity of Jericho on the day before the battle, makes this point. The victory over Jericho was a memorable battle against an ancient city. But actually it was no contest because the mighty armies of Yahweh assured the victory.

The story opens with Joshua contemplating battle. The city of Jericho is in the background (Josh. 5:13-15). Joshua seems to be in the mood of a football coach the day before a big game. As he paced about he looked up and saw a man standing with a sword drawn in his hand. When Joshua asked whose side he was on, he said he was "commander of the army of the Lord" (Josh. 5:14). The man told Joshua to take off his shoes because the ground was holy. Various proposals have been made about this man's identity. But it seems best to conclude that it was Yahweh appearing in human form (Gen. 18).

The man described himself as "commander of the Lord's army" (Josh 5:14). What does this mean? Yahweh describes himself as the "general of the armies." Several scriptures tell how Yahweh gives victory to his people through the action of his heavenly armies. "He came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand" (Deut. 33:2). It is by the might of Yahweh's forces, not through overwhelming human armies and astute military strategy, that God's people win.

Some boast of chariots, and some of horses;
but we boast of the name of the Lord our
God.

They will collapse and fall;
but we shall rise and stand upright.
Give victory to the king, O Lord;
answer us when we call.

Psalm 20:7-9

Yahweh Sabaoth at Jericho

The word "hosts" in Hebrew is *sabaoth*. It is a military term. In Joshua 5:14 the Hebrew word translated army ("commander of the army of the Lord") is *sabaoth*. In several prophets *Yahweh Sabaoth* is the standard designation of the God who commands the marauding, destroying armies.

So how can we understand the great victory at Jericho? Victory occurred because of the heavenly armies. The text affirms this. (1) God showed up at Jericho with his armies. These hosts were not obvious to everyone. They were only seen through eyes of faith. (2) Human armies were involved, but for the rituals of marching and shouting, which were a show of faith. (3) Victory was assured when the heavenly hosts of Yahweh caused the walls to fall; then the human army entered to complete the victory. God works through his hosts behind the scenes to give his people victory. God's action fulfilled his earlier promise to Joshua (Deut. 31:23). Not only did he stand behind Joshua to give him encouragement, but he also helped fight. "You shall not fear them; for it is the Lord your God who fights for you" (Deut. 3:22).

Why did Jericho fall? The Old Testament tells us it was because of the heavenly hosts of Yahweh. For some modern interpreters, the story is simply ancient folklore, a neat miracle story from a credulous age. Others have tried to soften this obvious

miracle by supplying natural explanations. At least two have been offered.

First, it has been argued that at the exact time of the seventh shout an earthquake destroyed the walls. Earthquakes did occur in the regions (Amos 1:1), but this has no textual support. Even if God acted through an earthquake, it would still be an extraordinary act of God since the timing was so perfect. A second, perhaps more logical, suggestion is that the fall resulted from mud slides. The year reportedly was an unusually wet one. The ancient foundations of the city walls were dirt, not rock. Just as during the rainy season in California when homes on the canyon rims slide into the abyss, so the foundations slipped and the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. Of course, the vibrations from the tramping feet and the great shout were "the final straw that broke the camel's back."

Now even in the Old Testament God did work through natural channels. The winds drove in the quail to supply the meat for the wilderness wanderers (Num. 11:31). But the story of Joshua makes it perfectly clear that Jericho fell because of the presence of the heavenly hosts of Yahweh.

Yahweh Sabaoth and Warfare

In the Old Testament, victories and defeats depended on whose side Yahweh fought. He gave his people victory over the Egyptians and the occupants of the land of Canaan. In David's time, when the Philistines troubled the land, David claimed victory in the name of the Lord of hosts, not because of his own might.

Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with

a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied."

1 Samuel 17:45

This statement makes it obvious that Yahweh Sabaoth is a military term. Notice how "Lord of hosts" is parallel to "God of the armies." The heavenly armies of Yahweh formed Israel's chief line of defense against enemies. Israel maintained a perilous position among the nations through God's might and power.

But Yahweh only gave victory to his people when they showed their trust in him by faithfully following his laws. Prophets often wrote that Yahweh led enemy nations against Israel because the people had turned their backs on him. The enemy will destroy Jerusalem (Isa. 3:1). Because the people have "rejected the law of the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 5:24), Yahweh will raise a signal for a nation afar off (5:26). As indicated by imagery, that nation was obviously the powerful and destructive Assyria.

The people in Amos' time also turned their backs on God. As the result, Yahweh went over to the side of the enemy. Now he marched against his own people as Yahweh Sabaoth, general of the opposing armies. "'Hear and testify against the house of Jacob,' says the Lord God, the God of hosts, 'that on the day I punish Israel for his transgressions . . .'" (Amos 3:13-14).

When Yahweh fought for his people, the earthly armies followed rules of warfare provided by Yahweh himself. Because these rules called for only token human participation, they clearly presupposed that the outcome depended on Yahweh

and his heavenly hosts. He loved to give his people victory because through them he showered his blessings upon the nations. He continually works to replace people who pollute the earth through their inhumanity to man and animals. He replaces them with persons who search for his ways and abide by his word.

Rules for Holy War

The most systematic presentation of the rules for holy war (war under the auspices of Yahweh) is found in Deuteronomy 20. First there's an injunction not to be afraid since God himself is in the fray, and after all he did well in Egypt (20:1). Second, the priests, then the military commanders, address the troops. The order is important. In the twentieth century it would be preposterous to prepare for a great battle by beginning with an address from the chaplain. These addresses are usually made by the general, such as in the Hollywood film version of Patton's march across Europe. In Deuteronomy 20, the priest supplies the encouragement, and the military officers identify the appropriate troops. Exempt are those who (1) have just built a house, (2) planted a vineyard, (3) recently acquired a wife, and (4) are fainthearted (20:5-9). If these rules applied today, there would be a rash of new houses and vineyards, weddings, and persons psychologically unprepared for war. Even in those days, the number of exempt people totaled more than those who fought. How could successful warfare be carried on under such rules? Victory belongs to Yahweh, not to superior human forces.

The rules conclude with the manner in which the conquered people and their land are to be treated.

Two sets of rules pertain to the conquered people: (1) for people in cities far off (20:10-15) and (2) for those within the inherited land (20:16-18). Terms of peace are to be offered to cities on the way to the land. If, however, the city desires war, God's people will fight and God will give them victory (20:3-4). All the males are to be killed, but women, children, animals and other materials may be taken for spoil. These people had a choice, and they were preserved or destroyed accordingly. However, all the people—even women and children—and animals in the land of Canaan were to be destroyed. "You shall save alive nothing that breathes" (20:16).

The fact that Yahweh himself ordered the killing of women, babies, and mothers with child seems inhumanly cruel. But before we judge, we should listen to the reasons given in the text. These are to be destroyed "that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices which they have done in the service of their gods, and so to sin against the Lord your God" (Deut. 20:18).

This command of God didn't result from a sudden whim. The wickedness of these people was multiplied down through the centuries. Finally, it was so bad that God didn't know what else to do except obliterate them from the face of the earth. There was no point in sending in others as replacements since they would only be contaminated by such gross evil.

Nothing seems as cruel to us as the taking of a life. But according to the scripture, what is ultimately important is not life itself, but the right way of life. A self-centered person who disrupts others and pollutes the earth is more harmful than some-

one who is dead. In fact, scripture identifies such people as dead: "She who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives" (1 Tim. 5:6), and "they boldly carouse together, looking after themselves: . . . fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead" (Jude 12). A person faithful to God also does not despair losing life because God is the author of life and will give it anew (Phil. 1:21-26). The worse fear is a life of suffering for evil now and eternally. Jesus said, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

The Old Testament shows that God's plans for wiping out the Canaanites were long in the making. God is depicted as "forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). Indeed, he was "slow to anger," as he declared (Exod. 34:6). You may have wondered why God did not provide Abraham the muscle to wipe out the Canaanites and take over the land immediately? You may have concluded that Abraham did not need all that real estate then, and that God had other assignments for his descendants in Egypt and only later did they need the whole land. But the text points to God's long forbearance. "And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen. 15:16). God didn't base his decision to replace the Canaanites on a few minor infractions. He gave them at least five hundred years to get straightened around. But they went from bad to worse. God enabled the Israelites to replace them because his people stood head and shoulders above the

Canaanites morally, not because Israel was without sin (Deut. 9:4-5).

What was so abominable about the Canaanites? In addition to their worship of Baal and his female consort Astarte, their many shrines with idols, their child sacrifice, mediums, wizards, and necromancers (Deut. 18:9-14), all of which reeked of self-indulgence, they even incorporated the sex act into their religious worship. This is clear from the prohibition to God's people.

There shall be no cult prostitute of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a cult prostitute of the sons of Israel. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog, into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow; for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 23:17-18

One of the claims for Baal was that he supplied fertility to people and animals. Therefore the sex act at the shrine was the way to appropriate his powers. Yahweh, however, does not function through such acts. He gives fertility, but by his word. Therefore, this use of the sex act contradicts the ways of Yahweh. So all these people were to be killed, and the slate wiped clean, because if women and children remained they would corrupt the standards of God's people. This happened when Solomon imported foreign wives (1 Kings 11:4-8).

Also, the rules for war say that trees producing nuts and fruit are not to be destroyed (Deut. 20:19). Warfare which indiscriminately destroys all vegetation is prohibited. Trees do not corrupt the earth. Man does.

Holy War Today

What implications do these rules have for modern warfare? Christians sometimes cite the Old Testament as justification for involvement in war. If we fight under the authorization of the Old Testament, we should also fight under its rules. We should (1) give the chaplain a major role, (2) grant widespread exemptions, trusting that God will supply the victories, (3) fight wars of aggression only for the land God has promised us, and (4) preserve trees which supply food. Most countries commonly violate these rules in modern warfare.

Indeed Christians cannot justify war by the Old Testament because the land they have been promised is "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22). The territory the Christian is to take and protect is not geographical. It is the territory of the kingdom of God which transcends all national boundaries. The war cry of the Christian and his Lord is "the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Continuing Victories

After Israel occupied the land promised to Abraham and conquered by the armies under Joshua, the people were involved in mop-up and protection activities down through the centuries. Israel was most successful when the people trusted Yahweh and not their own might or diplomatic shrewdness. Yahweh was Lord of hosts both for and against his people, depending on their faithfulness.

