

Good Word Schedule
“Rest in Christ”
July, August, September 2021

- | | | |
|-----|----------|------------------------------------|
| #1 | July 3 | “Living in a 24/7 Society” |
| #2 | July 10 | “Restless and Rebellious” |
| #3 | July 17 | “The Roots of Restlessness” |
| #4 | July 24 | “The Cost of Rest” |
| #5 | July 31 | “Come to Me . . .” |
| #6 | Aug 7 | “Finding Rest in Family Ties” |
| #7 | Aug 14 | “Rest, Relationships, and Healing” |
| #8 | Aug 21 | “Free to Rest” |
| #9 | Aug 28 | “The Rhythms of Rest” |
| #10 | Sept 4 | “Sabbath Rest” |
| #11 | Sept 11 | “Longing for More” |
| #12 | Sept 18 | “The Restless Prophet” |
| #13 | Sept. 25 | “The Ultimate Rest” |

Guests for this series of GOOD WORD broadcasts are Dave Thomas and Phil Muthersbaugh. Dave is a member of the Walla Walla University School of Theology; Phil is a retired pastor who has done some contract teaching for the School of Theology. Moderator, host, and study guide author is Alden Thompson, Professor Emeritus of the WWU School of Theology.

For more information about GOOD WORD contact the School of Theology at Walla Walla University by phone (509-527-2194), fax (509-527-2945), email (GoodWord@wallawalla.edu) or regular mail (Walla Walla University, 204 S. College Ave., College Place WA 99324).

Past and present GOOD WORD and PROBE broadcasts are available from our website at www.wallawalla.edu/goodword. GOOD WORD is jointly sponsored by the School of Theology and KGTS at Walla Walla University.

GOOD WORD 2021.3

Lesson #1 - July 3

“Rest in Christ”

Gen. 2:1-3; Jer. 45:1-5; Mark 6:30-32; Gen. 4:1-12

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: “Living in a 24/7 Society”

Leading Question: If life in Bible times was much more pastoral and leisurely than our fast-paced modern world, how can an ancient world like that help us today?

Our lessons for this quarter all fall under the general heading of “Rest in Christ.” We will focus on our need for rest and how Christ can help us fill that need. We will seek to apply biblical passages to the practical issues of our day.

Let’s begin with our leading question and explore the question of how a book from an ancient world can even apply to our world at all, much less help us. Modern books date very quickly. Why shouldn’t we expect that to be the case with the Bible too?

Let’s see if a quotation from C. S. Lewis can help us:

“The earliest converts were converted by a single historical fact (the Resurrection) and a single theological doctrine (the Redemption) operating on a sense of sin which they already had – and sin, not against some new fancy-dress law produced as a novelty by a “great man,” but against the old, platitudinous, universal moral law which they had been taught by their nurses and mothers. The “Gospels” come later, and were written, not to make Christians, but to edify Christians already made. (*The Screwtape Letters* [1961], ch. XXIII.3

Question: Do questions of sin and salvation transcend time and place bringing religious people onto common ground? What about non-believers? What about people of varied faith traditions?

Key Biblical Passages. In this lesson we will focus on four quite different biblical passages:

Genesis 2:1-3: 2: God creates a rest day:

1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

Jeremiah 45:1-5: God promises preservation and rest for Baruch, Jeremiah’s Scribe:

1 The word that the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Baruch son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah: 2 Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: 3 You said, “Woe is me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning,

and I find no rest.” 4 Thus you shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: I am going to break down what I have built, and pluck up what I have planted—that is, the whole land. 5 And you, do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh, says the Lord; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in every place to which you may go.”

Mark 6:30-32: Jesus commands his disciples to come apart and rest:

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Genesis 4:1-12: God declares that Cain will be a “restless wanderer” [NIV]:

1 Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.” 2 Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. 6 The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

8 Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” 10 And the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. 12 When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer [NIV: “a restless wanderer”] on the earth.”

Genesis 2:1-3: 2: God creates a rest day. The official study guide puts the question very nicely: “Why would God create a rest day before anyone was even tired?”

Comment: In our day we are easily exhausted in spite of our many labor saving devices. Perhaps “rest” is about more than just recuperating from exhaustion. God built into our lives cycles of rest, every day at night and once a week on Sabbath.

Jeremiah 45:1-5: God promises preservation and rest for Baruch, Jeremiah’s Scribe:

Comment: In the days of Jeremiah, as Jerusalem was careening toward exile – Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 587-586 – Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe, had complained to the Lord:

“Woe is me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.”

Through Jeremiah, the Lord spoke to him, promising, that in spite of all the trauma, God would give him his life “as a prize of war in every place to which you may go.” Note that this promise was given in the 4th year of Jehoiakim, about 605 or 604, with some 20 years of suffering before Jerusalem finally fell.

Question: Is that promise of deliverance one that all of us can claim?

Comment: A favorite promise from Jesus is the one that invites everyone to come to him for rest “because my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). Note that the yoke is easy and the burden is light – yet there is still a yoke and still a burden. God does not promise freedom from trials, but help in our trials.

Mark 6:30-32: Jesus commands his disciples to come apart and rest.

Comment: As the disciples returned from their “authorized” mission journey, Jesus commanded them to “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Mark adds that so many people had been coming and going that they “had no leisure even to eat. So they went away in a boat to a deserted place by themselves.”

Question: Is it possible that those who work directly in ministry may need rest and isolation more than people involved in “ordinary” labor?

Genesis 4:1-12: God declares that Cain will be a “restless wanderer” [NIV].

Question: Was the Lord being gracious, merciful, or just when he declared Cain to be “cursed from the ground” and that he must leave home?

Comment: By the time that God had finished sentencing Cain, Adam and Eve had lost both of their sons: one was murdered, the other exiled.

Many Christians assume that Cain’s sacrifice was not accepted because it was a fruit offering rather than an animal sacrifice. Yet a careful reading of the sacrificial codes indicates that a non-animal offering was an option for those who were poor (cf. Lev. 5:11-13). Apparently Cain had brought an offering with a wrong spirit and that was why it was not accepted.

Anger continues to be one of the most deadly emotions. Patience is on every single New Testament virtue list and anger is on none of them. But the Lord can heal our anger if we come to him: “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). That is how we find rest in Christ.

Leading Question: “Can a believer question God without being sinfully rebellious?”

In an authoritarian culture, any questioning of “authority” is already condemned as an act of rebellion. Josef Stalin, who ruled the USSR with an iron fist from 1922 to 1953, bequeathed to the Russian people an entirely closed system in which even the smallest questioning of authority could lead to loss of job, to exile, or to death. Only when two brave Russians decided to step out, at great personal risk, was a modicum of freedom restored.

The novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918 -2008), winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970, and the nuclear scientist Andrei Sakharov (1921 -1989), winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975, joined forces to break the smothering hold of authority in their native Russia. Speaking of Solzhenitsyn, one writer has said, “In terms of the effect he has had on history, Solzhenitsyn is the dominant writer of the twentieth century” (David Remnick, *Resurrection*, 1997).

In biblical history, the figures of Abraham and Moses stand out as believers who boldly challenged God – in the interest of defending him, to be sure – and won their way through.

But having thus struck a blow for the right to ask questions, I want to pick up the theme of lesson which focuses on the dangers of being “restless and rebellious.”

Numbers 11-14 lie at the heart of our lesson, 4 chapters that describe God’s attempts to deal with the rebellious ex-slaves. But 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 brings us a New Testament commentary on the Old Testament history of rebellion. These two sections of Scripture, one from each Testament, will be the focus of this lesson.

Note: The last verse of the NT commentary on the OT rebellion, namely, 1 Corinthians 10:11, provides a very useful concept that has a wide application throughout all Scripture. The message is clear in the classic words of the KJV: “Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.”

Devout people are very much tempted to use the words of Scripture to make universal and absolute applications to events in our day, a practice that is potentially deadly. A remarkable and helpful corrective to that universalizing impulse is provided in the writings of Ellen White:

“Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing.” – *Ministry of Healing*, 483 (1905)

One of my students, listening to the way I used Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White, blurted out in class, “What you are doing is using a casebook instead of a codebook approach.” It was as though a light came on for me. “You’re right,” I said. “Thank you for the inspiration!”

The “examples” of 1 Cor. 10:11 provides a “safer,” more biblical-sounding, approach to the idea. It’s worth noting that the “casebook/codebook” distinction has triggered the most extreme reactions of almost anything I have written. Many of my students say that is the most helpful idea that they have learned in my classes. By contrast, those who have not been in my classes but have heard or read about the casebook/codebook distinction, have sometimes been very troubled.

Part of the difficulty stems from the title for Chapter 7 in the original edition of my book *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Review and Herald, 1991): “God’s Word: Casebook or Codebook?” That was also the title for that chapter when it was reprinted in *Ministry* (July 1991, 6-10.) That “feels” too relativistic.

In the second edition of *Inspiration*, I include a one-page introduction to chapter 7, explaining the change in chapter title. This is a short version explaining that change:

“In the first edition I was so keen on introducing the diversity in Scripture, that I did not take into account the fragmenting impression that such an emphasis can leave in the minds of some readers. Only with a secure nucleus that never changes, as embodied in the law pyramid (the One Great Command of Love, Jesus’ Two Great Commands, and the Ten), will devout conservatives be willing to address issues of diversity. From a practical perspective, this is the most significant change in the new edition.”

The revised “casebook” chapter is included at the end of this lesson

But now let’s turn to the “examples,” the “cases” of the “restless and rebellious” people of God in Numbers 11-14. 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 summarizes the instances of rebellion. But Numbers provides the more complete picture.

Numbers 11-14: “The Restless and Rebellious”: ten incidents. “Restless and Rebellious” is a wonderful label that covers all four chapters. But the separate incidents are worth noting:

1. Grumbles, fire, and a complaint from Moses: 11:1-15. The chapter opens with a surge of whining from the people. The Lord heard it and was angry. A fire from the Lord began to destroy the people at the outlying edge of the camp. But Moses’ intercession effectively quenched the fire. Finally, Moses complained mightily to the Lord. The CEV (Contemporary English Version) translates his complaint/prayer in vivid language:

“I am your servant, Lord, so why are you doing this to me? What have I done to deserve this? You’ve made me responsible for all these people, 12 but they’re not my children. You told me to nurse them along and to carry them to the land you promised their ancestors. 13 They keep whining for meat, but where can I get

meat for them? 14 This job is too much for me. How can I take care of all these people by myself? 15 If this is the way you're going to treat me, just kill me now and end my miserable life!"

2. The Lord responds to Moses' complaint: 70 "inspired prophets to the rescue"! 11:11-30: Put rather quaintly, the NRSV describes how the division of responsibility would be spread:

11:17 "I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself."

But the Lord wasn't finished:

11:18-23: And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the Lord, saying, 'If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt.' Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. 19 You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, 20 but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" 21 But Moses said, "The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month'! 22 Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?" 23 The Lord said to Moses, "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not."

3. The blessing and curse of the quail: 11:31-35. As promised, God gave them meat, enough quail to make them sick forever. But the aftermath is sobering:

11:35 "But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague."

4. Miriam and Aaron rebel against Moses' authority: 12:1-16. When Miriam and Aaron grumbled against Moses because of his Cushite wife, the Lord passed quick judgment on Miriam, striking her with leprosy, and said she should be sent outside the camp for one week. During that time, the encampment stayed in place.

5. Spying out the land: 13:1-24. The initial paragraphs reporting the visit of the spies to Canaan are simply descriptive. All twelve of the disciples were particularly impressed by the lush fruit.

6. The spies are divided: 13:25-33. Ten of the twelve spies said it couldn't be done. Caleb gave a vigorous minority report, but to no avail.

