

Because You Have Shed Much Blood on the Earth

I had it in my heart to build a house for the Name of the Lord my God. But this word of the Lord came to me: “You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house for my Name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight.” - 1 Chronicles 22:7-8

David had it in his heart to *build a house for the Name of the Lord*. But it was revealed to him that he would not be the one to build the temple to accommodate the ark of God and the worship as prescribed through Moses. That privilege would be reserved for his son, Solomon. Why? Because Solomon would be a man of “peace” and David had been a man of “war.”

Why exactly did David’s record as a warrior preclude him in the sight of God from being the one to build the temple of the Lord? There must have been something defiling about having *shed much blood on the earth*, even if it was the blood of the enemies of the God of Israel.

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Some contend that it was the innocent blood of Uriah that prevented David from fulfilling his dream, but the context here makes it clear that it was more than that. David was a man of war and the fact that he had shed much blood disqualified him. The Lord wanted a man of peace, not a man of war, to be the one to build a house for his Name.

There is the sense that a man who rules when there is peace and rest is more suited to take on the project of building a temple because he is not distracted by going to war (see 1 Kings 5:3). But more than that, the temple was to be place of peace and it was more fitting that it would be built by a man of peace. The name Solomon is derived from the Hebrew word for peace, “shalom.” Notice too, that later, when the word of the Lord came to the prophet Haggai concerning the temple, the Lord said, “*And in this place I will grant peace*” (2:9). That is why if a person was being pursued by an avenger he could go into the temple and grab hold of the horns of the altar (see Exodus 21:13-14). No blood was to be shed there because it was a place of peace. Even today, depending on the circumstances, the authorities will not enter a house of worship to pursue a person who has fled there for refuge.

It was inappropriate for David to build this place of peace because he was responsible for much human destruction. Ironically, and perhaps inappropriately as well, the most famous modern legacy to the ideals of peacemakers was established by a man also responsible for much human carnage—the inventor of dynamite, Alfred Nobel.

Who Prophesied, Using the Harp

David... set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals... who prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the Lord. - 1 Chronicles 25:1,3

Prophecy, simply put, is an utterance or revelation inspired by God. That makes prophecy a considerable category, which, biblically, it is. That means that preaching can be prophetic, evangelism can be prophetic (the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Rv 19:10)), revelatory experiences are certainly prophetic, and many other kinds of communications can be prophetic, if they are truly inspired by God. In addition, the prophetic can be, and often is, found in the ministry of music.

Would you agree that the Psalms are prophetic—that they are words inspired by God? Many of the Psalms came out of the *ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals*, described here in 1

How many of our worship leaders are encouraged to be carried along prophetically as they lead the congregation into worship?

Chronicles 25. As part of setting up worship in the tabernacle, David designated certain persons for the ministry of prophesying. Imagine that. Earlier (chapter 16), David had chosen and designated certain ones, including Heman and Jeduthun, to *give thanks to the Lord*. Now he was adding to all the different ministries of tabernacle worship, the work of “prophesying.” And this particular ministry was to be in conjunction with the playing of musical instruments. Wouldn’t you have loved to have been there, not only to see how they did it, but also to be inspired by it?

This type of prophetic ministry would have been both spontaneous and scripted. Not only would they prophesy the word of the Lord by the descant of familiar songs, but the prophetic unction would inspire spontaneous *spiritual songs* (see Col 3:16) of praise and thanksgiving. Asaph’s “ministry” of prophesying with musical instruments produced Psalms 50 and 73-83.

How many of our worship leaders are encouraged to write their own songs under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and are given freedom to be carried along prophetically as they lead the congregation into worship? The current “Harp and Bowl” movement—where worship and prayer come together—is a positive way to “prophesy using the harp,” but we have a long way to go to see the fullness of what and how I believe the Holy Spirit wants to speak through music in worship.

Then the Leaders Gave Willingly

Then the leaders of families, the officers of the tribes of Israel, the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, and the officials in charge of the king's work gave willingly. They gave toward the work on the temple of God... - 1 Chronicles 29:6-7

One of my mentors in ministry, Kenn Gill, has said, “Leaders need to lead from out front.” As Paul said to the Corinthians, “*Follow my example...*” (1 Co 11:1). When it came to giving toward the building of the temple of God, David and his leaders “led from out front.”

The building of the temple was going to be quite a project. David already had the design. He had received the plans for the courts and all the surrounding rooms directly from the Spirit of God (see 28:12). Interesting. Just as God gave Moses the pattern for the traveling tabernacle, he provided David the blueprints for this permanent “residence.”

So, all the officials are assembled in Jerusalem for the big fund-raiser. David gives a speech about the building of the temple and how Solomon would be the one to do it. He unveils the plans for the project and

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commissions Solomon, the Levites and the priests for their role in the project. Then David starts talking money. But before he asks anyone else to give a shekel he lets them know about his personal commitment from his own bank account (v3). The amount is astronomical: One hundred and ten tons of gold and two hundred and sixty tons of silver. Having led the way, he is prepared to challenge his leaders. He says to them, “*Now, who is ready to consecrate himself today to the Lord?*” (v5). They follow David’s example and they *gave willingly*. Another one hundred and ninety tons of gold and three hundred and seventy-five tons of silver (that’s a lot of gold and silver, but it was used to overlay just about everything in the temple, including doors and walls). It says in verse 9 that the people’s reaction to all this was they *rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders*. No doubt, they were also primed to give.

If you are looking for a fund-raising model for your next building campaign, look no further than 1 Chronicles 29. This amazing consecrated giving to the Lord inspires, what is for me, the most powerful prayer in the entire Hebrew Scriptures (vs 10-13) where, among other things, David gives credit to the Lord for enabling the people to be able to give so generously. And it all started because David “led from out front.”