During the days of the judges, God's people had their ups and downs depending on whether they lived by Yahweh's rules (Judg. 3:18-19). Once after a long period of unfaithfulness and harassment by

the Midianites, an angel appeared to Gideon at the hidden wine press where he was threshing wheat. The angel told Gideon he would deliver his people and assured him, "I will be with you, and you shall smite the Midianites as one man" (Judg. 6:16).

As Gideon prepared for battle, God told him that he had too many people. God told Gideon to select the men by the way they drank. Three hundred men remained after meeting God's criteria. Since 300 men were a drop in the bucket compared with the manifold hordes of the Midianites, Yahweh again proved that victory depended on his heavenly hosts. Through God's instructions Gideon confused the enemy camp by distributing men on each side. After dark they put up torches and blew trumpets. "When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army" (Judg. 7:22).

Later, prophets Elijah and Elisha served God and provided leadership to protect his people and their land. Their victories also were attributed to the presence of Yahweh and his heavenly hosts. Once the Syrians were troubling Israel. The Syrian king, however, lost most of the battles because the Israelites always anticipated his strategy. He suspected that a traitor in his cabinet sent out secret information. When the king disclosed his suspicion to an advisor, he learned that the source of his trouble was Elisha. "Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber" (2 Kings 6:12). Elisha became the object of the king's ire. "Go and see where he is, that I may send and seize him" (2 Kings 6:13). The king sent a whole army to take

one man. When the servant of Elisha rose early the next morning, he was shocked to see the kings' horses and chariots. Elisha remained calm. He was convinced that one man and God form a majority. "Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (2 Kings 6:16). Elisha prayed that the servant's eyes be opened and behold, "The mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha" (2 Kings 6:17).

When Yahweh's man or woman is under attack, Yahweh appears with his mighty heavenly hosts. He is Yahweh Sabaoth. The forces of Yahweh work behind the scenes and can only be seen through the eyes of faith. "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation" (Heb. 1:14)?

One phrase describing Elijah and Elisha comes from the fact that wherever they went, there the armies of Yahweh were also present. When Elijah was about to die, he was taken up into heaven by a chariot of fire and horses of fire. As Elisha watched he cried out, "My father, my father! the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" (2 Kings 2:12). This exclamation obviously referred to the manner in which Elijah was taken into heaven. But it also pointed out that wherever this man of God appeared, the hosts of Yahweh were also present. Israel didn't require mighty earthly armies when Elijah showed up. The same phrase was used of Elisha at his death (2 Kings 13:14), indicating that victory was assured when he appeared at the battlecamp.

Prophets chided God's people for trusting their own might and diplomatic expertise rather than Yahweh Sabaoth. When Sargon II of Assyria died

in 705 B.C., Judah rebelled. Judah looked upon its situation as precarious and sent an ambassador to Egypt. Egypt became a ready ally, promising horsemen and chariots. But Isaiah considered all these efforts as wasted motion. God's people needed to trust Yahweh. He could supply heavenly armies to protect his people.

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
and rely on horses,
who trust in chariots because they are many
and in horsemen because they are very
strong,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel
or consult the Lord!

Isaiah 31:1

Victory for Israel will come from the Lord of Hosts. "So the Lord of hosts will come down to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill. Like birds hovering, so the Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem" (31:4-5).

The love of God is steadfast. He will always send his heavenly armies to fight for his faithful ones. One faithful believer and Yahweh make a majority, whatever the circumstances.

9



Inheritance of the Land

He loved your fathers and chose their descendants after them, and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance.

Deuteronomy 4:37-38

God's gift of land illustrates his undying love. In the text above, we learn that God's actions from Egypt to Palestine resulted from his great love for his people. Then he also gave them land as an inheritance because he loved them. God's heart reached out to his people who were homeless, and because he loved them he gave them a land.

A farmer in Iowa owned 640 acres of rich farmland. He and his wife were getting on in years. A young man came to work for them. He later married, had children and felt the responsibilities for a growing family. He had worked for the farmer about ten years when the needs of his family

started to outgrow his income. He and his wife became increasingly concerned about their future. It seemed to them they needed to buy land and farm for themselves to have security. That way, they could assure their ability to sustain themselves and provide for the needs of their family. When the old farmer and his wife became aware of the concerns of the young couple, they also did some serious thinking. They realized that they had come to love their employee as a son. They understood his predicament. They decided to give him a percentage of the farm earnings and will the farm to him so that at their death it would be his. The future of the young couple was assured.

Yahweh also understood the predicament of his son. In the ancient world, land was crucial if a man was to sustain himself. Almost everyone had at least a garden to grow food. So God gave his people land so they could sustain themselves and secure their future. Man is a future-oriented being. He is always making plans for the future. He is always concerned about how the future will turn out. He always seeks to make arrangements so his future will be secure. God encourages this trait in man. He has made various promises about the future and has asked man to trust him that it will turn out as he has said.

Yahweh is also future-oriented. "I will be what I will be" (Exod. 3:14). And God also knows that man must sustain himself day by day to be free for his relationship with God and to anticipate God's grander deeds. The affirmation that "man does not live by bread alone" (Deut. 8:3) recognizes that bread is necessary if man is to live. Man needs more than bread (for example, daily fellowship

with God), but he has to have bread in order to live.

For 600 years the homeless descendants of Abraham wandered on earth. But they lived in anticipation because of God's promise: "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess" (Gen. 15:7). They were not given the land so they could be rich and become self-indulgent. God intended for them to be wealthy, but he wanted them to use their wealth for the good of others. Servanthood was the objective of the legacy he bestowed (Ps. 136:21-22).

Yahweh loved his people and he gave them a land. He gave it without asking questions, but it was not a "no strings attached" situation. He gave it under the supposition that as they freely received they would freely give (Matt. 10:8). "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). They were to concern themselves with the fatherless and widows in the land because they knew what it was like to be without land. They had received the land as a gift. In turn, they were to distribute the produce of the land to others as gifts (Deut. 24:17-22).

This chapter will examine land under three topics: (1) the inheritance as a gift, (2) the proper attitude toward and use of the inheritance, and (3) circumstances under which Israel will be disinherited, or lose the land.

The Inheritance as a Gift

The Old Testament illustration of God's people inheriting a land comes from the customs of the time. It portrays in a profound manner the means through which Israel came to possess Palestine. The analogy is not totally consistent, but analogies

are seldom pursued consistently and rigorously. Despite some haze, the message shines through strong and clear. Israel did not earn Palestine through its own efforts. Israel did not inherit the land as a natural child. The people received it as a loving gift from Yahweh.

The love of God for Israel was like that of the Iowa farmer mentioned earlier. The hired man was not a son. There was no way he could earn a farm worth almost one million dollars. He received it because of the grace and love of the owner, not because of who he was. Likewise, Israel is depicted as an adopted son of Yahweh. "A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous" (Deut. 26:5).

Ezekiel's analogy is that of a bride rather than a son, but the same thesis is obvious (Ezek. 16:3-4, 8). Israel was taken as a bride, but not as a daughter from a respected family. Israel was an unwanted, exposed child. The ancient world had no children's homes or foster child care as we have now. An unwanted child was exposed to the elements—in Greece on a mountain side, in arid regions in an open field (Ezek. 16:5).

In Hosea's analogy, Israel was a wayward son adopted by Yahweh as a child in Egypt (Hos. 11:1). God brought him home to Palestine to raise him and prepare him to take over his estate. In a discouraging moment after reflecting on the son's ingratitude, God determined to take him back to Egypt (that is, back to the child's home). But he soon was overpowered by divine love and could not (Hos. 11:8-9).

Unlike Aeneas of ancient Rome, Israel was an adopted son of God. Like other ancient kings, Aeneas had a human and a divine parent and thus received kingship by divine right. Israel had no divine right to the land of Palestine. The Old Testament makes no claims for anyone being of divine descent. Kings might be referred to as sons of Yahweh—"You are my son" (Ps. 2:7)—but not because they literally descended from Yahweh. Their human parents were clearly evident. They were adopted "sons of Yahweh." Israel had no natural claim on the land of Palestine. Israel also did not deserve it through centuries of hard labor for Yahweh the landlord. Israel received the land because God was a God of grace, one whose steadfast love never ceases.

Unlike today, most adoptions of adults in the ancient world were by a person of some wealth and without any heirs. Today a couple without children might leave its estate to an institution. Ancient couples with no children adopted adult males whose lives pleased them, and made them heirs of the estate. At one time, in despair of ever having children of their own, Abraham and Sarah went that route (Gen. 15:2). Pursuing the analogy of adoption, we see that Yahweh, childless on earth, adopted Abraham and left his estate to him. The descendants of Abraham then became proud possessors of Yahweh's magnificent gift.

Yahweh owned the whole earth, not just Palestine.

For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills . . .

If I were hungry, I would not tell you
for the world and all that is in it is mine.

Psalm 50:10-12

Yahweh owned everything because he created it (Ps. 115:15). He gave of his possessions to all peoples, not just to Israel (Ps. 115:16). But in his will he reserved a special gift for Israel. As Yahweh's adopted son, Israel received the special territory which Yahweh had reserved for himself (Deut. 32:8-9). The Massoretic Hebrew text in 32:8 has "sons of Israel" rather than sons of God. However, the more likely meaning is, as translated in the RSV, that Yahweh fixed the number of earthly nations according to the number of his heavenly sons (see also Job 1:6). But in addition to these nations, Yahweh added one which he reserved for himself. That nation is Israel, whose status is unique. Of the nations Israel alone is an adopted son of Yahweh. Israel's inheritance is a special gift from a gracious, eternally-loving God.

Living in the Land

When Israel finally received the land, how were the people to live in it? First, the proper response was gratitude because of God's gracious gift. Second, the land did not actually belong to Israel; Yahweh still held the papers. But Yahweh wanted his people to sustain themselves. He didn't want them to go homeless. The Israelites often assumed they had made their own way in the world and could live as they pleased. But God's adopted son had no exclusive claim on his land. God gave him the rights to it so he would share it with others. If he did not use it as intended, God would reclaim it.

God's ultimate ownership of the land is obvious in the Old Testament rules concerning land. The principles behind these rules are important for Christians today. Christians must look out for the

welfare of others so that they are able to sustain themselves (Acts 6:1; Gal. 2:10; 6:10).