7. Rebellion: 14:1-12. Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua urged the people to move ahead. But the rebellion was now in full bloom. There was talk of a stoning. The Lord was not pleased:

And the Lord said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? 12 I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

Just as after the rebellion at Sinai (Exodus 32:10), God threatened to destroy the people and make of Moses a great nation, he again offered to wipe out the people and make of Moses a great people. But Moses would have nothing of it.

13 But Moses said to the Lord, “Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, 14 and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people; for you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. 15 Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, 16 ‘It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.’ 17 And now, therefore, let the power of the Lord be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying,

18 ‘The Lord is slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love,
forgiving iniquity and transgression,
but by no means clearing the guilty,
visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
to the third and the fourth generation.’

19 Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now.”

20 Then the Lord said, “I do forgive, just as you have asked

But there were consequences:

21 nevertheless—as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord— 22 none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, 23 shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it. 24 But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. 25 Now, since the Amalekites

and the Canaanites live in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.”

9. The unfaithful spies die immediately; the rest are told that they will die in the wilderness: Numbers 14:26-38. Only Caleb and Joshua were excluded from the sobering judgment. They were the two spies who gave a good report.

10. The rebellious and disastrous invasion: Numbers 14:39-45. All of a sudden the people decided that they wanted to invade the land after all. But again Moses was appalled and tried to dissuade them:

39 When Moses told these words to all the Israelites, the people mourned greatly. 40 They rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, “Here we are. We will go up to the place that the Lord has promised, for we have sinned.” 41 But Moses said, “Why do you continue to transgress the command of the Lord? That will not succeed. 42 Do not go up, for the Lord is not with you; do not let yourselves be struck down before your enemies. 43 For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will confront you there, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following the Lord, the Lord will not be with you.” 44 But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, even though the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and Moses, had not left the camp. 45 Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them, pursuing them as far as Hormah.

Questions: In this astonishing survey of promise and punishment, hope and dejection, in short a “restless and rebellious” roller coaster, how should we evaluate the following “players”?

A. God

B. Moses

C. The people

D. Caleb and Joshua

Chapter 7 from *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*, 2nd edition, 2016

**God’s Word:
Casebook and Codebook**

In the revised edition of this book, I have made one small but significant change in the title. Instead of a question: “Casebook or Codebook?” I have moved to a clear, affirmative

statement: “Casebook *and* Codebook.” To my astonishment, the suggestion put forward in the first edition that Scripture is often more like a casebook than a codebook has produced a volatile response. This revision addresses that very issue.

The uproar over the use of the word casebook was particularly surprising to me because my goal in writing this book in the first place was to establish what is clear and immovable in Scripture – those things that never change – over against those adaptations of God’s law to particular times and places, that is, the things that do change.

Chapters seven and eight, in particular, address the issue in some detail. And the following chapters often make use of the concept. But let me give a clear summary in advance, a snapshot of the great Law Pyramid:

The One – The one great principle of love: “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10).

The Two – Jesus’ two great commands: First, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Matt. 22:37, quoting Deut. 6:5); second, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39, quoting Lev. 19:18).

The Ten – The commands spoken from Sinai and written in stone (Deut. 4:13, referring to Exod. 20 and Deut. 5).

The One, the Two, and the Ten – that’s the Law Pyramid. It never changes. Everything else in Scripture illustrates and applies the One, the Two, and the Ten in more specific times and places.

Now let’s get on with this chapter as it was in the first edition.

A casual conversation after church from several years ago provides a good introduction to the casebook/codebook question posed by this chapter.

A man stepped up to me and volunteered the following comment: “I see that the School of Theology is going to be ordaining women,” he began. He had taken his cue from an article in favor of ordination that had appeared in *Westwind*, the Walla Walla College alumni journal. Based on interviews with the School of Theology faculty, the article reflected the consensus of the theology faculty that women should be ordained. Each interview, however, had included an important qualifier: “when the church is ready.”

“Ordination is not the responsibility of the School of Theology,” I reminded him. “But we do believe the church should move in that direction, at least here in North America.”

“But what do you do with Paul’s counsel,” he returned, “that women are to keep quiet and not have authority over men?” (See 1 Timothy 2:11-15.)

“Paul’s counsel reflected the culture of his day, not an enduring principle.”

“But Paul based his statement on the fact that Adam was created before Eve.”

“That was Paul’s logic, not necessarily God’s,” I said, adding then an echo from *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 21: “God has not placed Himself on trial in the Bible in words, logic, or rhetoric.”

“Wasn’t Paul inspired?”

“Of course. But inspired writers always address their own culture – and culture changes.”

“But God does not change.”

Sensing that it was time to tap into some Old Testament illustrations, I asked about the laws dealing with slavery, citing those in Exodus 21:1-6.

“I see nothing wrong with slavery.”

“And polygamy?” I responded. “What about the law in Exodus 21:7-11 that commands a man to grant full marital rights to his first wife if he takes the second one. Does that still apply?”

“Except for elders and deacons, I find nothing in the Bible that would forbid a man from having more than one wife.”

Somewhat unnerved by his self-confident answers, I decided to try once more: “What about blood vengeance?” I asked. “Do you think a man should even the score when a near relative is killed?” (See Numbers 35:9-28).

“If we practiced blood vengeance today,” was the ready response, “we would have a lot less trouble with law and order.”

To my knowledge, this brother did not own slaves, have more than one wife, or practice blood vengeance. But he still felt compelled to argue that a law once given by God should live forever. For him, Scripture clearly was a *codebook*.

In our culture today, a codebook is an instrument of precision. When a contractor builds to code, he goes by the book. The minimums are clear, the specifications exact. If he wishes, he may install more insulation or provide more access than the code prescribes, but not less.

Typically a codebook demands *application* more than *interpretation*, obedient *compliance* more than thoughtful *reflection*. It anticipates a straightforward query from the inspector: “Did you follow code?” The answer is a simple yes or no. Proof of compliance is at hand and easily measurable.

Is Scripture like that? In some respects, yes. But I believe there is a better approach for Scripture as a whole. Let me suggest two propositions as a springboard for discussion:

1. *Except for the law pyramid, Scripture is more like a casebook than a codebook.*
2. *Believers are reluctant to admit the casebook model for fear of undermining the authority of Scripture.*

We will take up each proposition in turn and explore what it means for the church today.

Scripture: Casebook More Than Codebook

I am indebted to one of my students for the suggestion that Scripture is like a *casebook*. He simply blurted it out during a discussion on biblical law: “What you are describing is simply a casebook,” he exclaimed. Since then, I have become increasingly convinced that the casebook/codebook comparison is a fruitful one for helping us understand the nature of Scripture.

Whereas a codebook is at home in legal circles and in the realm of the trades and technology, a casebook is often a more useful tool in the behavioral and social sciences. It can also provide the raw data on which certain legal judgments are based. But instead of *mandating* a single, clearly defined response as a codebook would do, a casebook *describes* a series of examples which reflect a variety of responses under varied circumstances. None of the cases may be fully definitive or prescriptive in other settings, but each is described in a manner that could be helpful to someone facing similar circumstances.

In this chapter I will attempt to show, by way of pertinent examples, why a casebook model is preferable to a codebook for explaining much of what we find in Scripture. The

following chapters continue the discussion. Chapter 8 develops a more thorough and systematic argument for the casebook approach, especially in the realm of law. Chapter 9 explores a specific New Testament passage, Acts 15, in which the casebook approach provides a helpful framework within which to interpret events bridging the Old and New Testaments.

In the examples that follow, we will note instances in which the complexity of changing times and circumstances suggest that a casebook approach can provide the right kind of framework for understanding the breadth of biblical material.

Law Codes – The examples cited above in my after-church conversation – slavery, polygamy, and blood vengeance – are all customs addressed by Old Testament law codes but which most Christians would consider inappropriate for Westerners in our day.

If, however, we want a specific biblical command indicating that these customs are no longer valid, we will be disappointed. In a technical sense, the brother who accosted me after church was right. Nowhere does Scripture directly condemn slavery, polygamy, or blood vengeance.

Since the next chapter discusses biblical law in greater detail, one additional example can suffice here to illustrate how the Bible itself adopts something like a casebook approach, actually reversing the application of a biblical law in the light of different circumstances.

The example involves the relationship between a man and his brother's wife. As part of a list of forbidden incestuous relationships, Leviticus 18:16 specifically commanded a man not to "uncover the nakedness" of his brother's wife. This law formed the basis for John the Baptist's condemnation of Herod Antipas (Matt. 14:3, 4).

If a man died without male offspring, however, Deuteronomy 25:5-10 describes how a brother actually was *commanded* to take his brother's wife and carry on the brother's name. This law, known as the levirate marriage law (law of the husband's brother), was the basis for the Sadducees' trick question to Jesus: "In the resurrection, to whom does a woman belong who has married seven brothers in turn?" (Matt. 22:23-33).

While the circumstances mandating the exception for levirate marriage are clearly spelled out, a legitimate question would be: Do either one or both of these laws still apply in our day? Regardless of the answer, a casebook approach would seem preferable to a codebook model for accommodating the differences between them.

Proverbs – A rather striking instance of apparently contradictory proverbs occurs in Proverbs 26:4, 5. The first proverb recommends one line of action, the second precisely the opposite:

26:4 "Answer *not* a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself" (RSV).

26:5 "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (RSV).

Some first century rabbis found such seeming contradictions troubling, even suggesting that Proverbs did not belong in the canon. A few moments of reflection, however, will suggest that proverbs by their very nature are likely to be *generally* true rather than *universally* true. In the world of non-inspired proverbs, for example, we may set two perfectly good proverbs against each other as apparently contradictory: "Too many cooks spoil the broth" versus "Many hands make light work."

What determines which proverb applies? The circumstances in the kitchen, of course.

Any cook can think of times when one proverb would apply more appropriately than the other.

As for the biblical proverbs cited above, one could conceive of circumstances when a fool should be confronted, but other circumstances when silence would be preferable. All that assumes, of course, that we are perfectly clear that we are dealing with a fool.

How could a codebook deal with all of that? It cannot. When more than one application is possible, a casebook is more helpful.

Prophetic Counsel – What would a prophet say to the following question: “Should God’s people resist a pagan invader or surrender?”

In the days of King Hezekiah, when the Assyrians threatened Jerusalem, Isaiah the prophet counseled resistance and promised victory for the kingdom of Judah (Isaiah 37:5-7).

Some 100 years later, in the days of King Zedekiah, Jeremiah the prophet gave just the opposite advice when Babylon threatened Jerusalem: “He who goes out and surrenders to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have his life as a prize of war” (Jer. 21:9, RSV). Understandably, Jeremiah was accused of treason.

We may not understand all the varied circumstances that led God to extend mercy to His people under Hezekiah and withdraw it from them under Zedekiah, though Hezekiah’s reputation certainly was superior to Zedekiah’s. But we certainly would expect God to adapt His approach to circumstances. And since a variety of factors determines the prophet’s response, a casebook seems more adequate than a codebook.

The Words of Jesus – A question for Jesus: “What kind of physical preparations and equipment do we need when we are serving in Your name?”

Jesus answers in Luke 22:35, 36 (RSV): “‘When I sent you out with no purse or bag or sandals, did you lack anything?’ They said, ‘Nothing.’ He said to them, ‘But now, let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a bag. And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one.’”

How could a codebook clearly prescribe what we are to take when? Jesus’ answer requires a casebook approach.

Bible Biographies: Public Witnessing – A question for both Daniel and Esther: “How important is it to state one’s convictions clearly when under threat?”