Since this Is Your Heart's Desire

God said to Solomon, "Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, riches or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge... therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, riches and honor..." - 2 Chronicles 1:11-12

The story is familiar and yet the lesson is exceptional. The Lord appears to Solomon one night saying, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (v7). An offer like that is what fables are made of. What would you do with an offer like that? What would you really do?

Solomon's answer wasn't just the "right" answer—like he is playing the TV game show, "Family Feud" and everybody says to him, "Good answer." Yes it was a good answer. But it was especially good because it really was his heart's desire. He was young, the task was great, and more than anything in the world he genuinely wanted wisdom and knowledge in order to be able to govern the people of God. And the Lord was pleased with his request, not so much because it was the right answer, but because it was a selfless one. Would the Lord have given Solomon wealth, riches or honor if he had asked? Would He have given him the death of his enemies? How about long life? Probably. It was a carte blanche offer. It had to be if it was going to be a true test of Solomon's heart.

It's a funny thing how the Lord is in the habit of testing people's hearts. Most people, if they had the one wish from the genie in the bottle, would ask for something in one of the three categories that Solomon did not ask for: Fame/fortune, revenge or long life. Because Solomon did not selfishly ask for any of those things with the "wish" that belonged to him, his Heavenly Father (see 1 Chronicles 28:6) gave these things to him anyway. Why? Because he wanted what was good in the eyes of the Lord.

So it turned out that Solomon did give the right answer. The "right" answer always comes out of a concern for the will of God and the interests of others. We have a promise that if we *seek first the kingdom of God*, the other things that we want and need will be given to us as well (Mt 6:33).

Ask Solomon about the best move he ever made, and there can be absolutely no doubt that he will refer to what he did with the offer that the Lord put before him that night. I wonder what we would do with that same offer?

With Your Mouth and with Your Hand

You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it--as it is today. - 2 Chronicles 6:15

The difference between God and man is that when God makes a promise he is not limited in his capacity to fulfill it. We human beings may talk a good talk, but because of deficiencies in ability and character, what we promise with the mouth many times is left undone by the hand.

Solomon was extolling the virtues of the Lord God of Israel at the dedication of the temple. The Lord was a covenant keeping God (v14). Solomon knew this because his own monarchy was a fulfillment of a promise that the Lord had made to his father David—as was the completion of the temple. Solomon praised the Lord saying, "With your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it."

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A promise is one thing, the fulfillment of it is another. What God begins with a promise, he always brings full circle to completion. There is no difference between what he speaks with his mouth and what his hand accomplishes. His hand will assuredly fulfill what his mouth speaks.

For us, this is the truest test of our character. This is what integrity is almost always about. Does your hand fulfill what your mouth speaks? The proverb, "A man is only as good as his word," is true. Think of the people you know whom you can count on. Why do you find them trustworthy? Because you know them to fulfill with their hand what they have spoken with their mouth.

If we have trouble keeping our promises, the problem is either with the "mouth" or with the "hand." Many of us, myself included, have a tendency to run the mouth and not consider the real cost. The tendency may come from a people-pleasing spirit or an overly optimistic sense of what can realistically be accomplished. Those who make promises they can't keep, over time, become known as *clouds without rain* (Pr 25:14). For those with "hand" problems, it is not a matter of promises they "can't keep, it is a shortage of diligence. Industriousness, tenacity, perseverance, and resolve are what is needed to make us into true promise keepers.

"With your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it." Lord, make us more like you.

Twenty-two Thousand Head of Cattle

Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the Lord. And King Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty-two thousand head of cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats. So the king and all the people dedicated the temple of God. -2 Chronicles 7:4-5

At the dedication of the temple, King Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty-two thousand head of cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats to the Lord. That's a whole lot of sacrificin' goin' on. Does that seem exorbitant to you?

Solomon could never be accused of having a "poverty mindset." When he did something, he did it big. The reports of his wealth are hard to fathom. He pulled in twenty-five tons of gold each year. He had twelve thousand horses in his stables. All his household articles (goblets, utensils, etc...) were made of pure gold. The daily provision at his table was 185 bushels of fine flour, 375 bushels of meal, thirty cattle, one-hundred sheep as well as various game and choice fowl. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. The man's scale did not have "small" for a setting.

In all of this "extravagance," I see no indication that the Lord seemed to mind

So when it came to offering up sacrifices at the dedication of the temple, twenty-two thousand head of cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats is right in line with the way Solomon did things. It could very well be that the people who attended the dedication of the temple were responsible for bringing some or most of these animals for sacrifice, which, according to the NIV Bible Commentary, could then be used to feed the vast crowds during the celebration. It was quite a bash, fitting for Solomon's style.

In all of this "extravagance," I see no indication that the Lord seemed to mind. In Mark 14, when the woman broke open the alabaster jar of perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet, it was not seen as a "waste,"—it was seen as an act of worship. It wasn't so much that Solomon's resources were unlimited as it is that the Lord's are. What is twenty-two thousand head of cattle when you are serving the One who owns the cattle on an infinite number of hills? Solomon did everything big because he knew nothing other than a big God, and he knew no way to worship him other than big.

A man's life does not consist of the abundance of his possessions and the Lord will not necessarily be pleased with thousands of rams and ten thousands of rivers of oil, but neither is he pleased with a spirit of poverty that cannot receive his abundant provision nor worship him extravagantly.

Rehoboam Rejected the Advice the Elders Gave Him

But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. He asked them, "What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, 'Lighten the yoke your father put on us?'" - 2 Chronicles 10:8-9

Age is no guarantor of wisdom but, all things being equal, the life experience gained over time will make the advice of the elder more reliable than the younger. It is a risky venture to reject the advice of those who have been around the block a time or two more than yourself.