Once the land was distributed, it remained in the possession of the same tribal unit forever (Lev. 25:23-24). If the land happened to pass into the hands of new owners, the law provided the channels through which it would ultimately return to the original owner (Lev. 25:25-28). The land was not to be used for wheeling and dealing. God distributed it equitably among his people so that each could grow food and sustain himself. It was especially important in the ancient world for a person to own a small plot of land. Without land people were forced to depend on charity or sell themselves as slaves. Therefore, a person who obtained the property of another deprived him of his livelihood. And since ultimate ownership is Yahweh's, the person who wheels and deals flaunts God's ownership of the earth.

Ahab's acquisition of Naboth's vineyard tested the property law. Naboth lived in critical times. Ancient paths were being ignored because Ahab the king had married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of the Sidonians—that is, a Phoenician. Because of Jezebel, Ahab built a house and an altar for Baal in Samaria (1 Kings 16:32). During this disregard for the laws of Yahweh, Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-4). Naboth refused to sell, but not because he attached sentimental value to the piece of property. He refused because of the law of God. "Remove not the ancient landmark which your fathers have set" (Prov. 22:28). The prophets railed against people like Ahab who flaunted the property laws (Isa. 5:8; Mic. 2:1-2). Jezebel, however, had no compunction

for the ways of Yahweh. So by a ruse she arranged Naboth's death, and Ahab went out to possess the vineyard. Meanwhile Yahweh told Elijah to meet Ahab at the vineyard and denounce him to his face because of his open rebellion against the law of God (1 Kings 21:20).

What important points do these land rules make? First, whatever man possesses he has received as a gift from God. "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). The Levitical law, of course, guarantees property, but the owner knows God is the real proprietor. The Old Testament view of land is neither communistic nor socialistic, because land is not held in common by all people or controlled by the state. But neither is it a free enterprise which denies ultimate proprietorship to God. If by free enterprise we mean the freedom to exploit God's resources as we please like Ahab did, we have no justification in the scriptures. Leviticus says each person should be free to use the resources God has provided to sustain himself. If he has more than he needs, he should open the doors of his warehouse to poor people, widows and orphans.

Second, when a person has enough for his own needs he does not seek to acquire more. The more possessions owned by a few, the less each individual participates in the good gifts of God. Jesus criticized people whose goal in life was to build bigger barns (Luke 12:13-21) rather than be sensitive to the needs of God's creatures (Luke 12:32-34). In countries today where land is owned only by a few or owned by the state and controlled by a few, poverty is widespread and many people suffer.

What right do people have to acquire more than they need and live luxuriously while depriving others of a suitable livelihood? They did not create the land. God made the heavens and the earth. In the eyes of God, they have no more right to God's real estate than anyone else, especially God's faithful servants. Therefore, God's person lives so that all of God's creatures may equitably enjoy His good gifts.

Third, as already noted, a person who has been fortunate enough to receive from God more than he needs should share it with others who are less fortunate. God planned for his people to be blessed and in turn bless others around them. Israel was once a slave and a stranger in a foreign land, but God gave the people land and resources. Israel's proper response was thus to share with strangers and unfortunate people (Exod. 22:21-24). According to Jesus, God gives us gifts so that we may give to others. The more we give others, the more we receive from him to give. "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap" (Luke 6:38).

Deuteronomy set out specific ways to help needy people. It was not so much by doling out goods but by helping people help themselves. You help a child by tying his shoes, but you can help him more by teaching him to tie them. The olive trees, vineyards and fields were not to be stripped bare so the widows, orphans and poor people could follow the reapers and glean enough to sustain themselves (Deut. 24:19-22). A person who realizes he has benefited abundantly from the grace of God is concerned about the equitable

distribution of God's gifts to meet human needs. He doesn't simply pass out money. He works creatively to help needy people sustain themselves through their own efforts. He favors small business loans for minority business men, and he supports public and private funds for the education of minorities.

God gave land so his people would not be without. He loves to give. In turn, he expects his people to take after him. "Like father, like son!" The prophets said a compassionate concern for the needy is at the heart of Old Testament faith. Isaiah complained about the sinfulness of Israel. Although they did not forsake the temple or fail to sacrifice, they ignored justice and equity for the fatherless and the widows (Isa. 1:23). They needed to "learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isa. 1:17). Amos said almost nothing about idolatry, but he talked plenty about injustice toward the poor. "Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end" (Amos 8:4-6). Amos predicted that because God's people used the gifts of God to their own selfish ends, they would lose what they possessed (Amos 6:4-7).

Disinheritance

Israel's failure to live according to the ways of God indicated ingratitude for his loving gifts. As we saw in the wilderness section, Yahweh put obstacles in the path of his sons to bring them to their senses in hopes they would return to him. If God's sons persist in their willfulness and self-indulgence, he continues the punishment. If nothing works, he finally disinherits them by taking

away the land. "I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them" (Num. 14:12; cf. 2 Kings 21:14-15).

How were God's people to understand the loss of their land which God lovingly supplied? How could he provide roots and security, then take them away? In 721 B.C., Sargon II, king of Assyria, marched westward into Israel and destroyed Samaria, its capital. Almost 150 years later (587 B.C.) Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. People in both lands, especially Jerusalem, thought that since Yahweh gave the land, the capital city was impregnable. In fact, under Hezekiah in 701 B.C., the city miraculously survived the onslaught of Sennacherib the Assyrian. Because of that escape, people ridiculed Jeremiah when he charged that the city would fall if God's people didn't change their ways. The temple of Yahweh was in the midst of the city. He himself appeared above the mercy seat. Since God resided in the city, it was impervious to attack. But Jeremiah said that confidence was baseless (Jer. 7:3-4). Yahweh could always withdraw and leave the city defenseless. Jeremiah and the other prophets were certain that God would disinherit his people and they would lose the land by willfully ignoring his rule that life is to be lived by helping others.

Many centuries earlier Moses told the people that once they were in the land and doing well, they would be tempted to think they earned what they had. If this happened, they would be in trouble. If they turned their backs on God, they would lose the land God gave them (Deut. 8:17-19). So according to the historians, the reasons for Israel's ups and downs and waywardness,

indifference to the poor, and ingratitude for God's gracious gifts. This is clear in the historical analysis of the fall of Samaria (2 Kings 17:7-18).

Because of misuse of God's gifts, Christians today may also lose their inheritance. The kingdom of God can fall into the hands of others (Rom. 11:20-24). Just because we rally around the name of Christ and his church, we are not impregnable. We are impregnable only if we do the will of God (Matt. 7:21-23). His will is that we "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

But God will not deprive his people forever. He will always save a remnant of the faithful to reoccupy the land. "I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them" (Amos 9:13-15). God always opens his heart for his faithful ones, however few they may be. God loves forever. He loves to give his people the security of land. In turn, he expects them to enhance the security of others.

10



A Shepherd for his People

He chose David his servant,
and took him from the sheepfolds;
from tending the ewes that had young he
brought him
to be the shepherd of Jacob his people,
of Israel his inheritance.

With upright heart he tended them,
and guided them with skilful hand.

Psalm 78:70-72

God has always loved women and men who respond to his overtures. The Old Testament singles out David as special among the numerous God-fearers. Why did God choose David? The writer of Psalms says God chose him to be "shepherd of Jacob his people, of Israel his inheritance."

God reveals his plans in his promises. He promised Noah he would never again destroy the earth by flood. He promised Abraham that through him and his seed, He would continue his good gifts to

man. The seed of Abraham would become a mighty nation and be a light to other nations. Through that nation Yahweh would continue his work of blessing man made in his image.

But God's nation had problems. It was harassed by enemies. Sometimes it ignored the ways of God. It tended to lack strong pro-Yahweh leadership. So God chose David to further his loving concerns. He chose David as a shepherd of his people to lead them in his paths. The promise to David had far-reaching ramifications. In that promise Yahweh announced a line of leadership that would be forever. How is that possible? Few nations have had one line of leaders for more than 500 years. So how could God promise David that his seed would reign forever?

The Call of David

Let's look at the events which led to the choosing of David. About 1200 B.C., 700 years after Abraham's death, God's people settled in the gift land after the early conquests. But even at Joshua's death, pockets of Jebusites, Philistines and others remained. For the next 200 years God raised up leaders for specific tasks. They were later known as judges—Deborah, Samson, and Samuel. Yahweh worked powerfully through these persons, but continuity was missing.

Late in the eleventh century winds of change stirred in the air. Under Samuel the armies managed to retake certain cities from the Philistines, and there was peace with the Amorites (1 Sam. 7:14). But Samuel was getting old, and his sons didn't seem like prime prospects for taking over his judgeship because, like Eli's sons, they

"took bribes and perverted justice." The Philistines threatened once again. To many people, it seemed to be an appropriate moment to appoint a king like other nations. Israel had not yet gone that route. Israel did not need a king—Yahweh himself was king. When the leaders tried to make Gideon king after his brilliant successes against the Midianites, he responded, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you" (Judg. 8:23). But now Samuel was old, and the leaders thought the time was ripe (1 Sam. 8:4-5). Samuel was highly displeased. No doubt he considered the demand a reflection on his life's work. But Yahweh told Samuel to comply with the people's request, so Samuel anointed Saul of the tribe of Benjamin as king of Israel (1 Sam. 10:1). Saul thus became God's anointed (Hebrew *mashiach*), a title which would have great future significance.

Saul reigned for about twenty years, but early in his reign he displeased the Lord by bringing home spoil from a foray into Amalek (1 Sam. 15:10). Saul's excuse was that he brought the animals back to make a sacrifice to God in Gilgal. Samuel then made a point which rang throughout Israel's history and even into our own. "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22).

Did God make a mistake in choosing Saul? Yes and no. Saul did not turn out as God hoped. In that sense, it was a mistake. But even here the love of God is obvious. God has high hopes for every creature made in his image. He especially wants them to become great leaders—shepherds of his people. Sometimes God's hopes are dashed when

prospective leaders refuse to obey. God longs for and encourages obedience, but he does not force it. Saul turned out to be a false shepherd.

Samuel thereupon had to anoint a new king. That was David, youngest son of Jesse. David was experienced in real shepherding. He spent his days herding his father's sheep (1 Sam. 16:11).