Daniel would say: “In one instance, I told the king’s servant that we could not eat the king’s food. Another situation involved my friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When they refused to bow the knee on the plain of Dura, they were thrown into the fiery furnace. But they stood firm. Finally, when King Darius forbid his subjects the right to pray to anyone other than himself, I kept on praying three times a day from my open window. For my convictions, I was thrown in the lions’ den. But the Lord protected me.”

By contrast, Esther would respond: “When King Ahasuerus sought a new queen, I obeyed my cousin Mordecai and did not identify myself as a Jew. I was treated as all the other maidens until he selected me as queen. Even then I did not reveal my identity. Not until the very existence of my people was at stake did I take my life in my hands and admit that I was a Jew.”

When Daniel tells us to speak up and Esther espouses keeping quiet, we know we need a casebook more than a codebook.

Bible Biographies: Soliciting Support from Pagans – A question for Ezra and Nehemiah: “Is it appropriate to ask pagan neighbors for protection and financial support for a trip back to Jerusalem?”

Ezra, in 457 BCE, answered no (Ezra 8:21-23). Ellen White comments: “In this matter, Ezra and his companions saw an opportunity to magnify the name of God before the heathen. Faith in the power of the living God would be strengthened if the Israelites themselves should now reveal implicit faith in their divine Leader. They therefore determined to put their trust wholly in Him. *They would ask for no guard of soldiers.* They would give the heathen no occasion to ascribe to the strength of man the glory that belongs to God alone. They could not afford to arouse in the minds of their heathen friends one doubt as to the sincerity of their dependence on God as His people. *Strength would be gained, not through wealth, not through the power and influence of idolatrous men, but through the favor of God*” (PK, pp. 615, 616, italics mine).

Nehemiah, in 444 BCE, answered yes (Nehemiah 2:7-9). Ellen White comments: “His request to the king had been so favorably received that Nehemiah was encouraged to ask for still further assistance. *To give dignity and authority to his mission, as well as to provide protection on the journey, he asked for and secured a military escort.* He obtained royal letters to the governors of the provinces beyond the Euphrates, the territory through which he must pass on his way to Judea; and he obtained, also, a letter to the keeper of the king’s forest in the mountains of Lebanon, directing him to furnish such timber as would be needed

“Nehemiah did not depend upon uncertainty. The means that he lacked he solicited from those who were able to bestow. And the Lord is still willing to move upon the hearts of those in possession of His goods, in behalf of the cause of truth. *Those who labor for Him are to avail themselves of the help that He prompts men to give.* These gifts may open ways to which the light of truth shall go to many benighted lands. The donors may have no faith in Christ, no acquaintance with His word; but their gifts are not on this account to be refused” (PK, pp. 633, 634, italics mine).

Christians who are sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of the world around them can easily conceive of circumstances when it would be wise to follow Ezra’s example. Other occasions may call for Nehemiah’s response. The casebook of Scripture includes both Ezra and Nehemiah and we can learn from both.

Apostolic Counsel – A question for the Apostle Paul: “What about marriage in these last days?”

“That depends,” he says in 1 Corinthians 7. “It is better to be single. But if you are already married, partners have a mutual obligation to grant each other conjugal rights” (vss. 1-7).

“If you are now single, even though I would prefer that you remain that way, it is still better to marry than to burn with passion” (verses 8, 9).

“If you are married to a non-believer, stay with your partner unless he or she wishes to separate. If the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so. In such a case the believer is not bound” (verses 12-16).

The many variables Paul suggests would seem to fit more comfortably in a casebook than in a codebook.

Summary – In some of the examples noted above, the circumstances relating to apparently contradictory applications are spelled out. This is particularly true of the ancient law codes. Paul’s various concessions relating to marriage are also rather well defined, though they do not eliminate the need for significant personal decisions.

In most of the other instances, however, Scripture is largely silent about the reasons and

circumstances that resulted in seemingly opposite actions or reactions. Since more than one legitimate alternative was open to the believer, the believer was required to choose a course of action, without a clear-cut command or a specific revelation from the Lord.

That places a high level of responsibility on the individual human being. It raises the fearful possibility of choosing wrongly and rationalizing away our duty to our own detriment and to the dishonor of God. All that is rather sobering.

Let us remind ourselves, however, that in each of the above instances, believers have been quite capable of integrating both sides of a seeming “contradiction” into a meaningful pattern of obedience toward God. To answer a fool or not, to solicit support from non-believers or not, to witness publicly or silently – all these are serious matters of obedience towards God. But each alternative can be seen as an obedient response in the right circumstances. The difficulty is that no codebook can provide us with the “right” answer in advance. We have a casebook with the various possibilities laid out before us. But ultimately, we have to choose our response. God will not do it for us.

And that last point is where the rub comes with many devout believers. Admitting that Scripture is a casebook seems entirely too open-ended. It could be seen as a dangerous invitation to take too much responsibility upon ourselves. That could lead to wrong decisions that would dishonor God and His Word.

This reluctance to be straightforward with Scripture as a casebook is a matter we must probe more carefully in connection with our second proposition.

The Reluctance to Accept a Casebook Approach

Devout believers respect God’s authority and the authority of His Word. It is understandable, perhaps, that believers in general are reluctant to say privately or publicly that a particular command or example in Scripture does not apply to them. To risk the possibility of the human will overruling the divine will is not an attractive prospect for someone really serious about obedience. Furthermore, examples can be multiplied of “careless” Christians who dismiss their responsibilities all too easily with a times-have-changed argument.

But even if we admit the cogency of the previously mentioned examples, the rhetoric from devout believers tends to portray God’s Word as providing much clearer guidance than is actually the case when we come down to specific circumstances in our lives. Several quotations, gleaned at random from both official and unofficial Adventist sources can serve to illustrate the fears, the longings, and expectations that we bring to Scripture – all of which can cloud our own responsibilities before God and obscure the nature of the decisions we are making.

The fear of relying on humanity is reflected in the following: “We cannot measure right and wrong by our feelings or by what the majority are doing! We need something from outside ourselves to tell us where the truth lies” (Joe Crews, *Inside Report*, vol. 4, no. 5 [n.d.]).

The deep reverence for inspired writings is suggested in an advertisement for some booklets by Ellen White. They are described as being “inspired by the Holy Spirit, and therefore faultless in the messages they contain” (*Our Firm Foundation*, July 1989, p. 10). The term “faultless” implies a certain transcendent quality overshadowing any need for human beings to interpret and apply.

A longing for consistency can lead us to overlook the fact that some divine commands

were temporary and that God has introduced some dramatic changes in the way He has dealt with humanity. Note how the following statement reflects the desire for consistency: “But the Bible itself offers abundant evidence that advancing light does not contradict past light. What was truth in Abraham’s day did not become error in Christ’s day” (Robertson, p. 66).

There is a larger consistency in Scripture, to be sure – Ellen White’s phrase is “underlying harmony.” But a desire for consistency should not lead us to oversimplify the evidence from Scripture. Unless we can tuck the “apparent contradictions” into a casebook, how can we explain such a startling event as God’s command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac, to mention just one vivid example?

In connection with the use of Ellen White’s writings as a commentary on Scripture, the same source drops a revealing hint of our deep-seated reluctance to admit that human beings must and do interpret inspired writings. A question mark is raised over the person who considers himself “free to determine his own interpretation of Scripture.” Why is that dangerous? Because “One’s own authority may compete with the gift of prophecy” (Robertson, p. 64).

But let us be candid about the twin dangers facing the church. Some people, indeed, have a tendency to disregard divine authority. They take the reins into their own hands and do not listen to God’s Word. But a much larger number in the church are all too willing to let some authority do their thinking for them – a parent, a pastor, the church, a commentary, Ellen White, even the Bible.

An authoritarian approach to Scripture, one that assumes that all our thinking has been done for us, results in perhaps the greatest irony of all, *in the name of God, we end up relying on an arm of flesh.*

In the aftermath of the 1888 Minneapolis Conference, Ellen White spoke again and again of the need for believers to study and think for themselves. The following quotation is particularly appropriate when it comes to the topic of Bible study: “Beware of rejecting that which is truth. The great danger with our people has been that of *depending upon men, and making flesh their arm. Those who have not been in the habit of searching the Bible for themselves, or weighing evidence,* have confidence in the leading men, and accept the decisions they make; and thus many will reject the very messages God sends to His people, if these leading brethren do not accept them” (TM, pp. 106, 107, italics mine).

But now let us work toward a concrete solution. If we clearly define Scripture as a *casebook*, then we are admitting that the Bible lays before us the many differing ways that God has guided His people in the past, but *without making our decisions for us.*

How then can we know whether to answer a fool or not (Proverbs)? To witness publicly (Daniel) or keep quiet (Esther)? To make preparations and solicit help (Nehemiah) or simply to trust that God will provide (Ezra)? To take a sword or not (Jesus)? To marry or stay single (Paul)?

The answer is brief, beautiful, painful: *We cannot just know Scripture, we have to know God.* And in that very connection, I would like to share briefly and in a rather personal way how the casebook approach to Scripture has revitalized my devotional experience. Depending on how you look at it, that three-cornered relationship involving God, His Word, and me, has become more simple and more complex, easier and more difficult. The whole process has become more intense and more challenging – and boredom is never a problem any more.

The Casebook of Scripture and the Devotional Life

I cannot remember when I made the startling discovery that my religious experience was based on a codebook or checklist perspective. Adventists steeped in the writings of Ellen White know all about the big three Christian responsibilities: prayer, Bible study, and sharing. What I discovered in my life, however, was that I was doing these three, not so much for their intrinsic value, but, quite frankly, to keep God happy.

In my mind's eye I pictured Him as a kind of giant scoutmaster with chart in hand. Each day he would mark off whether I prayed, studied my Bible, and shared. Thus, in my devotional life, duty led the way and true meaning trailed along behind somewhere. I always had one eye on the clock; I felt guilty when I fell short.

As I studied Scripture, however, it became clearer to me that I could not approach people – or God, for that matter – on the basis of a checklist. People and their needs differed greatly. How could I effectively point them to God? Without realizing it I began matching people and circumstances from my modern world with the world of Scripture. As I brought the various “cases” in my life into connection with the “cases” in Scripture, a serious dialogue with God became part of the process.

As I see it now, those conversations with Him remind me that my decisions are not mine alone, but His decisions, too. Not that He does my thinking for me, or that He makes the final choice, but those conversations do keep Him and His kingdom foremost in my thinking and make it more likely that my decisions will be motivated by the principle of love rather than by the principle of selfishness.

When viewed in this way, prayer is not a substitute for thinking, but an enhancement of the thought processes. A true Christian will use his mind more, not less.

Attempting to visualize what takes place when we pray might help us understand the process better. When I raise this question with friends, the range of suggestions is intriguing. Here are some samples:

- a. The radio. We are the receiver playing God's signal. In this model we are passive, God is active.
- b. The pilot. God is in the control tower. We must be touch with him if we want to land safely. But he does not force us. We choose whether or not to listen and respond. This is a more interactive model requiring greater human responsibility.
- c. The filter. Conversation with God acts like a filter on a moving stream. If our prayer life is healthy, the water is pure on the other side of the filter. When our prayer life falters, the stream keeps flowing, but the water coming through the clogged filter is impure.

The last two examples I have found particularly helpful. The pilot metaphor tells me that I must choose to listen and obey. The filter analogy reminds me that life goes on if I do not pray – but the result is impure.

In contrast with my earlier codebook or checklist approach, I no longer see Bible study and prayer simply as a means to keep God happy. Reading His Word in dialogue with Him lies at the very heart of my relationship to the world around me. And the sharing process has become natural, for having discovered the joy of communion with Him through his Word, I find it impossible *not* to share.

This approach to Scripture has significant implications. I can no longer define sin (singular) simply in terms of sins (plural), a list of acts committed or omitted. Sin is also a way of

life lived apart from God.