Rehoboam was succeeding his father, Solomon, as king. The people of Israel saw the changing of the guard as an opportunity to try and amend their situation. In fulfillment of the word of the Lord when the people had asked for a king (1 Samuel 8), Solomon had subjected the people to a yoke of heavy labor. The people came to Rehoboam and said if he would lighten up a little, they would be willing to serve him as king. Rehoboam didn't have an immediate answer, so he says, "Come back to me in three days." He is going to get some advice on the matter. He goes to the "elders" who served as advisers to his father and they counsel him to listen to the people. "If you will be kind to these people and please them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants," the elders say. Rehoboam rejects the advice of the elders, goes to the friends he grew up with and they advise him to be even harsher with the people that his father was.

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It sounds like Rehoboam already had his mind made up because he rejected the advice of the elders even before he spoke with his buddies. He refused the guidance of men who were both seasoned and objective, and listened to some inexperienced yes men who were so caught up in being part of the new regime that they were unable to tell Rehoboam anything other than what he wanted to hear.

Who knows why Rehoboam rejected the advice of the elders? Perhaps he wanted to distance himself from his father's administration and establish a name for himself. Perhaps he was insecure and felt like he had to show himself to be a tough guy. In retrospect, it was obviously a bad move. The new king not only refused to listen to the elders, he refused to listen to the people (v16) and lost more than half his kingdom. Rehoboam failed to realize that we all see the world through tinted glasses and that those older than us are usually better at distinguishing the tint from reality.

Even in His Illness He Did Not Seek Help from the Lord

Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians. - 2 Chronicles 16:12

Something happened to King Asa. One of the great reformers in the history of Judah and Israel, a man of outstanding spiritual fidelity—he finished his days with a grudge against the Lord.

Asa's reforms were legendary. The man whose name means “healer,” deposed his idolatrous grandmother, Maacah, who had usurped the throne in Judah. He tore down her idols and got rid of the male shrine prostitutes. By weight of his authority and zeal, he *commanded* Judah to seek the Lord and to obey his laws—and they did. He removed the high places and incense altars in every town in Judah (14:4). He repaired the altar of the Lord (15:8). All the people came together to enter into a covenant with the Lord and seek him with all their hearts (15:12). And the Lord was found by them and he gave them rest on every side (15:15). Those who chose not to seek the Lord were not tolerated (15:13).

He went to his grave holding a grudge against the Lord

On one occasion, Zerah the Cushite (Ethiopian) marched against Judah with his vast army. Asa called on the Lord and *they were crushed before the Lord and his forces* (14:13). But another time, Judah was threatened by Baasha, king of Israel who had an alliance with the Arameans. Instead of calling on the name of the Lord like he did against Zerah, Asa bought off the Arameans who broke their treaty with Israel and turned against them. When Asa was rebuked by the Lord through a prophet named Hanani, Asa refused to receive it. He became enraged and put the seer in prison. He then began to brutalize some of his people and when a severe affliction came against him in his feet, he refused to seek help from the Lord but sought it only from the physicians. Something ugly had come into his heart.

Asa was terribly offended by the rebuke of the Lord. He felt justified in his course of action, got really angry at the Lord and refused to repent for his self-reliance. It seems that he never let go of his resentment concerning the Lord's correction because when he was afflicted with that foot illness, he refused to seek God. He went to his grave holding a grudge against the Lord.

Don't ever be offended by the Lord's discipline or be unwilling to submit to his correction. That way, unlike Asa, you will be sure to finish well.

No Injustice or Partiality or Bribery

He appointed judges in the land... He told them, "Consider carefully what you do, because you are not judging for man but for the Lord, who is with you whenever you give a verdict. Now let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery." - 2 Chronicles 19:5-7

Of all the branches of civil government, the one most closely based on biblical principles is, and needs to be, the judicial branch. Here we have a clear mandate for those who have been appointed as judges. Whether it is from behind a courtroom bench or a kitchen table, the principles that Jehoshaphat gives to his newly appointed judges will serve anyone who has the fearsome task of administering justice.

These are the rudiments of successful jurisprudence:

Few things are as scandalous as a judge who shows partiality or takes bribes

1) *Consider carefully what you do.* The task of deciding any case that affects a person's future, no matter how small, must be taken seriously.

2) *You are not judging for man but for the Lord.* Any and every governing authority—whether they are magistrates, peace officers or parents—ultimately represent God. All authority resides in and is derived from God and those who exercise authority are actually doing it on God's behalf.

3) *Who is with you whenever you give a verdict.* It is vitally important to God that justice is done. He will be with those who need and seek his wisdom to give a just verdict.

4) *Now let the fear of the Lord be upon you.* We know that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This is especially true when it comes to making right judgments. The fear of the Lord is missing from many of our courtrooms. I've seen one too many a judge who seemed to have a “devil may care,” “another day on the job” attitude. This would never happen if he or she judged in the fear of the Lord.

5) *Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery.* Few things are as scandalous as a judge who shows partiality or takes bribes. But with God, there can be no such thing. Justice is because God is. If there is injustice, partiality or bribery, it is only because there has been deviation from who God is and what he has instilled in our consciences.

The keepers of the scales of justice truly need to be “blind”—free from impartiality. That blindness, along with the ability to see the truth, is best achieved by looking into the face of God.

The Ships Were Wrecked

Jehoshaphat...agreed with Ahaziah to construct a fleet of trading ships. Eliezer prophesied against Jehoshaphat, saying, "Because you have made an alliance with Ahaziah, the Lord will destroy what you have made." The ships were wrecked and were not able to set sail to trade. - 2 Chronicles 20:35-37

Jehoshaphat was a good king. He *walked in the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them; he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord* (2 Ch 20:32). He seemed to have a gentle spirit and a pure heart (see 1 Kings 22:5,8; 2 Chronicles 19:5-7; 20:18). He never had a real “downfall,” except this: He wanted to be “Mister Nice Guy.”

You might think it was a good thing that, as king of Judah, Jehoshaphat worked toward unity in the divided kingdom. When Israel, the people of his own ancestry, called for help, he was

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there. His response was, *“I am as you are, and my people as your people; we will join you...”* (18:3). The problem with that was that Jehoshaphat was siding up with three different kings (including Ahab) who were notorious for their worship of Baal and who consistently provoked the Lord to anger.