But it was a few years before David succeeded to the kingship. Saul saw him as a personal threat and sought his life. David gathered a band of guerilla fighters and lived among the Philistines. Finally, Saul was wounded in battle and killed himself (1 Sam. 31:1-6). David went to dwell in Hebron, and there the men of Judah anointed him king (2 Sam. 2:4). After later victories over the sons of Saul, the elders of Israel came to Hebron and also anointed David their king (2 Sam. 5:3). David was now declared king over all Israel.

The Great King

David was a great king, a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). He was an outstanding warrior and an impressive ruler. He established the borders of a mighty empire stretching from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates River. He was a man of many talents, many moods and many weaknesses. But above all, he was a true shepherd to the people of God. He led them in worship of Yahweh. Because of his efforts, his nation was blessed, and in turn his nation was a blessing to its neighbors.

David brought peace to his region. Throughout his life he trusted and obeyed the Lord. Of course, David sinned. But when he sinned, he repented and changed his ways. He led his people even in

repentance. Hebrew historians and interpreters later weighed and sifted the reigns of David's successors by the standards of David's faithfulness and commitment. It was written of Hezekiah: "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done" (2 Kings 18:3). Jereboam I, however, failed to measure up to the standards of David. "You have not been like my servant David, who kept my commandments, and followed me with all his heart" (1 Kings 14:8).

Toward the end of David's reign God made an impressive promise to David because of His love for him. The promise was a blessing for David and all his descendants forever. All the nations would benefit too. In Judah's later history, the promise to David provided stability in the midst of uncertainty, hope when times were hopeless, and permanence in times of change. Even in dark days when the countryside had been ravaged and Jerusalem destroyed, the promise to David provided a ray of hope.

Psalm 89 gives us the most vivid expression of the promise or covenant with David.

My steadfast love I will keep for him for ever,
and my covenant will stand firm for him.

I will establish his line for ever
and his throne as the days of the heavens.

If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my
ordinances,

if they violate my statutes
and do not keep my commandments,
then I will punish their transgression with
the rod
and their iniquity with scourges;

but I will not remove from him my
steadfast love,
or be false to my faithfulness.

Psalm 89:28-33

Yahweh did indeed love David and his seed forever. He did not put up with iniquity of individual kings. They were judged according to the laws of Moses. But the descendants of David always will be Yahweh's kings. They will shepherd his people forever.

Concrete Fulfillment of the Promise

God's promises deal with the real lives of men. According to the Old Testament, God worked with specific men and women right where they lived. He didn't work several feet above the earth, and he wasn't isolated in heavenly regions. We can trace in the Old Testament the way Yahweh kept his promise to David. But the promises of Yahweh sometimes take surprising twists. We may think we can predict how he will keep his word. But he keeps it his own way, not ours. He is faithful in promise. He loves forever. At the same time, he will be who he will be. He will act for his reasons and according to his purposes.

Why did the kingdom of Israel divide, leaving David's descendant Rehoboam ruling a small segment on the southern end of the land? We are familiar with the answer that greedy Rehoboam took the advice of the young men and increased taxation, and the opportunist and idolater Jereboam capitalized on the discontent and engineered a successful rebellion in the north (1 Kings 12). But 1 Kings 11 answers this question from the perspective of the promise of God to David.

The turn-about in Solomon's commitment to

Yahweh triggered the division. Yahweh told David that if his sons violated his statutes he would "punish their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with scourges" (Ps. 89:32). The sons of David had it made. Yahweh loved them and committed his caring acts for them even before they were born. They didn't have to do anything to secure or merit that love. But when they turned away from Yahweh, he turned away from them and withdrew his love. Solomon lost God's love through his faithlessness to the commands of God. "For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4). Solomon violated the first commandment in the Mosaic covenant: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). God didn't decide to punish Solomon immediately. "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger" (Exod. 34:6). Yahweh "had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not keep what the Lord commanded" (1 Kings 11:9-10).

So God had a decision to make. How would he punish Solomon? He could bring in violent armies from the east as he did later. In this case, however, he opted for an internal division. He tore away a large chunk of Solomon's kingdom and gave it to Jereboam. What a high price Solomon paid—a price that was to be exacted century after century. But then Solomon turned his back on David's long suit, a daily walk with God. Yahweh desires communion, fellowship, steadfast love with and from man. He desires these traits because they are also his own.

Yahweh was so angered that perhaps he wanted to end the dynasty of David right then. But he had made a promise. "However I will not tear away all the kingdom; but I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen" (1 Kings 11:13). Here we see how God carried out the details of his promise to David. This illustrates both parts of the covenant. The promise to maintain the dynasty of David was upheld forever. The promise of punishment for unfaithfulness was also exacted. We probably would not have expected the punishment to be the loss of a large part of the kingdom. But our ways are not necessarily God's. He will be who he will be. Our own limited thoughts never provide the outer limits of God's action. We should be suspicious of persons who are eager to assert what God will or will not do.

Yahweh always looks for leaders to work through. He raises up persons to lead and shepherd his people. But sometimes God's shepherds become neglectful. They quit watching the flock. Then they get wrapped up on self-interests and quit walking with God. God is hurt. He tries to get them back on track. But if nothing changes, he determines punishments which may affect God's people for many generations. "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3:9-10).

Did God Keep His Promise to David?

David commenced his reign about 1000 B.C. From that time until 587 B.C., or 413 years, David's descendants reigned in Jerusalem. Four hundred

years is a long time. English-speaking people made their first permanent settlement in America at Jamestown, Virginia, May 14, 1607, less than 400 years ago. Very few of the numerous Egyptian dynasties lasted more than 200 years and possibly none longer than 300. The dynasties of the northern kingdom were all relatively short. The longest was that of Jehu (842-746 B.C.), just less than 100 years.

So David's dynasty was amazingly long. Despite the lengthy succession, however, the dynasty came to a screeching halt when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. We could extend the dynasty beyond 587. Jehoiachin at eighteen was defeated by the Babylonians in 597 and taken to Babylon. He was replaced by Zedekiah, but to many, Zedekiah was only a provisional ruler. Jehoiachin (Jechoniah) had seven sons (1 Chron. 3:17-18), and an effort to restore the kingship to David's descendants occurred about 515 B.C. with Jehoiachin's grandson Zerubbabel (Hag. 2:21-22). The rule of David's descendants obviously ended there. In the New Testament period 500 years later the Herodians ruled. The first of the Herods, Herod the Great (40-4 B.C.), was of Idumean or Edomite origin, though he considered himself a Jew and was so regarded by his contemporaries. The radicals of the period considered the kingship of the Herods invalid based on the promise to David.

We must therefore ask if Yahweh broke his promise. Later Old Testament writings make it clear that expectancy of rule by David's descendants remained despite the long lapse. A long lapse was not precluded by the promise. The author of Kings says that Manasseh was so wicked that

Yahweh simply permitted the kingship to dissolve (2 Kings 21:10-15). Yahweh will be who he will be. He will interpret his covenant in his own way. In some future time God was to reestablish rule by David's seed.

The incredibly good news of the first disciples of Jesus was that God had kept his promise in an unexpected way. They affirmed that Jesus, Son of God and descendant of David through Mary, now reigned over the kingdom of God. This new kingdom reached into all the nations. It knew no boundaries. It would eventually traverse both the earth and eternity. Acts 2 argues that Jesus is a descendant of David and now reigns at the right hand of God. He is the fulfillment of the promise "I will establish his line forever" (Acts 2:33-36; Ps. 89:29; Matt. 1:1, 12:23). God did not forget his promise! Jesus, son of David, reigns. His reign will be forever. He will not succumb to the iniquities of the other descendants of David and be deposed. He "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). In an amazing manner God showed himself faithful in promise. Great is thy faithfulness! God provided a chief shepherd, a peerless leader, from his very self.

A Lawgiver Like Moses

David was important because he made a deep and lasting impression on temple worship. The Chronicler (the author of 1, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, traditionally Ezra), presented David alongside Moses as a lawgiver for Israel because of David's importance as a leader in worship.

Through David's initiative the ark of the covenant came to Jerusalem. Many times a body of the

Lord's people is planted by a governmental or business leader, not a "preacher." When David contemplated bringing up the ark, he had a tent or tabernacle constructed to house it (1 Chron. 15:3-16:1). David was also responsible for Jerusalem being the city of worship. He took it from the Jebusites, who had managed to retain it for 300 years (1 Chron. 11:4-9). Because of this, Jerusalem was called the city of David.

David also initiated systematic steps to organize the music employed at the place of worship (1 Chron. 16:4-6). The music included both songs and instruments. David encouraged the composing and collecting of psalms and probably wrote a number of the Psalms himself (2 Chron. 29:30). And because of his encouragement, a number of Psalms were dedicated to him. (The superscription translated a Psalm of David, in the Hebrew *ledhawidh*, literally means "to David.") The laws for priests and sacrifices came through Moses. The laws for the temple music came through David.

The Chronicler explicitly sets forth the parallels of David and Moses. These statements reflect the Chronicler's obvious interest in Judah, Jerusalem, and the kings of David. To him David is a new Moses in the sense that he stands with the original lawgiver and adds laws on temple worship which God has offered. In an interesting passage the juxtaposition of these two lawgivers is obvious. It speaks of the commandment of Moses (2 Chron. 8:13) and the ordinance of David (8:14). These terms are often synonymous in the Old Testament (Deut. 8:11). Later in this passage David is said to have commanded (2 Chron. 8:15; cf. Neh. 12:44-47). David's ordinances for worship were not

simply at his own initiative. "The commandment was from the Lord through his prophets" (2 Chron. 29:25).

David was a great man. He was a leader, a shepherd of God's people. He walked with God. He called the people to such a walk. He led the people in worship of God. We need this leadership from the community of believers today. The promise of Yahweh to David interjected eternal hope into the breasts of God's people.

Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.

Hosea 3:5

11



Praise in the Psalms

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;

**praise him according to his exceeding
greatness!**

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

Psalm 150:1-2, 6

Yahweh is so faithful, loving and concerned for his people that the word praise begins every comment about him in this final chapter of Psalms. People who intimately walked with God found him continually in their thoughts and on their lips. These thoughts were often written and recorded for future generations. They reflected on most aspects of private and public existence. However, they centered on Yahweh and his way with people. He came to the rescue in times of trouble. He

acted mightily to weld Israel into a great nation. He forgave and healed. In all his ways, he was worthy of praise!