Defining sin in this way means that “sinlessness” or “sinless perfection” no longer commands the same interest as it did before, because we now define our relationship to God in terms of “dependence” on Him. In this respect, Jesus now becomes our perfect example because we learn from Him how to relate to our heavenly Father. His life was one of constant conversation with God about the affairs of life. That can be our life too.

To summarize, I would like to emphasize that it is perfectly acceptable for Christians to make human decisions on how we are to live. Scripture will not do our thinking for us. Nor will God. The tendency among devout, conservative Christians is to let revelation speak for itself. We fear that reason can destroy the authority of revelation. *The casebook approach allows us, indeed, forces us to recognize that revelation and reason must work together. Revelation always deals with specific cases. Reason, in dialogue with the Spirit, determines which of those cases are most helpful in informing the decisions we make day by day.*

A crucial question remains, however, one that we must address in our next chapter: If Scripture as a whole is a *casebook*, which parts of Scripture still have value as a permanent *codebook*?

Yes, there are absolutes in Scripture. And these we must clearly define if we are to know how to interpret the various cases in our casebook.

Theme: Roots of Restlessness

Leading Question: Jesus clearly calls us to rest in him; but is it possible to look at “restlessness” in a positive light?

While we can all see the advantage of resting peacefully in Christ, what truth can be found in Augustine’s statement at the beginning of his *Confessions*?

“Thou dost arouse us to delight in praising thee, for thou hast made us for thyself;
And restless we must ever be until our heart find rest in thee.”

The authors of our study guide have planted their flag on the idea that restlessness is something we should seek to resolve and banish. Indeed, the opening passage in the lesson is potentially a very troubling one, Matthew 10:34-39:

34 “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

35 For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
36 and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and
whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38 and whoever
does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Those who find
their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Question: One of Jesus’ most beloved promises is: “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). But how can we find rest when Jesus promises us a sword?

Comment: William Barclay’s Daily Study Bible commentary on Matthew summarizes the four things that Jesus offers here: Warfare, choice, cross, and adventure. Is that fair summary?

Following the tension engendered by Jesus’ words that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword, our authors focus on three ideas that they see as containing the “roots of restlessness”: 1) Selfishness, 2) Ambition, and 3) Hypocrisy. Let’s address those three ideas.

1. Selfishness. Two contrasting biblical passages illustrate the two sides of selfishness: Luke 12:13-21 is the parable of the wealthy man who tore down his barn to build larger ones. In the

parable, God labels the man a fool because he has not considered his own imminent mortality.

The other passage is Philippians 2:5-8, considered by many to be the richest expression of Christ's self-sacrificing love:

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Questions: How does one avoid the fate of the rich fool, and experience the “mind of Christ” as presented in Philippians 2? What role can be played for us by stories and examples from Scripture, selfless lives modeled by fellow believers, and passages of Scripture? All of the above?

2.Ambition: Luke 22:14-30 and Matthew 20:20-28. The dangers of ambition are illustrated by two “teaching” passages of Jesus, coming from quite different angles to the same pointed truth.

In Luke, Jesus is at table with the twelve and overhears them talking about who is the greatest; in Matthew, the mother of James and John has brought her boys to Jesus, asking that they be given the highest places in the kingdom – which quite angered the rest of the disciples! Let's look at Matthew's “punch line” though Luke's is very similar:

Matt. 20:25-28: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Question: What was the more powerful motivator for the disciples: Jesus' teaching and example while he was alive, or the impact of his sacrificial death? What would be more powerful in our day and for us?

3. Hypocrisy: Matthew 23. The official study guide notes that Jesus uses the word “hypocrite” seven times in this hard-hitting chapter against hypocrisy. In everyday usage, “hypocrite” identifies someone who pretends to be something that he is not. But in a very subtle way, there is one setting, at least, where such pretending is fully in accord with the best of New Testament teaching, namely, Paul's weaker brother argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. In that setting he clearly shows that there are circumstances when we cloak our true position for the sake of the

“weaker” brother or sister. A C. S. Lewis quote from *Screwtape Letters* is to the point [Note: in *Screwtape*, everything is backward theology – Screwtape is the head devil, training his nephew Wormwood how to catch the “patient” and God is the “enemy”]:

We have quite removed from men’s minds what that pestilent fellow Paul used to teach about food and other unessentials – namely, that the human without scruples should always give in to the human with scruples. You would think they could not fail to see the application. You would expect to find the “low” churchman genuflecting and crossing himself lest the weak conscience of his “high” brother should be moved to irreverence, and the “high” one refraining from these exercises lest he should betray his “low” brother into idolatry. And so it would have been but for our ceaseless labour. Without that, the variety of usage within the Church of England might have become a positive hotbed of charity and humility. – C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, p. 75 [XVI.5]

In short, when we have allowed God to tame the roots of restlessness in our souls, everything we do will point our brothers and sisters to rest in God.

Theme: “The Cost of Rest”

Leading Question: How much time should one take to ponder the seamy side of Scripture?

The title for this lesson could just as easily be “The Cost of Sin,” for the lesson encompasses David’s sin with Bathsheba and its aftermath. As told in 2 Samuel 11 and 12, it is lurid, painful, tragic.

Paired with this unhappy story is that great penitential Psalm, Psalm 51. But I would like for us ponder this sordid event in the light of the experience of a devout and passionate brother who displayed a thinly disguised distaste for the Old Testament. He insisted on taking Philippians 4:8 as his touchstone for everything biblical.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Question: Are some people more vulnerable than others to the racy parts of Scripture? Should we encourage them to overcome their prudishness? Or should we help them build a reading program that matches and requirements of Philippians 4:8?

Comment: The same question could be asked for those who don’t see themselves as being “blessed” by the melancholy parts of Scripture, especially the “lament” psalms. Most of lament psalms, after plumbing the depths, break out into the light. Psalm 22 (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. . .”) does just that.

Yet others find the laments very helpful, even the grim ones that don’t break out into the light. Psalm 88 fits that mold. Church historian, Martin Marty, tells this wrenching story about his experience with his wife who was dying of cancer. It is found in the preface to his book, *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* (HarperCollins, 1993), xi-xii.

SHE: What happened to Psalm 88? Why did you skip it?

HE: I didn’t think you could take it tonight. I am not sure I could. No: I am *sure* I could not.

SHE: Please read it, for me.

HE: All right:

*...I cry out in the night before thee...
For my soul is full of troubles...
Thou has put me in the depths of the Pit,*

in the regions dark and deep...

SHE: I need that kind the most.

In that midnight exchange, though its author did not yet know it, this book *A Cry of Absence*, was beginning to be conceived. (See pp. 88ff)

In the little exchange above, “she” was Elsa, whom I married forty years before this second edition of a book occasioned by her illness (pp. 161-62) and after her death (p. 39), and who died a dozen years ago. I had agreed, through the seasons of her terminal illness, to take turns with her reading a biblical psalm at the time of each midnight taking of medication. The medicines were pain relievers, fighters against nausea, palliatives. Half the psalms were not.

I had agreed to read the even-numbered and she the odd-numbered psalms. But after a particularly wretched day’s bout that wracked her body and my soul, I did not feel up to reading Psalm 88. She noticed that. After the conversation I have recorded here, we continued to speak, slowly and quietly, in the bleakness [xi-xii] of midnight but in the warmth of each other’s presence and in awareness of the Presence.

We agreed that often the starkest scriptures were the most credible signals of the Presence and came in the worst times. When life gets down to basics, of course one wants the consoling words, the comforting sayings, the voices of hope preserved on printed pages. But they make sense only against the background of, and in interplay with, the dark words. Dark/light. Night/day. Winter/summer: yes, here was a “wintry sort of spirituality.” That phrase about winter by the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner came to mind and later got wedded to our midnight experiences.

After Elsa’s death a kind dean urged me to take a winter quarter off from teaching. I would rise at four in the morning, let the snow blow past the study window, and hear the sound, not of the classical music that usually accompanies my writing, but of the wind. Only the wind. One of my ways of “working through the experience” was to write. (pp. xi-xii)

The goal, mission, dream – call it what you will – for this book was to be as helpful as possible to people in their various pilgrimages without distracting them by telling someone else’s story. I knew that at our house during the bad days we had a hard time finding books that did not say “Cheer up!” or “All will be sunny, because God loves you, and so do the authors!” Books of despair, unmarked by the hope that I hope shines through by the end of this one, or books of easy solace, which is no solace on nights that call for the realism of Psalm 88, were the most recommended but always unwelcome suggestions to us.

The response to this book through the years has been revealing. I have published over forty books, and most of them have been reviewed [xiii/xiv] perhaps more frequently than they deserved; the files pile high and the archives bulge. But reviewed books by historians do not often elicit letters. *A Cry of Absence* evoked more letters than the other dozens did together.

Many of the letters came from people who knew me and knew the story of illness

and death behind the book. Just as many did not, since they had the book recommended to them by friends and had no reason to know the name of a University of Chicago religious historian. Those who knew said, and even those who did not know sensed, that a death shadowed these pages. When they were reading it as an accompaniment and companion in their passage involving a death, they were empathic as they elaborated their responses.

More often, to my surprise, the absence of which they wrote (and write, still), was occasioned not by death, but by other experiences. Almost always they could be summarized under two words: “separation” or “alienation” (xiii-xiv).

One can take the same approach to “violent” biblical passages. I once had a student who was really angry with God. We met weekly in an attempt to help him find a meaningful experience. He would come into my office, seething with anger. When I asked him what parts of the Bible he was reading “devotionally,” he almost spat out the word: “Judges!”

So I urged him to lay Judges aside and read the Gospels instead. He agreed.

The next week he came my office, still in an angry mood. “What have you been reading?” I asked. “Judges!” came the angry reply.

I don’t recall making much program over the few weeks we met. He simply could not stop feeding his anger.

A remarkable quote from Ellen White is worth noting in connection with the questions discussed above:

Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing.

So frail, so ignorant, so liable to misconception is human nature, that each should be careful in the estimate he places upon another. We little know the bearing of our acts upon the experience of others. What we do or say may seem to us of little moment, when, could our eyes be opened, we should see that upon it depended the most important results for good or for evil. – *Ministry of Healing*, 483 (1905)

Question: In light of our above discussion, how should we direct the discussion of the story of David and Bathsheba?

Comment: There is at least one other reason for avoiding the discussion of the story of David and Bathsheba, a reason reflected in Chronicles, the last book in the Hebrew Bible. Samuel/Kings was most likely written shortly after Judah went into Exile in 587/586. The author’s intention was to show how even Israel’s best kings (e.g. David and Solomon) were moral basket cases. Samuel/Kings lay out all the unhappy events that followed in David’s life as a result of the collapse of his moral standards.

But by the time the Chronicler was writing, the ethos in the exilic community had radically changed. The people had apparently taken the message of Samuel/Kings to heart and as a result were deeply depressed. So Chronicles repeats much of the history of Judah, but in a thoroughly revised version: the author leaves out as much of the dirt and grime of Israel's great kings. Chronicles doesn't mention a squeak about David and Bathsheba – not one word.

Is that justified. Why not? If the point has already been made, let's change the subject. In short, all of our reading of Scripture should be guided by our search for helpful soul food. If your malaria has been cured, you don't need to take quinine any more.