You see, Jehoshaphat had trouble saying “no.” When Ahab asked him to come fight the Arameans, he not only cast his lot with him, he agreed to be a decoy for the wicked king as they fought the Arameans. When, by the grace of God, he returned safely to Jerusalem, Jehu the seer went out to meet him and said to the king, *“Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord?”* (19:2). And here in 2 Chronicles 20, we find Jehoshaphat making an alliance with Ahaziah, son of Ahab, partnering with him to build some trading ships. The Lord is displeased with this unholy yoke and destroys the ships (probably by means of a storm), so they never even get out of port.

We need to be careful of making unholy alliances with persons who do not follow the Lord, especially those who claim to know God but live hypocritically—friends or family notwithstanding. If we acquiesce to requests that we know violate the Lord’s standards, there is a good chance we will find ourselves being rebuked by the Lord and our “ships” being wrecked because we have given our strength to those who do not honor the Lord.

In 1 Kings 22:49, we learn that when the new ships were destroyed, Ahaziah asked Jehoshaphat if his men could join with Judah’s previously existing fleet of merchant ships. Jehoshaphat refused. He had learned that being “Mister Nice Guy” is not the way to please the Lord.

The Lord Can Give You Much More than That

Amaziah asked the man of God, "But what about the hundred talents I paid for these Israelite troops?" The man of God replied, "The Lord can give you much more than that." - 2 Chronicles 25:9

A very talented and industrious man in our fellowship was waiting to hear about a full-time ministry position at a camp an hour outside of our city. During the weeks that turned into months that he was waiting, he spent probably a couple-hundred hours working on projects in our church building, immensely improving the function, aesthetics and value of our property. When we as pastors became convinced that we were to give our building away, the one person I was apprehensive to tell was this guy. Because of all the work he had done, we decided to talk to him first. His reaction humbled and blessed me. He said, “Well, the building will still be used for the work of the kingdom, and besides, God will give us something better.”

Amaziah, king of Judah, mustered the fighting men under his authority and found that there were three hundred thousand men ready for military service, able to handle the spear and shield.

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bidding***

Evidently, he thought he needed more than that, so he hired another one hundred thousand fighting men from Israel, paying a hundred talents (3.75 tons) of silver for their services. But a visit from a “man of God,” revealed to him that it was not in the will of Yahweh that he should have hired the mercenaries from the neighboring kingdom to the north. *“O king, these troops from Israel must not march with you, for the Lord is not with Israel,”* said the man of God. The word of the Lord was that if the Israelite troops were to go into battle with the men of Judah, they would be defeated. The Lord’s favor was worth a whole lot more than any number of troops that Amaziah could have hired, but now he is in a bit of a quandary. What about all that money that he has already invested in the extra fighting men asks the king? The man of God replies, *“The Lord can give you much more than that.”*

Oh, how true. Jesus made that clear when he said that no one who has left homes, families and fields for his sake would fail to receive those things many times over, not to mention eternal life (see Mark 10:29-30). God is able to multiply the things that we give up at his bidding. Whether it is 3.75 tons of silver or a half-million dollar building, it doesn’t matter. The Lord is able to give much more than that, in whatever composition he chooses.

His Pride Led to His Downfall

His fame spread far and wide, for he was greatly helped until he became powerful. But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. - 2 Chronicles 26:15-16

It is difficult to stay humble when fame, fortune and power come your way. Hollywood, sports and politics are replete with persons who let success go to their heads. A few notable exceptions have been Tom Hanks, Ron Howard, Ernie Banks, Wayne Gretzky, Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter. Even in the kingdom of God, notoriety and success has been the downfall of many. The Billy Grahams and the Jack Hayfords, who gain distinction and yet remain humble, are not easy to find.

King Uzziah became successful because God was with him. Because the Lord helped him, *his fame spread far and wide*. But his fame went to his head. How often have you seen someone who began humbly with the gifts and anointing that God

How often have you seen someone who began humbly ending up like their success was their own doing?

had given him or her ending up like their success was their own doing? Notice in the NIV it says that Uzziah *was greatly helped until he became powerful*. Once pride entered in, the Lord withdrew his hand. Why? Because he *opposes the proud* (1 Pt 5:5). And once that happens, the downfall will eventually come because *pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall* (Pr 16:18).

In one sense, it is puzzling how a person who has been gifted by God and/or helped by him can take credit for what they have achieved. After all, as Paul says, *“What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”* (1 Co 4:7). All natural giftedness and spiritual anointing comes from the Lord, so how can anyone take credit beyond what they have stewarded? In another sense though, it is easy to understand what happened to Uzziah. Pride is the inbred monster of the fallen nature that can hardly be contained under normal circumstances. How much less when fame, fortune and power come into play?

The Lord does not want to have to humble you, as he did Uzziah—who was afflicted with leprosy for the rest of his life. If you really want to be used by God, pray that you will first be stripped of all pride and selfish ambition. This will not be a pleasant process, but it is the only way to avoid being a casualty of your own ego. Then, when the Lord has greatly helped you and you have gained some measure of success, remember Uzziah—and stay humble.

Remove All Defilement from the Sanctuary

Hezekiah opened the doors of the temple of the Lord and repaired them. He brought in the priests and the Levites...and said: "Listen to me, Levites! Consecrate yourselves now and consecrate the temple of the Lord, the God of your fathers. Remove all defilement from the sanctuary. - 2 Chronicles 29:4-5

The holiness preachers of the nineteenth century often spoke about the “cleansing of the sanctuary.” Their premise was that it is the Lord’s will that we who are the temple of the Holy Spirit be cleansed from every defilement to be set apart as fit vessels for the residence of a holy God. 2 Chronicles 29 is surely symbolic of the cleansing of the believer.