Israel's book of worship, the Psalms, reveals the personal struggles and thoughts of the people of God. Later generations preserved, memorized and relished those psalms which were especially meaningful. The Psalms came from more than five hundred years of Israel's history. They disclose to us the heart of Israel's faith. In fact, if all the other documents were lost, the faith of Israel could be recovered from the Psalms. The songs and hymns of a people often tell much about their thinking and concerns.

A few years ago I knew a song leader who always selected hymns about heaven, Jordan, and Canaan land—mostly old gospel songs. I thought he just preferred those old songs for their rhythm and sentimental value. Then one Sunday night when the preacher was gone, the elders asked this song leader to preach. I immediately noticed that all his remarks were about heaven and getting ready to go there. I began to realize that people sing more about what they are or what they hope to be than they realize. The psalms of Israel tell us who these people were—their failures, their hopes, their joys, their sorrows. But chiefly they tell us of a daily walk with a God who participates moment to moment in the life of each of his children. He did so in the past, he is now and he will continue to do so in the future.

How the Psalms Came to Be

David helped collect the early psalms for use in temple worship. Probably some of the psalms even preceded David (about 1000 B.C.). Some people ar-

gue that oral poetry precedes prose. For example, the poems of Homer made up the earliest literature of Greece. They were circulated orally for some centuries before being written. Genesis contains a number of poetic fragments which likely had ancient origins (Gen. 14:19-20; see also Exod. 15:21). The people of God knew of God not only through his mighty deeds, but also in the retelling of those deeds. Faith was created in Israel by the words of God which revealed what his deeds meant. God creates through words and deeds. In fact, his words result in deeds. "And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures' " (Gen. 1:24). God created a community of faith through his words and actions. As Yahweh's people sang the psalms, they grew in faith. And so do we!

The psalms of Israel reflect Yahweh's central concerns for his people and the people's response. They don't give us too many details like dates, places and developments. But they are rich in things such as the manner in which the Israelites looked at their world, their reactions to what God had done and was doing in their midst, and their various needs. The songs are basically temple songs, but they reflected private and corporate concerns.

There are basically two purposes of psalms: (1) praise and thanksgiving and (2) laments and petitions. Examining them further, we find six types: (1) psalms of lament (Ps. 13), a majority of the psalms—about 60—are laments; (2) psalms of praise (Ps. 33); (3) temple psalms (Ps. 66); (4) royal psalms about kings (Ps. 45); (5) psalms honoring Yahweh's kingship or enthronement (Ps. 47); and (6) wisdom or instruction psalms (Ps. 1).

It is obvious that the Israelites expressed concern for all phases of their existence through the Psalms. In particular, they brought their personal and national problems to the attention of Yahweh. They also praised God for the times when he answered their complaints. And they expressed hope for the future because they fully expected he would come through again. This reminds today's Christian of Peter's affirmation, "Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you" (1 Pet. 5:7).

The Face of the Psalms

The 150 psalms are divided into five books—chapters 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106 and 107-150. We find a doxology or expression of praise at the end of each book. Psalm 150 may be a doxology to the whole book of Psalms. The beginning of each book contains psalms of lament, but toward the end there are hymns of praise. And there are evidences of smaller collections within the five larger books. At the end of Book II, we read these remarks, "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended" (Ps. 72:20). All the Psalms of Asaph are found in Book II (73-89), except Psalm 50. Scholars call Psalms 95-100 "enthronement Psalms." Psalms 120-134 include the superscription "A Song of Ascents." These psalms may have been used by the people as they left their homes and traveled to Jerusalem for religious festivals. Psalms 113-118, which begin and end with "Hallelujah" or "Praise the Lord," are called Hallel Psalms. They probably were sung at the three great feasts. Psalms 146-150 begin and end with "Hallelujah."

The psalms give us a rich, varied collection of the experience of God's people as they attempt to

worship and serve him. Therefore, we should be able to discover in Psalms comments which reflect on our situation. When I read for awhile in Psalms, I can always find words to match any mood I am in.

About the time of David's death, priests assigned to music in the temple collected old psalms and psalms by David, Asaph and others. A few more were added over the next 150 years, and by Hezekiah's time (about 700 B.C.) the collection totaled more than ninety. Some psalms were written in the northern kingdom (e.g., Ps. 77, 80 and 81) and probably added to the collection at the time of the exile. When the people returned to Palestine in 520 B.C., they tried to reconstitute the faith of old, including temple music (Neh. 12:27-30). The various collections of the psalms were completed in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. They were divided into five books, possibly on analogy with the five books of the law of Moses. Beginnings and endings, and perhaps in some cases superscriptions, were added.

The Psalms represent seven or eight hundred years of walking with God. They came from various times and places. We can therefore readily account for their richness. A key to the whole collection was the praise of Yahweh. "Praise the Lord! O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever!" (Ps. 106:1).

Israel's Identity

The Psalms express the centers of reality from an Old Testament perspective. In them we find a profound declaration of Israel's self-understanding. The identity of Israel was clearly located in its relationship with Yahweh, and the role of each

individual in the community of Yahweh's people. That relationship had a past, present and future. Some people of our time locate their identity in the past, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution or religious people who think all the actions of God are long past. Some persons find their identity in the present, like the hippie movement or the Social Gospellers at the turn of the century. Finally, some obtain their identity from the future, such as the Marxists who believe that because of continuing revolutions Communism will ultimately rule the world, and the Christians who have rejected the present and live in anticipation of the eminent return of Jesus Christ.

Israel took her identity from a God who formed and nurtured a community in the past, a community which lives upon God's good gifts in the present, but which anticipates his continuing actions in the future. They knew who they were because of who they were among and to whom they belonged. Furthermore, their community and their God was not obstructed in any direction past or present.

Many persons today suffer identity crises. They literally don't know who they are. I once talked with a man who was going through a mental upheaval. He spent some time in a psychiatric hospital. His problem was an identity crisis. As a successful executive of an electronics company he had all the signs of having it made, but his world had grown hollow. He lived in another region from the one in which he grew up. This man no longer identified with his home, and he was schizophrenic about the one where he now lived, because he was not readily accepted there. He didn't belong to any

groups, he didn't readily identify with his company, and he was not sure he believed in God. His identity was his work. He had cut himself loose from the past. He had no particular reason to anticipate the future since he had accomplished what he had set out to do with his life. When he realized he had no ties with anything, that he had arrived and that arriving had no meaning of its own, he ended up with a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. All was meaningless.

Despite the hope that a person's inner makeup and his present surrounding are adequate ingredients out of which to construct self-identity, people who proceed with this mix ultimately end up in the depths of despair. The grandeur and significance of life in Israel came from the fact that people achieved identity through a community and through a God who had worked in the past, was at work in the present, and had exciting and challenging plans for the future.

From Out of the Past

Israel had roots. The people shared an identity with their parents, grandparents, greatgrandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other people from many generations before. The nation had an explicit, personal history. But it was not a do-it-yourself human kind of history. God himself acted in Israel's history. Israel's history was rooted in ultimate reality because it was launched by Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth.

A number of psalms made it explicit that people worshiping Yahweh do so because of the past mighty acts of Yahweh. Psalm 105 praises God for "his deeds among the peoples," and "all his wonderful works" (vss. 1, 2). The psalmist mentions

the covenant with Abraham, the plagues in Egypt, the exodus, the guidance in the wilderness, the gift of the land, and the laws. God did these "wonderful works" (vs. 5) for his people, not just to show his muscle. "So he led forth his people with joy, his chosen ones with singing. And he gave them the lands of the nations" (vss. 43-44). The joy of Yahweh's people came from God, the one at the heart of reality, the one who supplied to everything its existence, the God of the universe who acted mightily on their behalf and in their very midst. He had given their forefathers identity. To determine who they were, they only needed to remind themselves of how they originated. "Remember the wonderful works that he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered, O offspring of Abraham his servant" (vss. 5-6).

Psalms 136 praises the steadfast love of God shown in his work in creation, parting of the Red Sea, leading the people in the wilderness, victory over the inhabitants of Palestine, and the gift of the land. All these past acts gave present identity because the same God supplies day-by-day needs to people in the community of faith. The people of Israel knew who they were and that they were being well cared for because of the one who did many mighty works in their past.

Several psalms also vividly depict God's mighty acts. Psalm 114 celebrates the crossing of the Red Sea and Jordan. "The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs" (vss. 3-4). Psalm 135 focused on the conquest, Psalm 8 on creation, Psalm 119 on the law and Psalm 89 on the promise to David. All

these were actions of a God whose existence reached back to eternity.

Before the mountains were brought forth
or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the
world,
from everlasting to everlasting thou art
God.

Psalm 90:2

We are often surprised to read laments, such as Psalms 13 and 35. Despite the fact that the rug seems to have been pulled out from under the psalmist, he doesn't despair. For him, disaster does not result in meaninglessness. He is confident that the God who reversed the headlines in the past will step in and turn present calamities upside down.

The people of Israel also found their identity because of their place in the community of God's people, and not just because of God's mighty works.

Know that the Lord is God!

It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pas-
ture.

Psalm 100:3

Each individual was a member of a flock, a community of people who knew who they were. And because they knew who they were, each individual also knew he belonged in God's flock. When great things happened, each Israelite had a community of people to tell his story to. "I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation" (Ps. 40:9). The community's long roots reach into the past. The roots of Israel's history could be summed up in a short poetical statement. Its past was a

corporate past. It consisted of Israel's people and their God. Their identity was founded on a rock which cannot be shaken: "O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (Ps. 19:14). Israel's God had established its roots in the midst of his congregation of people.

The Ever Present God

Because God acted in Israel's past, the people believed that he was ever present, acting also in the life of each passing generation. The psalmist looked at the past, the future and the present of each life and saw God in every moment. "Thou dost beset me behind and before, and layest thy hand upon me" (Ps. 139:5). Psalm 18 says whenever God's faithful ones call, he responds. "I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies" (vs. 3). The psalmist also describes the awesome theophany (God's appearance) as Yahweh arrives to assist his servants. "He reached from on high, he took me, he drew me out of many waters" (vs. 16). Because of God's tremendous assistance, the psalmist's day is a success. "Yea, by thee I can crush a troop; and by my God I can leap over a wall" (vs. 29). Because Israel's roots sank deep in the past, the present had certainty and meaning. No moment of their life was at loose ends, there was no deadening lull after years of strenuous effort, and there was no agonizing over whether anything mattered. The significance of the present lay with the powerful witness from the past.