Shifting Our Focus to Psalm 51

The other element in our lesson is Psalm 51, a favorite penitential psalm, and one that has been linked with the David/Bathsheba narrative via the title or superscription. Certainly the official study guide assumes that it reflects David's experience. We shall return to the issue, but first some more technical background information relative to the titles,

Psalm titles: either unclear or later additions

"It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that where their meaning is clear, we have reason to doubt their reliability, and that where they might provide us with valuable data about the history and use of various pss., their interpretation is debated or obscure. Those which are straightforward but unreliable are the historical notices which assign individual pss. to particular occasions.... The remainder seem to indicate the authors or origin of the pss., their character, the tunes or musical instruments appropriate to them, and the cultic actions for which some pss. were intended. But there is so much uncertainty about the interpretation of most of these terms that even a general classification can be offered only with considerable reserve." -- G. W. Anderson, "The Psalms," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (rev. ed., 1962), p. 409.

A. A separate textual history (from the psalm text itself). Original NEB excluded titles; **but cf. 2 Sam. 22:1 (part of the Hebrew text) and Ps. 18:1 (separate from the text).** Note that in the **MT (= Masoretic Text)** 34 of the psalms are "orphans" without titles; the **LXX (= Septuagint [Gr. OT])** gives additional information for 18 of these (cf. also the use of the word **Selah**: 71 times in MT [plus 3x in Hab.] almost all in Books I-III, but 92 times in LXX).

B. Titles and names for God loosely linked to organization. Book I, for example is both Davidic ("of David" in titles) and Yahwistic (uses Yahweh, not Elohim). Except for 1 (preface to the Psalter?), 2 (Davidic psalm that lost its title?), and 33 (later addition?), book I is thus a Yahwistic Davidic collection (2-32, 34-41 = "of David"). The Elohist collection (42-83) is followed by an appendix of Yahwistic psalms (84-89). **NB: Some psalms are duplicates except for the name of God:** 14Y = 53E; 40:13-17Y = 70E.

C. Names in titles may indicate collections rather than authorship. Some Ugaritic psalms are "of Baal"; Ps. 72 is "of Solomon" but is one of the "prayers of David" (72:20).

Question: Why is it important that we "know" whether or not David wrote the psalm?

Comment: Probably for most people it would be a matter of indifference. But if the Davidic authorship is linked with the truthfulness or helpfulness of the psalm, one could be in for a rude awakening! For the end of the Psalm clearly indicates the psalm in its present form is post-exilic, i.e. after 586 CE.

Just as secular tunes can be “baptized” into sacred hymns, so psalms from one setting can be transplanted into another setting. One of the best modern examples of this process was in the celebration of the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. Leonard Bernstein’s legendary live recording of Beethoven’s Ode To Freedom (Symphony No. 9) captured not only the elation of the moment but conveyed a celebration of and a longing for freedom which extended far beyond the occasion. Von Schiller’s original lyric, “Ode to Joy (*Freude*),” was transformed by Bernstein’s into “Ode to Freedom (*Freiheit*).”

Note the striking contrast between Psalm 51:16-17 and the last two verses:

16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
19 then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

The new “form” reflected the hope that God would rebuild Jerusalem. Then sacrifices would again be offered in Jerusalem. The original psalm had declared that God did not want animal sacrifices, but the sacrifice of “broken spirit,” a “broken and contrite heart.”

That’s the part that really applies to David. “Create in me a clean heart, O God” declared the psalmist. That’s what the Lord longed for from David.

Question: Can this information about Psalm 51 be made beneficial? Or is it sometimes destructive?

Comment: The more general nature of Psalm 51 helps explain its value in worship setting. There is not a single explicit reference to David’s sin in the psalm itself. That makes the psalm very useful in a congregational setting. One doesn’t have to be an adulterer to be blessed by Psalm 51.

Theme: “Come to Me. . .”

Leading Question: Jesus said, “Come to me . . . and I will give you rest.” Is it possible to find rest without coming to Jesus?

Jesus’ well-known rest invitation comes at the end of a record of tumultuous events. John the Baptist has been put in prison and Jesus pronounces strong judgment on some of the cities where he had been most active, including Capernaum. After all that he “commands” the weary to come to him for rest.

Question: Does one need a command to come to Jesus? Does one need to come to Jesus in order to come to God?

Comment: This invitation to rest includes three commands: “Come,” “Take,” and “Learn.” These are all commands from Jesus. But what about those who don’t know about Jesus or about God? Note, for example, this Ellen White quote about the heathen who do not know about God, and this C. S. Lewis quote about Emeth, the worshiper of the pagan god Tash, who dies and finds himself in Aslan’s kingdom.

Ellen White: Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have cherished the spirit of kindness; before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God. – *Desire of Ages*, 638

C. S. Lewis: But I said, Alas, Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash. He answered, Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then by reason of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath’s sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And

if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child? I said, Lord, thou knowest how much I understand. But I said also (for the truth constrained me), Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek. – C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 149

Both these quotations point to a God with wide-open arms for anyone who seeks to do what is right. These are not rebels, but they have not known about the God who revealed himself in Jesus.

Question: Matthew 11:29 refers to a “yoke.” How is his idea of a yoke positive or negative?

Comment: Galatians 5:1 uses the term yoke in a negative sense, “yoke of bondage.” Yet a well-fitting yoke also allows for a more productive life. Ideally, one becomes so “comfortable” in the yoke that one is hardly aware of it.

Tangentially related to the idea of a well-fitting yoke is the concept of freedom: discipline gives freedom. Tennis players know that if they want the ball to go where they hit it, they will need discipline.

C. S. Lewis suggests that the goal of all this is a certain independence.

He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys. – C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 39

The use of the phrase “law of liberty” in James 2:12 is also related to the need for discipline if one wants to be free. Finally, we should refer to that astonishing passage in Galatians 5:18: “If you are led by the Spirit you are not subject to the law.” This passage is in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, a letter which is often used in a more libertarian way. Yet the works of the flesh listed in 5:19-21 indicate that Paul fully affirmed the value of “law”:

19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,
20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions,
factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning
you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the
kingdom of God.

Question: How can a burden be “light,” as promised in Matthew 11:30.

Comment: A shared burden is a “light” burden. Moses’ father-in-law noted that he needed to “share” his burden with others (Exodus 18:13-22). A New Testament parallel is found in 1

Corinthians 12 with the metaphor of the “body of Christ”: the whole body works together in a way that virtually eliminates the burden because it is a shared burden.

Theme: “Finding Rest in Family Ties”

Leading Question: If we keep score of the family relations in the book of Genesis in order to determine which side wins, the dysfunctional family or the supportive family. What is the result?

It would seem that of all the family histories recorded in Genesis, the dysfunctional ones far outnumber the supportive ones. Note this list:

Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, Seth
Noah, Shem, Ham, Japheth
Abraham, Hagar, Sarah, Ishmael, Isaac
Isaac, Rebekkah, Jacob, Esau
Laban, Rachel, Leah, Jacob
Jacob and his twelve sons, including Joseph
Joseph and Asenath, Ephraim, Manasseh

Of all those families, Joseph would come closest to the ideal – yet his road was a rocky one indeed!

Question: How is it that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are all listed as faith heroes in Hebrews 11:17-22?

Comment: The official lesson guide puts it this way: “God’s faith champions often fall short of their own and God’s expectations. These men are listed in Hebrews 11 not because of their messy family relationships but in spite of them.”

Question: If we broaden our search to include all the Old Testament, do we find *any* ideal families?

Comment: In much of the Old Testament, the dysfunctional family is the rule, not the exception. Note these examples:

Moses, Aaron, and Miriam
Elkanah, Hannah, Peninah, Samuel
Samuel, Joel, Abijah (1 Sam. 8:1-3)
Eli, Hophni, Phineas
David, Bathsheba, Amnon, Absalom,
Ahaz (evil), Hezekiah (good), Manasseh (evil – but in Chronicles he repents), Amon (evil), Josiah (good). See 2 Kings 17-23: Good kings produce bad kings, bad kings produce good kings (with exceptions)

Note the four women in Matthew’s version of Jesus’ genealogy: Tamar (incest), Rahab (prostitute), Ruth (finally (!) a good woman, but a Moabite and an ancestor of David) Bathsheba (adulteress)

Question: What is the secret of a good family.

Comment: God’s spokespersons often fall short of seeing their ideal fulfilled. God had great hopes for Abraham. But alas he and his family fell short of the ideal:

For I know him (Abraham) that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. – Genesis 18:19

And Timothy, in his guidance for bishops/elders and deacons, also set a high standard. These instructions from 2 Timothy 3, are worth pondering:

1 The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. 2 Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. 4 *He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way— 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church?* 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.

8 Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; 9 they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons. 11 Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons be married only once, and *let them manage their children and their households well*; 13 for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

On balance, this little narrative on “The Point System” may suggest the only solution for raising a good family:

The “Point System”

A man dies and goes to heaven. Of course, St. Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates.

St. Peter says, “Here’s how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you’ve done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in.”

“Okay,” the man says, “I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated

on her, even in my heart.”

“That’s wonderful,” says St. Peter, “that’s worth three points!”

“Three points?” the man says, “Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service.”

“Terrific!” says St. Peter. That’s certainly worth a point.”

“One point!?!?” “I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans.”

“Fantastic! That’s good for two more points,” St. Peter says.

“Two points!?!?” the man cries, exasperated. “At this rate the only way I’ll get into heaven is by the grace of God.”

“Bingo! 100 Points! Come on in!”

In short, only the Grace of God can bring positive results in our families.

Theme: “Rest, Relationships, and Healing”

Leading Question: When Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, was it his fault, his father’s fault, or the fault of his brothers?

After the bitter disappointment of being sold by his brothers into Egypt, Joseph finally ended up on his feet. The official study guide puts it this way:

Eventually, things moved in the right direction for Joseph, big time. He not only gets out of prison, but he is made prime minister of Egypt after interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams (Genesis 41). He is married and has two children of his own (Gen. 41:50-52). The storehouses of Egypt are full, and the predicted famine has begun. And then, one day, Joseph’s brothers turn up in Egypt.

Question: According to Genesis 42:7-20, what was Joseph up to in his first encounter with his brothers in Egypt?

Comment: The official study guide offers this interpretation. Do you think it is correct?

“Joseph had the power and could have taken his revenge on his brothers without having to justify himself. But, rather than revenge, Joseph is concerned about the members of his family at home. He is worried about his father. Was he still alive, or had a dysfunctional family become a family without a patriarch? And what about his brother Benjamin? As his father’s delight and joy, Benjamin was now in the same position that Joseph had been. Had the brothers transferred their dangerous jealousy to Benjamin? Joseph is now in a position to look out for these vulnerable people in his family, and he does just that.

Question: In the concluding words of the judgment parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 41-46), Jesus declares that the abuse and neglect of the vulnerable members of the community is actually done to Jesus himself. Does such an application make the point of the parable more forcible?

Question: Joseph is able to eavesdrop on his brothers when they talk with each other. The official study guide says that Joseph feels sorry for his brothers. In the light of these words from Scripture (Gen. 42:21-24), do you agree?

21 They said to one another, “Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us.” 22 Then Reuben answered them, “Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there

comes a reckoning for his blood.” 23 They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter. 24 He turned away from them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them.

Comment: Alongside the suggestion of pity for his brothers, another possibility presents itself as an explanation for Joseph’s tears: His sense of isolation and loneliness from his family after all these intervening years.

Healing the Wounds of the Past

The remarkable narratives involving Jacob and his family can be very instructive for us. The earlier forgiveness extended by Esau to his cheating brother Jacob was part of the family story, too. But the long tentacles of the brothers’ treatment of Joseph leave a fascinating pattern for us to ponder.

Jacob was in Egypt 17 years before his death. Up to that point there is not a hint of any feeling of revenge on the part of Joseph. Still the deep imprint of their evil deeds on the brothers themselves were not easy to eradicate. Genesis 50:15-21, in particular, is worth exploring and discussing:

15 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” 16 So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17 ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” 19 But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Question: Based on our own experience and observations, is it likely that Joseph’s reassurances completely obliterated the effects of their evil?