The temple and its sanctuary had been defiled and were no longer in use. The first thing that Hezekiah does as king is open the doors of the temple and command that it be prepared

“Sanctification” is the cleansing of the “sanctuary”

for utilization again. But it is not only a matter of making repairs, what is most needed is consecration and cleansing from spiritual defilement. Hezekiah commands that the priests and the Levites consecrate themselves as keepers of the temple of the Lord and *“remove all defilement from the sanctuary.”* It takes them sixteen days, but they get it done. They remove everything “unclean,” dump it, and probably burn it, in the Kidron Valley. As soon as the purification of the temple is complete Hezekiah sacrifices sin offerings. He then calls an impromptu Passover celebration which includes both Judah and Israel. The joy and celebration is so great, the festival is extended an extra week, after which the Israelites go out and tear down every idol in sight.

“Sanctification” is the cleansing of the “sanctuary.” It is making “holy” that which is “holy.” The temple of God cannot be fully utilized with joy without the “cleansing of the sanctuary.” *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit* (1 Co 6:19)? Jesus was able to say that there was nothing in him that Satan could get a hold of (see John 14:30) because his “sanctuary” was free from defilement.

By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit we need to remove all defilement from the sanctuary. It may take “sixteen days,” but as Paul says, *“Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God”* (2 Co 7:1) and, *“If a man cleanses himself... he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work”* (2 Ti 2:21).

God Left Him to Test Him

God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart. - 2 Chronicles 32:31

For the first twenty-four months of my Christian life there was an uninterrupted sense of the presence of God. Then one day, quite unexpectedly, that sense, along with my joy, was gone. I didn't know what to make of it. I was sure that I must have sinned so I sought the Lord to find out what I needed to repent of. No answer. For all intents and purposes, the Lord had left me. I was troubled about it and became rather sullen. I remember going home dejected after worship because the choir of which I was a part had sung a song called "There is Joy in the Lord." The irony did not escape me. And even though I did not feel like attending the evening service that day, I went anyway. I slipped into a pew and the moment I opened my mouth to sing, the joy of the Lord flooded my soul.

If we stay true to the Lord when there is no apparent sense of his presence or working in our lives, then it is proven that our worship of him is more than a fair weather exercise

Do you believe that God will leave a person to test him or her? Here in Chronicles it says concerning king Hezekiah, "*God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart.*" What would be the point of that? Well, it's the tough times—not the good times—that tests the mettle of someone's love. If we stay true to the Lord when there is no apparent sense of his presence or working in our lives, then it is proven that our worship of him is more than a fair weather exercise. And God will test us in this way—which should be encouraging for all who are, or will be, going through what John of the Cross called, "The dark night of the soul."

But you may say, "Didn't God promise to never leave us or forsake us?" (Hebrews 13:5). Assuredly. But who has been a Christian for any length of time and not experienced the "desert" where his manifest presence has been withdrawn. Even Jesus cried out on the cross, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mk 15:34). The cross was the ultimate test, and in order for it to be so, the Father had to withdraw his presence from his only begotten son.

Are there those who never face this test and never know the pain of God "leaving" them? Probably. But neither do these experience the profound satisfaction of passing the test nor the depth of gratitude of having his presence restored.

While He Was Still Young, He Began to Seek God

In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles, carved idols and cast images. - 2 Chronicles 34:3

Josiah began his reign when he was eight years old. Obviously, Josiah would not have been capable to rule his people on his own at that tender age. As he grew and became aware of his authority, he could have become enamored with the power of his position and disregarded the God of his ancestors. But that was not the case. The Scriptures say that at the age of sixteen *he began to seek the God of his father David.*

The age of sixteen, at least in our culture, represents the time when a person really begins to discover what life has to offer. These are the "wonder years." The world becomes an open book. The apron strings are being cut, the work force is entered, the driver's license is issued and the quest for independence has begun in earnest. There is so much that is vying for the attention of the sixteen-year-old. This is the age when kids start dropping out of both school and church, and often, the last thing on a sixteen year-old's mind is the God of their fathers.

But this is when Josiah began to seek God. It could have been, like Solomon, the foreboding weight of royal responsibility that turned his attention to the Lord. Or it could have been a hunger to know the God of his fathers the way that he heard that David had. In any case, the consequential thing was that he began to seek the Lord. Four years later he began to rid the land of false worship and six years after that, at the age of twenty-six, the temple was refurbished, the covenant with God was reestablished and the Passover festival was re-instituted. All because he began to seek God *while he was still young.*

To the youth I would say: While others are seeking to discover what life has to offer, seek the one who offers life itself. Solomon said, *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'* (Ec 12:1). A time comes as you get older when life loses some of its freshness and you begin to wonder what happened to the wonder. But if you follow Josiah's example and seek God while you are still young, the "wonder years" will continue and your regrets will be few.

While others are seeking to discover what life has to offer, seek the one who offers life itself

They Set Fire to God's Temple

They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there. - 2 Chronicles 36:19

How is it that the Lord would allow pagan hordes to come into the holy city of Jerusalem to break down the walls, take his people into captivity and burn down the place where the Lord said his eyes, his heart and his name would forever be (1 Ki 9:3)? Yes, I know that it was because his people provoked him to anger, but what I am really asking is how is it that the Lord would make the commitment to allow his name and his presence to be associated with a place (and a people) only to allow it to be destroyed and become a byword? What do you think is in the heart and mind of God as he sees the temple burning?

Earlier in 2 Chronicles 36 it says that the Lord *sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy* (vs 15,16). So it got to the point where there was no remedy. The mess could not be fixed and the disease could not be healed.

More important than the temple that bears the name is the name itself

Hence, the Babylonians were given free rein to cause ruin and desolation in the place that had seen more of the glory of God than any other setting on the face of the earth. So, even though it was never God's intention that the temple that bore his name be destroyed—it was not beyond him to allow it. And if it was not beyond him to allow it with his people then, what does it mean for us today? The Jews in Jesus' day made the mistake of assuming that since they bore his name, God would not allow them to be cut off, yet they were.