The people of Yahweh live under the constant watch of Yahweh. "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me" (Ps. 3:5). The

message of Psalm 23 has a well-deserved significance because this well-known psalm affirms that God cares for his people now as a shepherd cares for his sheep. "He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul" (Ps. 23:2-3). The present is not hollow because God walks with his people and they are walking with him. The Lord's people are his sheep. They are a part of a flock. They have their identity from the shepherd and the flock. "For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (Ps. 95:7). He guides them over the rough spots of life and sustains them. His existence in their present moments is real because he forgives and makes a new life for his people when they stumble. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit" (Ps. 51:10, 12). The Psalms are sensitive to the present work of God and to his past action. In fact, because of his past action the present is crucial and worthy of concern and discussion.

The Future is His

Yahweh's people also have assurance that a new dawn will always reveal its telltale streaks of red above the horizon. God's people are firmly anchored to the past, but they are also being winched in from the future. They know where they have been and where they are going. They have no fear of drifting off course and gouging a hole by running on rocks. They know who they are and where they are headed.

But I trust in thee, O Lord,
I say, "Thou art my God."

**My times are in thy hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and
persecutors!**

Psalm 31:14-15

The charge to wait for the Lord tells us that the future is the future of Yahweh. Sometimes the present moment seems untidy, or a crisis occurs resulting in great stress. Sometimes our detractors seem to have the upper hand. But Yahweh's people never despair even though they suffer many anxious moments (Ps. 44). After all, their identity is not simply the identity of the present moment. If this were true, as with many people today, they would face one crisis and one defeat after another. Each day they would have to ask themselves again who they really are. But Yahweh's people feel a tug from the future. They see the steel cable stretched to the horizon. They wait for the Lord and fully anticipate that he will steer them safely into his desired harbor. "Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord" (Ps. 31:24). The future is assured because Yahweh himself is everlasting. "From everlasting to everlasting thou art God" (Ps. 90:2). Because of his grand works in the past, his people can be sure of their future. "That you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God for ever and ever. He will be our guide for ever" (Ps. 48:13-14). God has signed his name on the dotted line and committed even the future.

**My steadfast love I will keep for him for ever,
and my covenant will stand firm for him.
I will establish his line for ever
and his throne as the days of the heavens.**

Psalm 89:28-29

Yahweh gave his people songs. He gave them songs even for the blackest moments. He gave songs in the night. Yahweh loves joy. He loves praise. He loves to hear from his people. He loves to help them in their day of trouble. Yahweh loves psalms.

**By day the Lord commands his steadfast love;
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.**

Psalms 42:8

12



Wisdom through the Proverbs

Just as the psalm tradition in Israel focuses on David, the wisdom tradition centers on Solomon. Solomon attained international notoriety for his wisdom. The acclaim of wisdom in Israel, among her neighbors and people afar off, suggests that wisdom is universally respected. Unlike the laws thundered at Mt. Sinai for the covenant community, the claims of wisdom relate to all men. In its opening statement, Proverbs declares that wisdom is for all men—not just the men of Israel or Judah.

That men may know wisdom and instruction,
understanding words of insight,
receive instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;

Proverbs 1:2-3

The queen of Sheba came from her distant country to visit Solomon because she had heard of his wisdom and administrative skill. Sheba was in the southwest corner of modern Saudia Arabia about

1,500 miles from Jerusalem. Her visit shows the international interest in wisdom and that wisdom is universally applicable. The queen was impressed by being around Solomon, seeing his kingdom, and hearing his advice (2 Chron. 9:5-7). According to Kings, the wisdom of Solomon "surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30). His proverbs were multifold. "He also uttered three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five" (1 Kings 4:32).

Though Solomon was the focus of Israel's wisdom, proverbs and other materials came from various sources. The wisdom tradition in Israel possibly began at the town gate where the elders met, business transactions were completed, and judgments were made (Ruth 4:1). By Solomon's time the movement obviously centered in the king's court. According to older customs, wise men surrounded the king in Egypt and elsewhere (Gen. 41:8, Dan. 2:12). Jeremiah assigned wise people a special role along with priests and prophets. "For the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet" (Jer. 18:18). There was family or clan wisdom, courtly wisdom, scribal wisdom, nature wisdom, and juridical and practical wisdom. And there was the special wisdom of warriors, sailors, farmers, and soothsayers.

The Shape of Proverbs

Though many proverbs are assigned to Solomon, some come from other authors. Other proverbs collected by later wisemen didn't all come from Solomon. However, there is no reason to deny that Solomon wrote many proverbs.

The first heading in Proverbs is "the proverbs of Solomon, son of David, King of Israel" (1:1). A second heading states, "The proverbs of Solomon" (10:1). A third heading asserts that an additional collection was made of Solomon's proverbs in the days of Hezekiah, more than 200 years after Solomon's death (25:1). Two other headings attribute material to non-Israelite sources: "The words of Agur son of Jakeh of Massa" (Prov. 30:1), and "The words of Lemuel, king of Massa" (Prov. 31:1). There was a willingness to receive wisdom from more than one source and even sources outside Israel.

The form and content of the material in Proverbs also differ. Proverbs 1-9 is different from Proverbs 10-22:17. The material in the first nine chapters contains ideas developed in more lengthy passages. The literary structure has continuity for several verses. Much more interest in God is evident, and his name is mentioned more often. The proverbs between chapters 10 and 22:17 are almost all two-line proverbs. The subject matter from one proverb to another may or may not relate to the same topic. The form most often found is antithetical parallelism: "A wise son hears his father's instruction, But a scoffer does not listen to rebuke" (Prov. 13:1). Notice the antithesis between wise son and scoffer, instruction and rebuke. Although this section occasionally refers to God, the theological flavor in these proverbs borders on the minuscule.

We need also to look at the nature of "wisdom" found in the Old Testament. If you have done much reading in Job or Proverbs, you may have a feel for what wisdom means. If not, you may at

first be surprised. To us, wisdom means either technical knowledge, such as the technology of space flight; expert information, such as a tax lawyer knowing how to set up a foundation; or intellectual insight, such as a philosopher mastering the ideas of Immanuel Kant. This wisdom, however, is not the wisdom of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, wisdom is the art of picking your way through life with a minimum of bumps and bruises. It is practical knowledge about rules governing the world and the relationships between people. People acquire this wisdom through experience, and they accumulate it through generations. The total experience from the perspective of spiritual values is transferred from father to son. Wisdom is the ability to cope and say the right word or do the right deed at the right time.

Whence Then Comes Wisdom?

Anyone who reads Deuteronomy and Leviticus, then turns to Proverbs, will notice considerable differences. Deuteronomy and Leviticus consist of laws for a covenant community, for internal and external relations, and for cultic celebration. Proverbs contains rules for life, the right path to travel, the right voice to hear. But despite the differences, both have a common source, God. Law and wisdom belong in the same book because they both come from God. But the manner in which they come from God differs. The people for whom law and wisdom are intended are the same, except that wisdom is for all men, not just the covenant community.

How do the insights of wisdom come from God? The word of God in the law was declared to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The word of Yahweh

came through the prophets in pictures, objects, and words, without any effort on the part of the prophets (Jer. 41:7). Wisdom obviously was not a part of the law delivered on the mountain. It didn't arrive as a voice or in a vision to God's man. How do wise men become wise? They learn what their fathers passed on.

Hear, O sons, a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight;
for I give you good precepts;
do not forsake my teaching.
When I was a son with my father,
tender, the only one in the sight of my
mother,
he taught me, and said to me . . .

Proverbs 4:1-4

But how did the fathers learn what they passed on? Most likely, the fathers learned by observing the ways of life and the world, and by studying which path creates the least friction. Wisdom results from "heads up," astute sifting of experience. It is not the experience of one person. It is the accumulated, scrutinized experience of many generations. But if wisdom results from human effort, how can it come from God? Is what comes through human experience and what comes from God the same?

Let's start with a "yes" answer and see what data is available before responding "no." In wisdom literature we read that creation and history reflect the wisdom of God because through wisdom he created that which exists (Prov. 3:19-20).

Proverbs 8:22-31 expands on this theme. Creation itself bears the telltale signs of the ways of God. We discern the ways of God when we ob-

serve nature and life. Just as we learn the ways of the artist by studying Picasso's "Guernica," so we can discover the ways of God by studying nature. Therefore, when a man sorts out the ways of nature through experience, his conclusions come from God because they are God's ways. This is the argument of natural or universal ethics. Universal ethics operate on the premise that all men can know right by studying the ways of nature because God is the author of nature.

The Position of the Scriptures

But this position is ostensibly not the position of the scriptures. First, the text says the wisdom of Solomon came neither from his earthly father nor solely from his own powers of observation. It came from God. "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and largeness of mind like the sand on the seashore" (1 Kings 4:29).

How did God give Solomon wisdom? Was it through oracles or direct delivery of his word like he did to the prophets? The answer apparently is no. "Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that . . . none like you shall arise after you" (1 Kings 3:12). God gave Solomon a mind for wisdom, and he acquired it through his own observation and struggle. But perhaps the conclusions were not left purely to the powers of the mind. Proverbs 2 attributes the acquiring of wisdom, first of all, to strenuous human effort. A person must listen to the words of wisdom, then struggle and cry out for insight (2:3). He must work hard and diligently seek wisdom, just as he would put in long, hard hours searching for treasure (2:4). After all this effort, then "you will understand the fear of

the Lord and find the knowledge of God . . . ” (Prov. 2:5-7).

This may be like a person who struggles with the nature of light over a period of months, then finally comes up with a brilliant answer in a flash. Similarly, a person struggles through astute observation and finally attains wisdom, but it is God who supplies the flash. We conclude that wisdom comes from God because: (1) the observer examines nature and life, in which the ways of God are found; (2) he persistently weighs and sifts through his experiences with a mind given by God; and (3) he ultimately arrives at a conclusion after his struggle. But God provides the insight at the end of the struggle. In this manner wisdom is, in fact, from God. The proverbs are his words. But the channel through which the word of God arrives differs from the channel through which law and prophecy come.