Question: Can you think of other examples that might illustrate Joseph’s view of providence: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good”?

The Business of Forgiveness

Several questions bubble to the top when we talk about forgiveness. Three, in particular are crucial. First, should we forgive? Hopefully, we can answer that with a hearty “yes!” But the second and third questions often haunt our ability to say yes. Can we forgive wholeheartedly? And if we sense a problem there, then we have to ask: “How can God touch my heart so that I

can say yes?

But tainting our ability to say yes is the second question: Are we able to forgive? Joseph's brothers wanted to forgive and be forgiven, but they were haunted by their own evil deeds.

So the last question is: How can the heart be transformed? And here Acts 5:31 is crucial for it teaches that both repentance and forgiveness are gifts of God:

“God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”

Both repentance and forgiveness are gifts of God. Human will can only enter the picture after God has given his gifts.

Having said that, our official study guide points to four passages of Scripture that we should ponder prayerfully:

1. Being forgiven, *should* teach us to forgive: Matthew 18:21-35.

21 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

2. The timing of forgiveness: Luke 23:34. Quoting the official study guide: “Jesus didn’t wait for us to ask for forgiveness first. We do not have to wait for our offender to ask for forgiveness. We can forgive others without having them accept our forgiveness.”

Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

3. Loving our enemies: Matthew 5:43-44; Luke 6:27-28.

Matthew 5:43: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . .”

Luke 6:27: “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

Perhaps the best we can do is prayerfully ponder the story of Joseph and his brothers and look to the teachings and example of Jesus.

Theme: “Free to Rest”

Leading Question: How should we differ in addressing the needs of those who are physically paralyzed and those who are mentally paralyzed?

This week’s lesson focuses on two radically different kinds of “sick” people. On the one hand are those who are obviously damaged physically. Here our lesson focuses on the paralytic who was let down through the roof by his friends into the very presence of Jesus (Mark 2:1-12). But on the other hand are those who appear undamaged physically, but who are suffering from something like depression. Here our lesson focuses on the story of Elijah at Mt. Carmel and his subsequent flight from Jezebel to Mt. Horeb (1 Kings 18:19).

Question: Why is it important to distinguish between those who are obviously disabled (like the paralytic) and those who are mentally troubled or depressed (like Elijah)?

Question: Should it make any difference in our attitudes whether a person has “chosen” his malady by bad decisions, or has simply been overwhelmed by circumstances seemingly beyond his or her control?

Laws of Health and the Law of God

In connection with Jesus’ handling of the paralytic, Adventists should be aware of a fascinating, potentially helpful, and potentially troubling quotation on laws of health from the pen of Ellen White:

It is a sin to be sick, for all sickness is the result of transgression. Many are suffering in consequence of the transgression of their parents. They cannot be censured for their parents' sin; but it is nevertheless their duty to ascertain wherein their parents violated the laws of their being, which has entailed upon their offspring so miserable an inheritance; and wherein their parents' habits were wrong, they should change their course, and place themselves by correct habits in a better relation to health. – *The Health Reformer*, August 1866; = *Counsels on Health*, 37 (1923)

Note that Ellen White seems to be merging all God’s laws under one heading. In short, the “laws of our being” and the law of God are the same. But note that she states that those who are “sick” cannot be censured for the parents’ sin. But they do have an obligation to find out what their parents did wrong so that they can put things right. The original quotation is dated to 1866 and only appears in one other place in her published writings, *Counsels on Health*, published in 1923. But for those who take an “absolutist” approach to the writings of Ellen White, the consequences can be deadly.

The Paralytic (Mark 2:1-12)

The healed paralytic presents a number of issues that could be discussed:

1. Jesus commended the faith of the friends, not the man's faith (Mark 2:5). **Question:** Can those with strong faith be instrumental in "healing" those with weak faith or none at all?
2. Jesus identified that man's disability as being caused by sin.
Question: Jesus could distinguish issues of volition in ways that ordinary humans cannot. But as far as we are concerned, does it make any difference in how we treat people?
Question: Even if non-volitional elements are involved with the volitional, shouldn't that be a non-issue, except in those cases where continuing bad habits are preventing healing?

A Depressed Elijah

A quick Google check yielded some interesting observations. In terms of vocabulary, the labels Manic-Depressive and Bi-Polar are apparently interchangeable. And Google brought up two side-by-side pictures, one of a highly energized person (manic) the other of a bed-ridden depressed person. The captions were identical: "Manic phase may last weeks or months." And, "Depressive phase may last weeks or months."

Question: Is it likely that Elijah was bipolar, a manic-depressive?

Comment: Three quotes from Ellen White's chapter on Elijah in *Prophets and Kings* are worth noting, two are more likely to be encouraging, one more likely to be problematic:

Encouraging. Into the experience of all there come times of keen disappointment and utter discouragement – days when sorrow is the portion, and it is hard to believe that God is still the kind benefactor of His earthborn children; days when troubles harass the soul, till death seems preferable to life. It is then that many lose their hold on God and are brought into the slavery of doubt, the bondage of unbelief. Could we at such times discern with spiritual insight the meaning of God's providences we should see angels seeking to save us from ourselves, striving to plant our feet upon a foundation more firm than the everlasting hills, and new faith, new life, would spring into being. – *Prophets and Kings*, 162; RH Oct. 16, 1913

Encouraging. If, under trying circumstances, men of spiritual power, pressed beyond measure, become discouraged and desponding; if at times they see nothing desirable in life, that they should choose it, this is nothing strange or new. Let all such remember that one of the mightiest of the prophets fled for his life before the rage of an infuriated woman. A fugitive, weary and travel-worn, bitter disappointment crushing his spirits, he asked that he might die. But it was when hope was gone, and his life-work seemed threatened with defeat, that he learned one of the most precious lessons of his life. In the hour of his greatest weakness he learned the need and the possibility of trusting God

under circumstances the most forbidding. *Prophets and Kings*, 173

Problematic. Hope and courage are essential to perfect service for God. These are the fruit of faith. Despondency is sinful and unreasonable. – *Prophets and Kings* (1917)

Note: The comments above on the EGW statement that “It is a sin to be sick. . .,” may provide a helpful explanation. But this quote from *Desire of Ages* rises to the top it comes to offering encouragement to troubled sinners:

Jesus knows the circumstances of every soul. You may say, I am sinful, very sinful. You may be; but the worse you are, the more you need Jesus. He turns no weeping, contrite one away. He does not tell to any all that He might reveal, but He bids every trembling soul take courage. Freely will He pardon all who come to Him for forgiveness and restoration. – DA 568

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: “Rhythms of Rest”

Leading Question: How important are “rhythm” and “rhythmic habits” to our religious experience?

This week and next week our lessons focus on the Sabbath. And for this first lesson we will think about the Sabbath as part of a rhythmic pattern that God has given us to help order our lives.

But let’s back up one step and talk about rhythmic patterns in life in general. Are some people more committed to habit than others? Could we perhaps contrast the structured person with the spontaneous one?

Question: What is it about Sabbath that separates it from the rest of creation week?

Comment: The Sabbath is a kind “glue” between the “spoken” events of the first six days and the “hands on” events of the creation story in Genesis 2. The comment in the official study guide is to the point:

After all of this active creating, God turned His attention to something else. At first glance, it did not seem as spectacular as leaping whales or dazzling feather displays. God simply made a day, the seventh day, and then He made it special. Even before humanity would dash off on our self-imposed stressful lives, God set a marker as a living memory aid. God wanted this day to be a time for us to stop and deliberately enjoy life—a day to be and not do, to celebrate the gift of grass, air, wildlife, water, people, and most of all, the Creator of every good gift.

This invitation would continue even after the first couple was exiled from Eden. God wanted to make sure that the invitation could stand the test of time, and so, right from the beginning, He knit it into the very fabric of time itself.

During this week, we will study God’s wonderful invitation to enter into a dynamic rest, again and again, every seventh day.

Question: The Greek’s assessment of the material world was that it bad. For them only the immaterial and spiritual was good. So how does the Bible value the created, material world. Does it say that it was good, bad, or indifferent?

Comment: Most Christians do not realize the vast difference between the biblical view of the material world and the Greek view. One of the first modern scholars to highlight that difference was the French New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann. His little book, first published in English in 1964 with the title, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* was originally published in French in 1956.

Cullmann's thesis is that resurrection is firmly rooted in the biblical teaching of creation. The human body was created by God and is worth resurrecting. By contrast, the Greeks saw the material world as tainted. Thus they looked forward to the liberation of the soul from its prison of flesh. Cullmann has a number of significant publications. But this is what he says about the reaction to this book. It is included in the Wipf & Stock edition of the book:

No other publication of mine has provoked such enthusiasm or such violent hostility. The editors of the periodicals concerned have been good enough to send me some of the letters of protest which they have received from their readers. One of the letter – writers was prompted by my article to reflect bitterly that 'the French people, dying for lack of the Bread of Life, have been offered instead of bread, stones, if not serpents' Another writer takes me for a kind of monster who delights in causing spiritual distress. 'Has M. Cullmann,' he writes, 'a stone instead of a heart?' For a third, my study has been 'the cause of astonishment, sorrow, and deep distress.' Friends who have followed my previous work with interest and approval have indicated to me the pain which this study has caused them. In others I have detected a malaise which they have tried to conceal by an eloquent silence.

My critics belong to the most varied camps. The contrast, which out of concern for the truth I have found it necessary to draw between the courageous and joyful primitive Christian hope of the resurrection of the dead and the serene philosophic expectation of the survival of the immortal soul, has displeased not only many sincere Christians in all Communion and of all theological outlooks, but also those whose convictions, while not outwardly alienated from Christianity, are more strongly moulded by philosophical considerations. *So far, no critic of either kind has attempted to refute me by exegesis, that being the basis of our study.*

Question: How does the creation of the "man" in Genesis 1 differ from God's method as described in Genesis 2?

Comment: The creation of "man" in Genesis 1 is by the spoken word. Only in Genesis 2 does God get his hands dirty, so to speak, and form man from the dust of the earth. The challenge in the telling of the story of Creation is that God wants to tell two great truths that stand in a certain tension with each other. Pagan creation accounts depict creation as emerging from a battle of the chaos monsters. God wants to counter that view. That's the hands-off account in Genesis 1.

But such a view leaves a very sterile and distant God. So the inspired writer tells another story that brings the personal touch to center stage: God forms man with his own hands, brings the animals to Adam for him to name, and shapes a woman from man's rib. This is the personal Yahweh God who looms so large throughout Scripture. If, in our day, we try to merge the accounts, we take the shine off both pictures.

Remembering the Sabbath

Six times in Genesis 1 God declares that the creation is "good" – once for Day 1, twice for Day 3 – making up for Day 2 – and once each for Days 4 and 5. And after the creation of

Man, Scripture states: “God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” Not just good, but very good!

Here is the capstone as Scripture reports it:

Genesis 1: 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 2:1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

In short, God built the rhythm of time into the very fabric of human life and told his community to “remember” what he had done.

But sin takes its toll and human beings forget.

Question: How did the miracle of the manna (Exodus 16) serve to rejuvenate human memory?

Comment: Every week-end there were two distinct miracles woven into the fabric of the greater miracle of the manna itself: Twice as much manna on Friday, no manna on Sabbath. So by the time Israel got to Sinai, they were ready to hear the command: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”

Question: What dramatic change marks the stated “motive” in the 4th command when Moses gives the law the second time in Deuteronomy 5?