All this means that God's association with his people is actually a risk. Relationships are always a risk. God gives his glory and kingdom to a people who may not only fail to produce good fruit but treat his name, glory and kingdom as unholy and trample them underfoot (see Hebrews 10:29).

The reason that the Lord was willing that the temple that bore his name would burn to the ground and become a byword among the nations was that his name was not being honored there. And more important than the temple that bears the name is the name itself.

In Order to Fulfill the Word of the Lord Spoken by Jeremiah

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm... - Ezra 1:1

For those who think that prophetic words have no real affect on world events, a look at the history of the ancient near east might bring a change of mind. It is recorded in many annals of antiquity (Assyrian, Babylonian, Hebrew) that from 605 B.C. to 586 B.C. the people of Judah were taken into captivity. The Scriptures tell us that in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, a year after the deportations started, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah (Jer 25:1). The word was that after seventy years of captivity the Jews would be allowed to return to their homeland, but not until then. The Lord had also spoken through Jeremiah that at the end of the seventy years that he would *punish the king of Babylon and his nation* (Jer 25:12). So, Jeremiah's word was that at the end of the seventy years, two things would happen: The king of Babylon would be punished and the Jews would be allowed to return home.

Others have said that Jeremiah's prophecy was written after the fact

Enter Cyrus, king of Persia. At the end of Chronicles, he appears out of nowhere. It is recorded how the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and carried off the people (in the year 586 B.C.) and the next thing we read is that Cyrus is issuing an edict for the Jews to return. What happened to the Babylonians? Historians confirm that in the year 539, Cyrus led the emerging Persian Empire to easily conquer Babylon and in the year 536, the seventieth year after the first deportation, Cyrus issued the edict to allow the Jews to return home. Thus, the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled.

I appreciate the specificity of Jeremiah's prophecy. The more specific the prophetic word, the easier it is to measure the accuracy and credibility of the prophet. Some may say that the rise of Cyrus and his edict were coincidental to Jeremiah's word. That would be quite a coincidence. Others have said that Jeremiah's prophecy and others like it were written after the fact to make it appear as if significant historical events were actually predicted by the Lord's prophets. But the word of the Lord is the word of the Lord and it should not surprise anyone that he speaks and that when he does his word does not return to him void but accomplishes the purpose for which it is intended. And in this case, the fate of nations, the hearts of emperors, and the course of history were involved.

They Lodged an Accusation Against the People of Judah

At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem...Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. - Ezra 4:6,24

You will receive opposition in the work of the Lord—guaranteed. And if you think that the opposition will play fair, think again. Injustice awaits you if you intend to accomplish anything of value for the kingdom of God.

In the year 536 B.C., Cyrus, king of Persia, issued an edict that the Jews could and should return to Jerusalem to rebuild their city—and the temple in particular. Long before, in the year 722 B.C. when the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been taken into captivity by the Assyrians, the king of Assyria immediately resettled Israel with pagan people from other lands (see 2 Kings 17:24). When the southern kingdom of Judah was taken into captivity by the Babylonians between 605 and 586, the land was left unoccupied, except for a few peasants who worked the land as best they could. For the first time since the days of Moses (who died around 1400 B.C.) there was no real presence of the descendants of Israel in the land of Israel.

Because Israel and Judah had been such a force in the region for eight hundred years, you can imagine that when they began to repatriate Judah and rebuild Jerusalem, the people who lived nearby were not pleased. They did not want the glory of those former kingdoms to be renewed. They tried direct opposition but it didn't work. So, after the death of Cyrus, they sent an accusatory letter full of half-truths and outright lies, to persuade the new king that the Jews were a menace—and it worked. Unjustly and unfairly, the Jews were forced to stop rebuilding the temple.

If you have ever faced a machination of accusations, half-truths and outright lies because someone didn't like what you were doing, you are in good company. Joseph, Daniel, Jesus and Paul faced underhanded accusations, insidious conspiracies, treacherous snares, deceitful witnesses, unscrupulous lawyers, and prejudiced tribunals. If it happens to you, trust the Lord to bring you through, and remember: *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven* (Mt 5:11-12).

If you have ever faced a machination of accusations, half-truths and outright lies because someone didn't like what you were doing, you are in good company

I Was Ashamed to Ask the King for Soldiers

I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey...I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him..." - Ezra 8:21-22

Should Ezra have asked for soldiers? He had already received from the King of Persia a letter of commendation, a vast sum of money and all the provision needed to make the nine hundred mile trip from Mesopotamia to Jerusalem. Even though they were 1,800 strong, with all the wealth that they were carrying with them (to aid in the rebuilding of Jerusalem) it could be a risky five-month journey without some kind of armed protection. The king's favor was with Ezra and he would likely oblige to a request for protection along the way. But Ezra had been witnessing to the king about the Lord and his ability to protect those who look to him. Ezra felt sheepish about asking for a military escort. Would it be right for him to ask for soldiers or not?

Should Ezra have asked for those soldiers?

We know that there is such a thing as putting the Lord to a foolish test. Satan attempted to get Jesus to jump off the highest point of the temple to prove that he was the Son of God (see Matthew 4). I knew of a diabetic who stopped taking his insulin because he was trusting the Lord for his healing—and he died. When Nehemiah built the wall he said, *"We prayed to our God and posted a guard"* to meet the threat of the enemy (Ne 4:9). Many circumstances in life call for our best effort to compliment what we are trusting the Lord to accomplish in and through us.

But then there are other times when we need to put the Lord to a different kind of test. It is one thing to say that God is able to accomplish something and another thing to trust him to actually do it. Was Gideon foolish for sending most of his troops away before going into battle? Was David foolish for running into battle with the Philistine giant with five stones and a sling? Was Paul foolish for not heeding the warnings that he would be arrested in Jerusalem? These heroes did not, and would not, rely on the arm of the flesh—and God was glorified.