For whom is wisdom intended? Based on circumstantial evidence in the text, wisdom is for all men. The covenant community is subject to receive wisdom for it is from God. The covenant community is also subject to the laws of God delivered at Mt. Sinai. But the law given at Sinai was for Israel alone, not the nations, and only occasionally did the other nations receive instructions from God through the prophets. But the nations also can know rules for right living by a close look at nature's ethical laws. Yahweh is the God of the nations. He is concerned with all men. God transplanted people other than Israel (Amos 9:7).

Amos and other prophets condemned the nations because they should have known better by observations of right and wrong from life and na-

ture. "So they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). In the Old Testament, the ways of Yahweh are more obvious in the commands Moses brought down from the mountain and when the prophet says, "Thus says the word of the Lord." Nevertheless, traces of the ways of God are visible in life and nature, and God provides insight to those who seek long and hard. The ways of God are available to all men, and all are accountable.

The Message of Wisdom

The message of wisdom is directed to all Israelites and persons everywhere. The sons of Israel share with all men the knowledge that Yahweh is maker of heaven and earth and that all people bear his image. Through the wisdom tradition, the Old Testament recognizes the common situation of all men in the world and their common concerns and solutions. In many periods of Israel's history, the law and words from the prophets overshadowed wisdom. But wisdom remains, and occasionally it surfaces when times are appropriate. These are times when human reflection and observation are prized and people search for universal rights and wrongs, not just beliefs of a particular religious tradition.

The message of wisdom is many faceted, but the basic convictions are that (1) the world is orderly because of Yahweh's "wisdom" at work in creation; (2) the wise men who tune into the orderly features of creation give advice which will improve the quality and length of life; (3) God made the universe so that virtue is rewarded and vice punished; and (4) man must *fear* the Lord, not just *know* the ways of God. One must also fear the

Lord to have the compulsion and humility to actually live wisely.

1. *The world is orderly.* The orderliness of creation is perhaps most clearly expressed in Ecclesiastes. "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die" (Eccles. 3:1). Everything has a time, but it is repeated. Nothing changes. The universe is like an army marching in place. There is movement, but the same motion is repeated over and over. There is "a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted" (3:2). Planting changes to harvesting, but planting and harvesting continue like clockwork. The world is orderly because whatever happens is repeated at predictable intervals. "That which is, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away" (3:15). If anything in the universe drops out of line, God hustles it back into place.

The fact that wisdom was with God when he created the earth also expresses confidence in the orderliness of creation.

When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face
of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains
of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not
transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations
of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master
workman.

Proverbs 8:27-30

God's faithfulness is as obvious in creation as it is in his promises and their fulfillment. God loves the created order forever. Therefore, he loves wisdom forever because it seeks order in creation.

2. *Wisdom discovers quality of life.* The purpose of wisdom is to give "instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; that prudence may be given to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth" (Prov. 1:3-4). The person who follows wisdom will have well-being, pleasantness, and long life.

Happy is the man who finds wisdom,
and the man who gets understanding,
for the gain from it is better than gain
from silver
and its profit better than gold.

She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare
with her.

Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.

She is a tree of life to those who lay hold
of her;

those who hold her fast are called happy.

Proverbs 3:11-18

Even the author of Ecclesiastes, who sometimes thinks that in the end the wise man is no better off than the fool, nevertheless, believes that wisdom adds to the quality of life, especially for the person who has money.

Wisdom is good with an inheritance,
an advantage to those who see the sun.

For the protection of wisdom is like the
protection of money;
and the advantage of knowledge is that wis-
dom preserves the life of him who has it.
Ecclesiastes 7:11, 12

God created the universe using wisdom. The person therefore who discovers the signs of wisdom in the world and lives accordingly will come out on top because he is living life according to God's rules. Just as a locomotive can pull a heavier load and last longer by running on tracks because it was built to run on tracks, a life which proceeds according to the rules of the universe will be longer and have well-being.

3. *Virtue is rewarded and vice punished.* If the world is orderly and God is good, then the universe must be designed so that people get ahead by doing right and they are set back by doing wrong. Wisdom talks little about punishment and reward after death because virtue is rewarded and wickedness is punished in this life. These rewards and punishments do not require special acts of God. Rewards and punishments result naturally from the world. For example, work has its rewards, but indolence has its punishment (Prov. 10:4). People who do right have nothing to worry about, but wrongdoers live in fear (Prov. 10:9).

A person who defies the demands of the marriage relationship will suffer the consequences. God may not throw a thunderbolt out of heaven and paralyze him for two weeks or strike him dead, but the world is built so that the jealousy of a man toward his wife's lover will bring about punishment (Prov. 6:27-35).

Job and Ecclesiastes, however, suggest that too

simple an explanation of rewards and punishment tends to be disillusioning. Job was as virtuous as any but he suffered the loss of flocks, herds and family. The writer of Ecclesiastes says, "In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing" (Eccles. 7:15).

However, neither of these books denies that, for the most part, virtue is rewarded* and evil punished. They are concerned with the exceptions. How are these explained? Ecclesiastes may not offer an answer, except that there is an element of the unpredictable from where man stands, but not from God's perspective. Since man cannot look over the shoulder of God to see what he is up to, he must accept his status and enjoy whatever comes his way in life. Job, however, suggests that life is more complex than many people think. God's decisions, not just the rules built into the earth, determine the course of a person's life. The exceptions are explained by God's actions in his total universe to bring about his ways.

It would seem, therefore, that taking existence as a whole, rewards and punishments flow naturally in the universe. But from the human perspective various exceptions are observed. These may ultimately be explained, but to do so one has to sit in on the heavenly council. We do not have enough facts to know why everything happens as it does. "Hollywood life styles" seem to create more anguish, dysfunction and shorter life spans than the average population. Going by this, doing right wins out and wickedness loses. But man doesn't understand in every case just how this happens and he

doesn't know all the interests and workings of God.

4. *The fear of the Lord.* It's not enough just to know. Knowledge may simply make a person a dilettante, someone who professes a love of wisdom, art, and ethics, but who shows by the way he lives that he really doesn't care. According to the wisdom tradition, it does a person no good to gain all the insights of wisdom if he is not humble enough or isn't compelled to do what he knows is right. Solomon was a great king because of his wisdom, but he met disaster because he did not fear the Lord. His pride and wrong desires cancelled his great wisdom (1 Kings 11:9-10). Therefore, wisdom has no efficacy unless it is founded upon fear. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7). People who gain from wisdom are people who fear the Lord enough to find out his intentions for man in the world, then set out to live accordingly.

The Lord loves wisdom forever. Through it he has created the heavens and the earth. He is committed to a relationship with his creation forever. He loves people who seek out his ways through the created order. They are usually the ones who live long, productive, rewarding lives.

13



Hope of the Prophets

The Old Testament ends as it begins by affirming the steadfast love of the Lord. But from the human aspect, it doesn't look as good as it did in the beginning. Through 1,500 years since the promise of Yahweh to Abraham, man continually sinned. He made up his own rules for life and lived by them rather than following the loving laws of God. "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (Isa. 53:6). Despite man's waywardness, God remained faithful in his relentless love. The Old Testament ends on a positive note by telling us that the time is coming when God will break into history in a new and amazing way and dwell with man so that he continually walks in loving obedience. Yahweh never gives up. He always comes up with astoundingly new ways of wooing man to himself.

“Behold, I am doing a new thing” (Isa. 43:19).

Some stories aren't complete. They promise future action which remains unfulfilled. The storyline of the Old Testament includes promises which go unfulfilled, and it talks of new ages which never arrive. The Old Testament points beyond itself. It heralds an age or a person which or who has not yet appeared. The Jews still look for a messianic age or a messiah. In contrast, the early Christians, declared that all the unfulfilled hopes came to fruition in an amazing manner in Jesus of Nazareth. The good news of Jesus Christ tells us that all those matters left dangling at the close of the Old Testament were gathered and tied together in his ministry, his death, his resurrection, his kingdom, and his future appearance.

Messengers of Hope

In particular, the prophets of Israel offer hope for the future. The prophets spent much time demanding current obedience and justice. They frequently commented on what would soon come to pass if God's people did not repent and change their ways. But often they burst forth in unrestrained optimism over future divine actions.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness.

Isaiah 51:11

The prophetic movement actually began in the days of Samuel, or the 1100s B.C. Bands of prophets first appeared at this time (1 Sam. 19:20). Later in the period of the kings, the prophets rose to prominence. They served as the conscience of

the nation. They counterbalanced the power of the kings and princes. Their function was like the journalists of today, except that prophets professed to bring a word from the Lord.

Nathan, Elijah and Elisha, the first great prophets, encouraged the kings to be God's men. When the kings violated the law of God, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha responded with words of condemnation. The sayings of prophets weren't preserved until later in the eighth century. The works of these prophets are divided into major and minor, but this has nothing to do with their importance. It refers to the length of their work. The four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel) are followed by twelve minor prophets. One way of grouping which helps put each prophet in perspective is by the century in which he worked. The fact that we know the time of the prophets is more important than we realize. It tells us that God entered into the actual life of men in the Old Testament. There is no way of dating the work of the gods in the Hindu scriptures. Their actions seldom interfaced with real human history. But Yahweh involves himself in the life and history of his people. The earliest prophets who wrote did their work in the eighth century B.C. Here are the prophets and the centuries in which they lived:

Eighth: Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah

Seventh: Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum

Sixth: Habakkuk, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Haggai,
Zechariah

Fifth: Daniel, Malachi, Joel

The later prophets more often searched the distant horizon for signs of extraordinary divine activity.

The future hopes and promises at the close of

the Old Testament may be divided into five parts. The details vary from prophet to prophet and some affirmations occur more frequently than others. In order of frequency, they are (1) new actions of Yahweh, (2) a new age, (3) a new reign, (4) a new ruler, and (5) a new relationship.

New Actions of Yahweh

Israel believed that Yahweh would break into history in amazingly new ways in the future because he had acted powerfully in the past. Earlier when Israel cried out to God, he heard the cry and responded lovingly. Israel believed that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceased, so the people saw no reason to conclude that the deeds of God were all past. He could repeat his actions. He could create anew, open new paths through the sea, be with his people in a new wilderness, and give his people new victories. These convictions had important ramifications for all persons who later walked with God. They declare he always works in new and creative ways, loving and caring for his people. "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?" (Matt. 6:30).