Comment: Even though Scripture declares that God wrote the law on the stone tablets with his own with his own finger, we don’t know exactly what he wrote when he came to the Sabbath command, for the key verb and the driving motive are different. Instead of admonishing Israel to “remember” the Sabbath because God was their Creator, he asks them to “keep/observe” the Sabbath. The “remember” comes a few lines later when he asks them to remember that they were slaves:

Deut. 5:15: Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Thus the 4th command in Exodus celebrates Creation, while in Deuteronomy it celebrates redemption – and declares that the “rest” was a gift to their slaves as well:

Deut. 5:14: But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your

towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

Comment: In the first chapter of John's Gospel, the message is loud and clear that Jesus is both Creator and Redeemer, bringing the message of the Sabbath home, both in its Exodus version (creation) and in its Deuteronomy edition (redemption).

Reflection Question: What has been your experience in "keeping" the Sabbath? What has been the influence of the Bible in your keeping of the Sabbath? Has it been a joy or a burden?

Theme: “Sabbath Rest”

Leading question: Is the Sabbath a test or a gift?

Our leading question takes us into territory not suggested by the official study guide. But it is a crucial opportunity for us at a time when many traditional Adventists are reacting against their heritage.

In our early years Adventists were gripped by the Sabbath-Sunday conflict, an issue that was thrown into bold relief by events in the last decades of the 19th century. That issue has virtually vanished from our culture in general, but still lurks in traditional Adventist blood.

So in conjunction with our leading question, we should ask two additional questions:

Question: Where in Scripture is the idea suggested that the Sabbath is a test?

Question: Where in Scripture could one find support for the idea that the Sabbath is more a gift than a test?

Comment: The three angels’ messages in Revelation 14 have been the seed bed for the idea that the Sabbath is a test. The argument goes something like this: If capitulating to Sunday worship at the end of time, one can receive the mark of beast. The counterbalancing idea is the Sabbath as the seal of God, and this is linked with the first angel’s message where worship of the creator God, judgment, and Gospel are all rolled into one:

Revelation 14: 6: Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

The “traditional” use of this passage in Adventism triggers a number of other questions:

Question: What happens when the cultural landscape changes so radically that the issue of “sacred time” is no longer on center stage?

Question: In what other ways can the Sabbath be relevant in our day and in our cultural context?

Comment: Here is a list of possible Sabbath applications for us today:

1. The Environment. In Genesis 2:5 and 15, our modern translations use the word “till” with reference to the cultivation of the earth. But the root of the Hebrew word is the same

as “serve.” In other words, humans were created for the purpose of “serving” the earth.

That idea of “serving” then links up with the task God gave humans in Genesis 1:26-31, namely, the mandate to “have dominion over” the earth:

26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

27 So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, “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.” 29 God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Many devout evangelicals, however, have taken that idea in the opposite direction, far from the idea of “serving” the earth. They have claimed that God has given us the earth for *our* use. But Scripture teaches that the Sabbath is a call to serve the earth, dominion over the earth in the sense of “serving” the earth.

2. Worker protection. In *Themelios*, an evangelical journal no longer published, Chris Wright wrote an editorial with the title, “Deuteronomic depression.” In fulfilling the assignment of writing a commentary on Deuteronomy, he came to some startling conclusions. He opens with this line: “Bibles should carry a government health warning: ‘Bible study can seriously damage your peace of mind.’”

A few paragraphs later, he fills out the picture with these words: “A major dimension of Deuteronomy’s economic and social concern is related to the world of work. The fourth commandment is the only commandment to have a specific *purpose* (as distinct from a motivation) attached, which is ‘so that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as you do’ (5:14). It was, as Harold MacMillan is reputed to have said, the first and greatest worker protection act in history.” – *Themelios* 19:2 (Jan. 1994), p. 3.

3. Care for the animals. Exodus 23:12 adds care for animals to the list of Sabbath beneficiaries:

“Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.”

These three ideas alone offer modern Adventists rich opportunities for making the Sabbath relevant in our day, not just as a personal spiritual blessing, but as a substantive blessing to the earth, to oppressed people, and to weary animals.

The official study guide is a good resource for exploring the personal, spiritual blessings provided by the Sabbath. But we can broaden our horizons and breathe more deeply. There are wonderful opportunities before us. The Sabbath is truly a gift, not only for spiritual growth and development, but also for service to our world and its creatures.

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: “Longing for more”

Leading question: “How far is it possible to stretch a biblical symbol?”

Comment: The title for this week’s lesson is a tantalizing one, for it suggests that ultimately, the biblical idea of “rest” should stay alive, on into a future, heavenly world, a world of which we are almost wholly ignorant.

So let’s go back and explore symbols that we could all agree are symbolic. And here I would suggest the law of God as something that is enduring. But I still remember how startled I was when I realized that the decalogue would make no sense in a heavenly realm.

An important biblical passage that undoubtedly shaped early Adventist thinking is Revelation 11:19:

“Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.”

In Ellen White’s book, *Early Writings*, the report of an 1847 meeting clearly reveals a very concrete thinking group envisioning a *real* temple in heaven with a *real* decalogue. And I distinctly remember the moment when I realized that the decalogue would make no sense in a perfect world without adultery, murder, and a Sabbath marked by sundown and sunset as in this world.

But it seems to me that one has to tread carefully in such matters, for all-or-nothing thinking so easily puts faith at risk. This quotation from Ellen White suggests that at a later point in her life, she, too, realized that there was no concrete “temple” and “decalogue” in heaven:

But in heaven, service is not rendered in the spirit of legality. When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of. – *Mount of Blessings*, 109 (1896)

Symbols, Past, Present and Future

It might be helpful to list here some of the symbols that are part of the biblical tradition, pondering what their status is:

1. Animal Sacrifice. While all modern Christians would no doubt recoil from the thought of a real sacrifice being offered in a church, animal sacrifices are part of the biblical tradition. Is the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ a decisive way to end all animal sacrifice? Yet some conservative Christians envision the renewal of animal sacrifice during the millennium.

2. Circumcision. Though circumcision is not limited to the biblical tradition, in Genesis 17:13-14 God did command Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household:

“Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

While circumcision has simply vanished from sight, there is no indication at all in the Old Testament that it would pass from use. And Acts 15 describes the tussle that the apostolic church went through over the issue. Furthermore, as a symbol in the male body, it could hardly be a universal symbol for both male and female. In Romans 2:29, Paul clearly moves circumcision to the “spiritual” side of the ledger:

“A person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.”

3. Sanctuary. Exodus 25:9 and Hebrews 8:5, both indicate that the earthly sanctuary was built according to the pattern set by God:

Exodus 25:9: “In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

Hebrews 8:5: They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”

Yet scholars agree that the wilderness sanctuary was modeled after a Canaanite sanctuary – in a particular culture a church needs to look like a church to the people in that culture. Still it is striking to note the similarity between Israel’s sanctuary and those of their Canaanite neighbors.

As for the passage in Hebrews, scholars would again recognize that the sanctuary seen in Hebrews would have been understood as a replica of the “idea” of sanctuary in heaven, following the Platonic philosophy of the “ideas” or “ideal”: everything on earth is simply a replica of the “idea” in heaven.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that the temple described in Ezekiel 40-48 is unlike any of the other biblical tabernacles/temples. And Revelation 21:22 says this about the temple in heaven: “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”

In short, God’s personal presence overwhelms all pictures of the earthly sanctuary, and God’s personal presence, so tragically lost when Adam and Eve sinned, will once again be restored, as so beautifully stated in Revelation 21:1-4:

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

4. Sabbath Rest. Some have interpreted the “Sabbath rest” of Hebrews 4:1-11 as a replacement for an outdated Sabbath rest. Yet if we follow the development of biblical ideas it is clear that the original idea of “Rest in Christ” remains robust, indeed, is strengthened. That’s the great blessing that comes from knowing the Sabbath as a gift, not just as a test:

1 Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. 2 For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. 3 For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

“As in my anger I swore,
“They shall not enter my rest,””

though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. 4 For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” 5 And again in this place it says, “They shall not enter my rest.” 6 Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, 7 again he sets a certain day—“today”—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. 9 So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; 10 for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. 11 Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

On balance, all that was lost in Eden will be restored. Genesis 3:8 tells how God came looking for Adam and Eve in the garden, wanting to talk with them, the Creator with his created beings. But alas, sin had mutilated God’s ideal.

But now all that was lost is restored.

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them. – Revelation 21:4

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Restless Prophet

Leading question: What happens when a restless prophet is much less merciful than the God who sent him?

Comment: The official study guide does a wonderful job of stating the paradoxes of the book of Jonah:

“Here he was, a prophet of God, someone called of God, and yet—what? He runs away from God’s call. Then, after being persuaded in a dramatic way to change his mind and obey the Lord, he does so, but then only to do what? To complain that the people to whom he was called to witness actually repented and are spared the destruction that, otherwise, would have been theirs!

What an example of someone not at rest, not at peace—even to the point where he cries out, “ ‘Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!’ (Jon. 4:3, NKJV).”

Question: How can someone who is so far off the mark, be a credentialed prophet for the God of the universe?

Comment: Because of the ministry of Ellen White, Adventists have often trumpeted the four “biblical” tests of a prophet. At mid-century, T. Housel Jemison wrote the “official” textbook for collegiate level “Prophetic Guidance” classes: *A Prophet Among You* (Pacific Press, 1955). Based on the explicit language of the King James Version, here are the four tests:

“*Test 1. ‘To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.’ Isaiah 8:20.*” [i.e. the prophet’s words are to be tested by Scripture] – p. 100.

“*Test 2. ‘Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.’ Matthew 7:20.*” [One of the subpoints under this test is this: “There must be no question about the trend of his thinking and actions.” – p. 104. One is tempted to say that Jonah failed this test.

“*Test 3. ‘When the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord hath truly sent him.’ Jeremiah 28:9.*” Jemison himself states (p. 108): “The Bible’s best illustration of the principle set forth by Jeremiah [i.e. ‘conditional prophecy’] is in the book of Jonah.” Jemison therefore takes several paragraphs to explain why Jonah should be considered a true prophet even though his prediction did not come to pass. – pp. 108-110.

“*Test 4. ‘Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God.’ I John 4:2.*” – p. 110. Obviously this test would only be useful after the incarnation.

Question: Have we set the bar too high for prophets?

Comment: We have learned to live with the history of flawed messengers. David and Peter always win the “favorite Bible Character” contexts precisely because they fall so far from the ideal. Even in this quarter’s lessons we have noted how many of the families described in Scripture are dysfunctional! (See Lesson #6, “Finding Rest in Family Ties.”). Indeed, against the backdrop of Abraham’s dysfunctional family, it is startling to note God’s view of Abraham.

For I know him (Abraham) that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. – Genesis 18:19

In short, Jonah, “The Restless Prophet,” fits quite nicely in the rogue’s gallery that God has called to be his special messengers.

Question: Even strong free-will advocates may be startled by God’s “coercive” intervention in Jonah’s life. The “restless” prophet was quite willing to head for the ship’s hold and sleep off his depression. What does this incident tell us about God’s willingness to use the heavy hand with an otherwise reluctant prophet?

Comment: It would appear that God handles prophets quite differently than he does ordinary people. In short, many of the prophets felt coerced by God when they were called to their prophetic ministry. Peruse this list of “coerced” prophets:

- A) (Exod. 3:1- 4:17) **Moses:** divine coaxing and urging; many excuses in return
- B) (Num. 11:16-30) **The Seventy:** one-time, non-volitional experience
- C) (Num. 22-24) **Balaam:** prophetic dictation (cf. Num. 31:16; Josh. 13:22)
- D) (1 Sam. 19:18-24) **Saul:** non-rational, ecstatic prophetic trance, seemingly imposed for defensive purposes (to protect the innocent)
- E) (Isaiah 6) **Isaiah:** a call "almost" freely chosen, but overwhelmed by a sound and light show
- F) (Jeremiah 1:4-19; 12:1-17; 20:7-18) **Jeremiah:** coerced, overpowered, openly complaining
- G) (Ezekiel 2-3; 24:15-18) **Ezekiel:** coerced, overpowered, but uncomplaining and unemotional
- H) Jonah 1, 3-4) **Jonah:** angry, reluctantly obedient

In connection with the topic of “coerced” prophets, Ellen White’s remarks may help us see how the prophets were not to be placed in the same category as ordinary believers.