So, should Ezra have asked for those soldiers? No. He did the right thing. He called for a time of fasting and prayer for both discernment and favor. And God answered. For a foolish test is done out of pride and unbelief but Ezra was operating out of humility and faith.

They Have Mingled the Holy Race

They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. -Ezra 9:2

I was a guest panelist on a live radio call-in show. A caller was inquiring about the propriety of mixed race marriages. A respected older pastor advised against such an arrangement because of complex cultural differences and because of the Old Testament precept that prohibited the Israelites from intermarrying with persons from other nations. I disagreed. For one, there are genetic advantages of having mixed race children. But more germane to the question, the reason for the prohibition in the Old Testament was that Israel was to be a holy nation set apart for the Lord and that intermarriage with people who worshiped other gods would compromise their fidelity to the one true God. It wasn't a matter of "race," per se (Ruth was a Moabite), it was a matter of being unequally yoked with an unbeliever. The view I expressed to the caller was that a Christian is free to marry a person of any racial background, if they too are part of the "holy race."

I have this sense that I wouldn't like Ezra if I met him—a bit too intense for me

Ezra was a Jewish priest living among the exiles in Mesopotamia in the 5th Century B.C.. He was very well versed in the law of the Lord and his commitment to teaching its decrees to Israel prompted him to journey to Jerusalem. Soon after he arrived, some of the leaders approached him about a serious problem with the men, including many leaders and officials, who had violated the law of the Lord and taken foreign wives for themselves and their sons. This appalled Ezra to intense dis-consolation. He tore his clothes, pulled hair out of his head and began *praying, and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God* (9:3,10:1). This dramatic demonstration from the newcomer brought about a fervent conviction with an earnest change of heart among the people.

I have this sense that I wouldn't like Ezra if I met him—a bit too intense for me. Although the action taken in Ezra's day to send away the foreign wives and their children would not have been recommended by Paul, (see 1 Co 7:12-14), it was called for at the time.

We are a "holy nation" set apart for the Lord. We are the chosen race of Israel's seed. As such, marriage to an unbeliever is completely out of order, and if it takes someone with the intensity of Ezra to get that point across, then let it be.

I Had Not Told Anyone What My God Had Put in My Heart

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. - Nehemiah 2:11

If the Lord has set a purpose in your heart, follow Nehemiah's example and use discretion about when and to whom you share it. The right timing and audience will help advance the vision God has given you.

Nehemiah was a descendant of those who had been exiled from Judah to Babylon between the years 605 and 586 B.C.. The year was now 445 B.C.—ninety-one years after Jerusalem began to be resettled. Although he served in the court of the king of Persia, Nehemiah was very interested in what was happening in the homeland of his people. An eyewitness report unsettled his spirit. The people of Jerusalem were living in disgrace—the city walls were still in ruin. Distressed by this news, Nehemiah immediately went into a season of prayer and fasting. The Lord put it in his heart to go beyond praying and take action to help remedy the situation which was greatly troubling him.

Many a godly vision has been trampled by uncircumcised naysayers, never to be recovered

Receiving the blessing of the king (letters of commendation, an armed escort and assurances for building supplies), Nehemiah arrived with the desire and the plan to see the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt. But before he would announce his objective to the people of Jerusalem, he needed to assess the situation. Timing was important. A premature announcement could ruin the enterprise. After three days of waiting, Nehemiah went out under the cover of night to inspect the walls. He needed to be sure of two things—that the walls could be repaired, and that the people would have the heart to work. With his passion, his vision, and the favor that was on him, Nehemiah's decision to keep his tongue in abeyance must have taken great discipline. But when you truly have something from the Lord, you want to make sure that you are not casting your pearls before swine. Many a godly vision has been trampled underfoot by uncircumcised naysayers, never to be recovered and delivered to the persons who would value its true worth. Hold what God has put in your heart until you know from him when and with whom to share it. When the time was right, Nehemiah shared his vision and the people recognized the hand of God in it. And later, when the uncircumcised naysayers came to mock and ridicule (v19), Nehemiah was able to confidently say, "*The God of heaven will give us success*" (v20) because the people were with him.

But We Prayed to Our God and Posted a Guard

They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. - Nehemiah 4:8-9

Nehemiah and the Jews were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. But they were getting serious opposition from the surrounding peoples. These people were none too happy when they realized that the effort to reconstruct the walls of the once mighty city was more than the feeble undertaking that they hoped it would be. At the beginning of the reconstruction they said, *“If even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!”* (v3). So, when much to their chagrin the wall was half-finished, their kings *“plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it”* (v8).

What was Nehemiah to do? Pray? Prepare to fight? How about both? It wasn't an either/or situation. There are times when we are expected to do what we can while relying on God to do what only he can. We are to do what is humanly

There are times when we are expected to do what we can while relying on God to do what only he can

possible and at the same time look to the God of the impossible. As the late Keith Green wrote in one of his songs, *“God says, ‘Do it your best, and pray that it’s blessed, and I’ll take care of the rest.’”* So many times, what needs to be accomplished won't get done without both the effort of man and the favor of God. Nehemiah's plan? *“We prayed to our God and we posted a guard.”*

Notice that Nehemiah first said, *“We prayed to our God.”* Seeking the Lord in this situation was not an afterthought. It was the principal order of business. The posting of the guard was the afterthought. It was not to be a substitute for dependance on Heaven. Without the blessing and protection of God, the posting of the guard would likely have been insufficient. Remember, though, that there are times when a situation is completely out of your hands and there is nothing that you can do about it. And sometimes there is nothing you should do about it and you need to take your carnal hands off of it so God can do what he needs to do.

Some people think that dependance on God and hard work are mutually exclusive. But Paul proved this otherwise when he said, *“I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me”* (1 Co 15:10). To pray to your God and post your guard is often your best course of action.