The most traumatic experience of the people of Israel in Old Testament times was the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. by the Babylonian army. In the word of the Lord which came to Jeremiah, the destruction was so catastrophic that it constituted a reversal of creation (Jer. 4:23-26). But after the catastrophe, Yahweh started over again. He created plants, animals, and people (Jer. 31:27-28). Once in a while our world falls to pieces. It may be a personal tragedy like the death of a husband, or a

national tragedy like the war in Viet Nam. But Yahweh recreates his world. He brings beauty from ashes. In Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, God laid sinews, flesh, and skin on the decaying bits of calcium and they amazingly came to life (Ezek. 37:1-6). God's work is not over. He is always doing new things. "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa. 43:18-19). Isaiah's convictions about the continuing work of God were so strong that he declared Yahweh would "create new heavens and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17).

The prophets also believed God would favor them with new exoduses. Isaiah looked past the destruction of Jerusalem to a new exodus (Isa. 43:16-19). Deuteronomy predicted that God would reverse his action if his people were unfaithful. "And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt" (Deut. 28:68). With great expectation, Jeremiah envisioned a new exodus for the people of God beyond their bondage (Jer. 23:7-8).

The people of God continue to be enslaved by debts, family problems, and even alcoholism. They bring their problems on themselves just as Israel did through its sin. But if God's people will cry out to him and repent of their evil works, he will hear them and open up new paths through the sea.

The prophets also anticipated a new wilderness where God would love his people freely and where the gulfs between God and man, man and man, and man and animal would be bridged (Hos. 2:14-15). Isaiah depicted a wilderness and spoke of a highway through it (Isa. 35:5-8). The Hebrews writer said Jesus provided a new day in the

wilderness, and Christians committed to him would rest from their labors (Heb. 4:1-10).

When Israel gloriously took the land with great victories, it signaled future expectation that God's enemies are always doomed. God gave great victories to his people in the past, and he will give them victories again (Zech. 14:4-5). "The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory" (Zeph. 3:17). People today have been frightened "out of their wits" by movies about Armageddon and the destruction of the "late, great planet earth." Of course, unbelievers should obviously tremble. But people who know of the victories of "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" the son of Yahweh are confident, not fearful. He has conquered (Rev. 5:5). No enemy is too great for our God. He loves to give new victories. In fact, because of the victory already won by Jesus, the awesome battle shaping up with Gog and Magog is no contest. They are taken care of in one fell swoop (Rev. 20:9). Great are the victories of God!

A New Age

The prophets anticipated a new day when God's presence would be more obvious than in the past. This new era will include the dissemination of the law of Yahweh among the peoples of the earth, the worship of nation with nation, the flowering of peace, and a universal language.

Both Isaiah and Micah spoke of a new age when numerous persons would actually desire to hear the laws of the Lord. In turn they would carry them back to their friends. The loving ways of Yahweh would then prevail upon the earth. His good gifts would benefit all the inhabitants of the earth. A new love and peace would be obvious

everywhere (Isa. 2:2-4, Mic. 4:1-4). Isaiah even envisioned major powers worshiping Yahweh together and being at peace with one another (Isa. 19:23; cf. Mic. 7:11-17).

In Zephaniah's beautiful vision of all the nations coming together, some were destroyed, but some were also preserved in order to create a new serving people. Yahweh is still looking for people through whom he will bless the nations. The new people he will call can disseminate their message far and wide because they will speak one language. "Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord" (Zeph. 3:9-10). The new breakthrough of Yahweh is also called the "day of the Lord" (Joel 1:15, Mal. 4:1-5).

This new age had still not arrived as the Old Testament ended. But the people who ate and slept and walked with Jesus believed the prophets had the age of his church in mind. People from the far corners of the earth heard the good news of the resurrection of Jesus on a visit to Jerusalem (Acts 2). Because of him people from all the nations worshiped together. He brought peace on earth by teaching that his followers should even love their enemies (Matt. 5:43-48; cf. 5:9). And as people from all nations heard the declaration of God's work in Christ, amazingly they each heard in their own language. All heard and understood the new message of God (Acts 2:6).

Some of the implications of these prophecies, however, possibly have not yet been fulfilled. Some people insist that none of these promises have come to fruition. They believe the promises

have to do with precise developments in a rapture and a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. They obviously ignore the new day of God which happened in Jesus. On the other hand, people who insist that all prophesy is highly imaginative, overly figurative, and without literal significance may some day be in for a rude awakening. After tracing the promises of God through the Old Testament, it should be obvious that we are often surprised by joy. Yahweh still has work to do in this world. The prophets encourage us always to be open to the future in expectation. Knowing the sort of god Yahweh is, we must take precautions against a hardening of the categories.

Yahweh will be what he will be. We believe the future is his, but what we can be sure of in his future is only a sketchy outline. He will provide the details. We witness the action, wait for the dust to settle, and then piece together how the fulfillment matches the promise. We therefore stand before these prophetic visions in both certainty and uncertainty. We know that the future of the world is in the hands of God and he will do the unexpected. But we can never anticipate God's specific actions, despite popular contemporary preachers who claim inside information and confide that by the Bible they can declare tomorrow's headlines today. It is enough to know that God is at the helm. We may not know what the future brings, but we know the one who brings the future.

A New Reign and a New Ruler

Some prophets apparently had in mind a resurgence of the political kingdoms of David and Solomon. Amos anticipated that after destruction

Yahweh would restore the fortunes of his people (Amos 9:14). However, the prophet who highlighted the new reign or kingdom was Daniel.

In Daniel, God's people are in exile. They were evicted from the promised land. Rather than praising Yahweh in Jerusalem, they were weeping by the river Chedbar (Ezek. 1:1). Daniel had a grand vision of a succession of mighty empires, more than just an endless rise and fall of civilizations. Each successive fall of an empire set the stage for the break-in of a new rule, the rule of Yahweh himself. "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed" (Dan. 2:44). Paul said Christians were situated in just such a kingdom. "He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13; cf. 1 Cor. 15:25).

Tied in with the new reign and inseparable from it is a new ruler from the family of David. "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isa. 11:1). Most of these passages speak of a new king from the family of David, a human being like the former ones, but having new qualities of loyalty to Yahweh. But perhaps there are clues that Yahweh will bring forth a succession of new kings and, at some crucial juncture, a descendant of David with unanticipated powers and connections.

In Micah 5:2 the prophet spoke of a ruler born in Bethlehem "whose origin is from of old, from ancient of days." We need to remember that David was born in Bethlehem (1 Sam. 17:12). That was 300 years before Micah. Therefore, the scion of David that Micah anticipated had roots reaching

back for 300 years. His origin is "from of old" (5:2). He will be a majestic leader of God's people. "And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God" (Mic. 5:4). Christians understood that, in a special sense, Jesus fulfilled this anticipation.

Isaiah 9 envisions a mighty king of David. As John Willis wrote in his *Living Word Commentary* on Isaiah, all the terms of Isaiah 9:6-7 are and may be applied to an earthly king from David. This is true, but we cannot limit the work of God. He may even have in mind here a scion who was his very own Son. Obviously, the early Christians anticipated a human messiah (Mark 10:35-45). They were surprised by joy, however, when the resurrection confirmed that he was God's very Son (Acts 2:36).

Daniel 7 gives the clearest affirmation of a heavenly figure receiving a kingdom. "His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away" (Dan. 7:14). The phrase "like a son of man" (vs. 13), means that the one to receive the kingdom was not a man, but like one. He was either less or more than man. The implication clearly is that he was more. By the first century the Jews were talking about a new king (an anointed one, messiah) a new messianic kingdom, and a messianic age. Daniel 7 has such a king and kingdom in mind. For the early Christians, this figure "like a son of man" was obviously Jesus himself. By his use of the title "son of man," he shows that he identified with this prediction and claimed divine origins for himself. Even the language of Daniel 7 describes the coming again of Jesus. "And then

they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:26).

The section of Isaiah beginning with chapter 40 frequently speaks of a figure to appear in Israel's future—a servant. The servant is the channel through whom God will bring his blessings to the nations (Isa. 49:6). It is not real clear who this servant is. Sometimes the servant is Israel (Isa. 49:3). By Isaiah 53:8, if not earlier, the servant turns out to be an individual who has suffered for Yahweh's own people, not just for the nations.

Who is this servant? Is he a prophet, priest, or king, or simply a common citizen picked for this role? This text makes no reference to the servant as a kingly or divine figure. But the text does not limit how God will fulfill his word. The early Christians believed the servant was Jesus, descendant of David, the anointed king of God's new people, God's very Son (Acts 8:26-40).

A New Relationship

The prophets anticipated that God himself would provide the remedy for man's sin by giving him a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek. 36:26). When that happens, man will be faithful to God, creating a new relationship. "I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (Ezek. 36:27). Jeremiah referred to the new relationship as a new covenant. "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31). In the new relationship God will "put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33).

For Paul the new relationship came through the arrival of Jesus. The Holy Spirit also arrived with the coming of Jesus (Gal. 3:1-5). Ezekiel said that the spirit of God would cause his people to walk in his statutes. Paul said, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). He clearly understood the fruit of the Spirit as the fulfilling of the law of God through Christ (Gal. 6:2).

His Loves Endures Forever

The God of the Old Testament has shown himself through all the days and years as a God who loves man, the being made in his image. He is immersed in a continual struggle, working daily with his servants, preparing them as warehouse managers who will dispense his good gifts to the nations.

But as the Old Testament comes to a close, it is not all over. Many statements provide assurances that, over the horizon in some future age, Yahweh will break into history in a new and decisive manner. The New Testament tells us the good news that it actually happened. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Eph. 1:3). In the new day of Jesus Christ, the steadfast love of Yahweh descended upon all creation.

O give thanks to the Lord for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Psalm 136:1

HE LOVES FOREVER

Take a panoramic look at the Old Testament message from creation to the prophets and delve into many troubling questions:

- How could an all-wise God create a flawed world?
- Why did God impose hundreds of rigid laws on the Israelites?
- How could a loving God be responsible for such violence and destruction?
- Like Israel, do we face experiences in the wilderness and captivity?

Thomas Olbricht provides some satisfying insights to these and other questions. Through it all you will discover "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end" (Lam 3:22).

THOMAS H. OLBRICHT is a professor of Bible at Abilene Christian University and serves as an elder for the Minter Lane Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas. He is the author of another Journey Book, **The Power to Be**, and an upcoming book about the message of the New Testament.