"God has not given my brethren the work that He has given me. It has been urged that my manner of giving reproof in public has led others to be sharp and critical and severe. If so, they must settle that matter with the Lord. If others take a responsibility which God has not laid upon them; if they disregard the instructions He has given them again and again through the humble instrument of His choice, to be kind, patient, and forbearing, they alone must answer for the results. With a sorrow-burdened heart, I have performed my unpleasant duty to my dearest friends, not daring to please myself by withholding reproof, even from my husband; and I shall not be less faithful in warning others, whether they will hear or forbear." (*Testimonies* 5:20 [1882]; repeated in 5:677-78 [1889])

Question: Can the line, “failed prediction, successful prophecy” be useful in explaining Jonah’s experience?

Comment: One of the intriguing questions – unanswerable from our merely human perspective – has to do with God’s role in the giving of Jonah’s message. Did God know that only with a powerful threat would the city respond? Or did Jonah choose his words without explicit “inspiration” from God? Whatever God’s role may have been, his failed prediction resulted in a successful prophecy.

At the end of this lesson appears an article originally published in *The Signs of the Times*, entitled: “Who Can Change the Mind of God?” It addresses the idea of conditionality that looms so large in the book of Jonah.

A fitting conclusion: Regardless of Jonah’s anger, God’s last appeal to Jonah is a fitting one with which to close this lesson:

Jonah 4:6 The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” 10 Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

“Who Can Change the Mind of God?”

By Alden Thompson

Signs of the Times, Feb. 1992, 25-27

God is in the business of changing people's minds, especially the minds of sinners. That's not surprising. But it is worth a raised eyebrow or two to hear God ask sinners to help *Him* change His *own* mind.

You heard right. God asks sinners to help Him change His mind. Jeremiah 26 tells the story, shedding important light on the purpose of God's prophetic messages in the Old Testament.

In the chapter, the spotlight is on Jeremiah himself, a prophet in misery, prophesying in a miserable time. The Lord has sent him a bad news/good news message to pass on to the people of Judah. The bad news is God's threat to destroy the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The good news shines through in the word *IF*: *IF* the message is blunt enough, suggests God, maybe “they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil ways” (Jer. 26:13 NRSV). It's an earlier version of Peter's “patient” God who wants everyone to repent and no one to burn (2 Pet. 3:9).

In this instance, Jeremiah lays down a definite *IF*, an approach well-attested in Scripture. Moses' last speech to Israel is perhaps the most notable example: Blessings *IF* you obey (Deut. 28:1-14), curses *IF* you don't (Deut. 28:15-68).

Jeremiah 26 tells us more about God's use of the *IF* clause. But before we take a closer look, we should note that God does not limit himself to this one approach. In many instances He seems to drop all conditions, speaking of both doom and salvation *as if* they were iron-clad and sealed, no ifs, ands, or buts.

Prophecies of doom in this mode are easy to spot in the prophets. Micah, for example, on Jerusalem: “It's all over. Zion will be a plowed field, Jerusalem a heap of ruins” (Mic. 3:12). Or Jonah to Ninevah: “In forty days Ninevah will be destroyed” (Jonah 3:4).

On the positive side, unconditional promises of salvation are also ready to hand. God takes the initiative. Jeremiah's new covenant promise is a good example: “*I* will write my law on your heart. Your life depends on *my* certain promises, not your broken ones” (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The same is true of Ezekiel's promise of a new heart: “*I* will give you a new heart. And *my* Spirit will make you keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Since promises and threats appear in both modes in Scripture, that is, with the *IF* and without, it is interesting to note how Christians bring the two patterns together – or keep them apart.

Mostly they have kept them apart. Those who stress Divine sovereignty (e.g. the Presbyterian and Reformed [Calvinist] tradition) focus on the unconditional promises and threats, minimizing the human response. But those who stress the importance of the human will (e.g. the Methodist [Arminian] tradition) have less to say about Divine sovereignty, focusing instead on the *IF* clauses.

Pushed to their logical extremes, the two approaches seem contradictory, at least at the theoretical level. One world is determined by God's decision, the other by human effort. If, however, we look at both approaches for their practical, motivational value, they complement each other, covering the full range of human needs, for as perceptive parents, teachers, and

pastors know all too well, what turns one person on, turns another off, and vice versa.

Some crave freedom, others security. Some love a challenge, responding best when they have a hand on the reins. Others are most productive when assured that their destiny lies secure in God's hands.

In our modern world, it is the difference between those who thrive on the uncertain excitement of working on commission and those who need a steady salary: the hard-driving salesman in the showroom, and the faithful accountant in the back room. In a religious setting, it is the difference between the fast-paced world of the evangelist and the more settled parish environment of the pastor.

Remarkably, because of sin, either approach can result in discouragement or carelessness. Those who love a challenge too easily slip into neutral in a secure world. Those needing security become just as ineffective in the face of a challenge.

So God does what every wise parent, teacher, and pastor has to do: He mixes, matches and blends His methods, becoming all things to all people in order to save some.

But now let's return to Jeremiah 26 and look more closely at God's attempt to motivate His people. When Jeremiah first pled with them to change God's mind by changing their behavior, they treated Jeremiah as a traitor. Jeremiah 7 records his attack on their secure world. You can't just say: "The Temple! The Temple! The Temple!" as though it were some magic charm, he warned. You can't kill, steal, and commit adultery while claiming the temple as security. Reform, says God, or I will destroy this temple as I did the one at Shiloh (Jer. 7:1-15).

Jeremiah 26 records the people's reaction. "Treason," they cried. "You shall die!" (Jer. 26:8-9). They liked their safe, secure world, one unthreatened by wicked behavior. Amazingly, they viewed Jeremiah's *conditional* threat as a treasonous certainty, even though he plainly said God was begging them to change His mind (Jer. 26:3). "If you repent," Jeremiah promised again, "God *will* change His mind" (Jer. 26:13).

Suddenly, someone remembered a piece of history, just enough to rescue Jeremiah from the mob. "Wait!" came the cry. "In the days of King Hezekiah [some 100 years earlier] didn't the prophet Micah prophesy that Jerusalem would become a heap of ruins? Yet King Hezekiah didn't put Micah to death. Instead, he turned to the Lord and the Lord changed His mind" (Jer. 26:17-19). Jeremiah 26:18 includes the actual quote from Micah 3:12, a threat of destruction, unconditional and unequivocal. Yet Micah's audience heard the unspoken IF and repented. And the Lord changed his mind.

The same thing happened when Jonah preached against Ninevah. Although he announced unconditional destruction, the people heard God's IF, repented, and saved their city. The NRSV simply says: "God changed his mind" (Jonah 3:10). Jonah, however, was angry. He wanted smoke, even though, as he himself admitted, he knew all along that God would relent if the people did (Jonah 4:1-2).

In the end, a remarkable two-fold conclusion emerges from the prophets: 1. When people are sensitive to the Spirit of God, they hear His IF, even when it is not stated. 2. When they resist, they don't hear the IF even though it is shouted in their ears. Isn't it curious, that those hearing Micah and Jonah responded positively to the unconditional threat, while Jeremiah's listeners resisted the IF? Only when they remembered Micah's unconditional threat did they finally hear the IF and respond.

It seems safe to conclude, then, that as far as God's threats are concerned, all are

conditional, even when no IF is included. But what about promises of salvation and restoration? That's a more volatile question, for while all evangelical Christians agree that restoration is certain, the when and how is much debated.

A sizeable number of modern Christians have adopted so-called "dispensationalism," a perspective emphasizing God's sovereignty to the virtual exclusion of conditionality: God's prophecies will be fulfilled, period. Consistent with that position, every unfulfilled prophecy from the Old Testament is expected to be fulfilled *in detail* at the end of time or during the millennium to follow. Even human death and animal sacrifices are said to continue after the second coming of Christ.

If we take the position, however, that the purpose of prophecy is to reform not simply to inform, then we can see every prophetic "restoration" picture as establishing the principle of restoration. The details will differ according the differing needs of each audience. The great restoration pictures of Scripture, Ezekiel 40-48, Isaiah 65-66, Zechariah 14, Revelation 21-22, all confirm the hope of restoration, yet the details differ, sometimes dramatically. Recognizing the principle of conditionality explains why some were not fulfilled in the Old Testament. Yet we don't have to toss them out as contradictory or struggle to integrate every detail into one grand master plan. They simply are God's way of being all things to all people that He might save some. Saving is always God's consistent purpose. That never changes, even when threats of doom seem to overwhelm the promise of restoration.

Finally, I must admit, that Jeremiah 26 has helped me see the glimmer of hope even in the most emphatic pronouncement of doom, for when Jeremiah says that "the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you" (Jer. 26:13 NRSV), he picks loose a thread of hope that apparently was bound fast when King Josiah, just a few years before, discovered the law book in the temple and learned to his horror that the nation was doomed. As told in 2 Kings 22, the prophetess Huldah informed Josiah that Judah's sin was too great. Disaster was certain. But the Lord would postpone destruction until after Josiah's reign because the king had humbled himself before the Lord (2 Kings 22:15-20).

Could the evil day have been postponed permanently by continued repentance? I think so, for Jeremiah promised the people: "The Lord will change His mind." If rattling the saber will wake the people up, the Lord will do it. "Change my mind," He says. "I want to save, not destroy."

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: “The Ultimate Rest”

Leading question: How do we keep alive the Advent Hope after waiting for some 2000 years?

This last week’s lesson on the quarter explores ways of keeping alive the hope of Jesus’ return. If you are discussing this lesson in a group, it could be helpful to hear what the members of the group say about how they keep the hope alive.

Question: With reference to return of Jesus, what is the difference between hope and proof?

Comment: Devout Christians of conservative stripe are sometimes tempted to look for external proof for our faith. Yet the word “faith” (= confidence) and “hope” do not depend on proof. If we were to try and “prove” my wife’s love and devotion to me, seeking for proof would destroy that which is most precious between us: trust. Hiring a detective to look for proof would mean the end of a trusting relationship.

Question: Could Paul’s words in Romans 8:24 help to cure us of our need for “proof”?

Romans 8:22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Signs and Surprises: Matthew 24-25

For those waiting for the Lord to return, Matthew 24-25 is an important passage. Because of the way Matthew begins with “signs,” Christians have been tempted to make charts that would predict the end. But after Jesus gives the signs, he immediately states “the end is not yet” (24:6). He even says that the return is “near, at the very gates” (24:33). Several paragraphs and some stories follow that repeatedly state in various ways: “Be ready, for no one knows the hour except the Father” (cf. 24:36); “keep awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (24:42); you must be ready, “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (24:44); “the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know” (24:50).

Then Matthew 25 opens with the story of the wise and foolish virgins. It’s worth noting that even the wise slept (25:5). But the difference was that the wise were ready. Jesus closes the story with this punch line: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (25:13).

Question: What does Philippians 4:4-7 tell us about the best “mind set” for “waiting”?

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Comment: The words of Jesus and apostles make it perfectly clear that we don't know when the Lord will return. He may be near, even at the door – yet we could wait for 2000 years! So be ready. And while we are waiting, let us rejoice!