Do Not Grieve, for the Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength

Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” -Nehemiah 8:10

We all know that the healthy expression of grief can and should be an aid to our emotional well-being. But we should also know that grief can sap our strength. Those whose strength has been sapped for too long by grief need the joy of the Lord.

Joy is meant to be part and parcel of our life in God. Psalm 16:11 says, *You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.* Jesus exhorted his disciples to obey, *“That my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete”* (Jn 15:11). And, of course, we know that “joy” is part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Ga 5:22).

The term joy and its cognates are found hundreds of times in the Old Testament. There are over a dozen Hebrew words which are translated “joy” in English Bibles, and almost all of them have to do with the

Happiness is winning the lottery. Joy is witnessing the birth of your firstborn.

concept of rejoicing or experiencing joy. The word “chedhevah,” used here in Nehemiah 8:10, has a different nuance. Only three times do we see this word in the Hebrew and it has more to do with what is found in the Lord than what is found in his people. Chedhevah has to do with an essence that resides with God: *Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and “joy” in his dwelling place* (1 Ch 16:27). So when Nehemiah says that the *joy of the Lord is your strength*, he is not talking about your joy in the Lord but about something that the Lord possesses, that in turn is imparted to you—his joy.

Now, this joy that the Lord imparts is meant to be “strength” to you. Even though this phrase in Nehemiah is one of the most familiar in the Bible, we don't necessarily equate joy with strength. We tend to equate it more with “happiness.” But joy is more than happiness. It goes deeper. Happiness is winning the lottery. Joy is witnessing the birth of your firstborn.

We need joy to keep us strong. We cannot and should not go very long without it. That is why Nehemiah did not want the people to grieve. Grief can make us weak, but the joy that comes from above gives us strength. And since it is the “joy of the Lord,” it doesn't depend on circumstances. It is ours to receive from him whenever we need it, even in the midst of trials, hardships, and yes, grief.

You Have Kept Your Promise Because You Are Righteous

You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him... You have kept your promise because you are righteous. -Nehemiah 9:7-8

What causes one to keep his or her promises? Integrity? Honor? Resolve? Yes, these ideals can be said to make a promise keeper, but the root of fidelity is what the Bible calls “righteousness.”

In what actually closes out Old Testament history, the Levites recite the story of Israel in prayer to the Lord as recorded in Nehemiah 9. In their prayer, they make many statements about the faithfulness of Yahweh. In recounting the covenant with Abraham, they honor the Lord by saying, “*You have kept your promise because you are righteous.*”

“Righteousness” is an abstract but simple and important, biblical concept. It appears more than five hundred times in the Bible and the meanings of the terms, “righteous” and “righteousness” are notably consistent both within and between the Testaments. Biblical righteousness is being free from accusation or blame. It is doing what is just and right. If you do what is right, you are righteous, but if you do what is wrong, you are unrighteous. In Christ, we have a perfect righteousness imputed to us, without which we could not be saved. In addition, we have a practical righteousness imparted to us, by which we can live righteously.

In Christ, we have a perfect righteousness imputed and a practical righteousness imparted

Perfect righteousness is always doing what is right and never doing what is wrong. This, of course, describes God. That is why the Levites said, “*You have kept your promise because you are righteous.*” God is righteous and that is why he kept his promise to Abraham. So if you are righteous, you will keep your promises.

This sounds elementary, but I think there is a key here that will help us. We don’t necessarily need to concentrate on keeping our promises, or doing any other good thing, for that matter. What we need to do is walk in the righteousness of Jesus. Keeping your promises doesn’t make you righteous. It is the other way around. We all have attempted to be good and to do right—but we all have fallen short. You can’t achieve righteousness by trying to keep your promises. But many a person has been able to keep their promise because of the righteousness imparted by Jesus.

From Beersheba to the Valley of Hinnom

So they were living all the way from Beersheba to the Valley of Hinnom. -Nehemiah 11:30

The northern kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.. The southern kingdom of Judah faced the same fate at the hands of the Babylonians starting in the year 605 B.C.. We know that Judah was resettled after seventy years in exile—but a similar word was not issued for the people of the northern kingdom, Israel. There is no such thing as a “post-exile” land of Israel, per se, because there was no formal resettling of the northern kingdom.

There was a saying that was once used in Israel that would describe the geographical extent of the land of promise in which they

What did happen to the ten lost tribes of Israel?

lived. Much like we in North America would say, “from coast to coast,” they would say, “*from Dan to Beersheba,*”—Dan being the northern most point and Beersheba being the southern. From the time of the Judges to Hezekiah, this expression is used on nine occasions in the Hebrew Scriptures (i.e., Ju 20:1; 1 Ki 4:25). As of 722 B.C., it no longer applied. At the end of Old Testament history, the basic description of the land that the people of Yahweh could call home had changed. It was now, “*From Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom*” (the Hinnom valley ran adjacent to Jerusalem, the northern point of Judah).

Only two of the original tribes of Israel were ever officially resettled into the promised land: Judah and Benjamin. Much has been made of the ten “lost tribes” of Israel. One fantastical theory is that they migrated to the British Isles and transmuted themselves into the English people.

What did happen to the descendants of those exiles from the northern kingdom? The NIV Bible Commentary points out that even before 722, many fled south to Judah to escape the idolatry of Israel (see 2 Ch 11 & 30); many would have come to Judah between 722 and 605 (see 1 Ch 9:3); and others would have filtered into postexilic Judah as “Jews.” (The term “Jew” came into being at this time and is derived from “Judah.” The term became synonymous with all the descendants of Israel.) Many would have also filtered into their homeland of Samaria and lived with the pagans who took over the territory. This would explain how and why by the time of Jesus the people of Samaria were despised as “half-breeds” by those from “Judea” in the south. And finally, many migrated all over the world establishing synagogues in various places in ironic and divine preparation for the spread of the gospel of the soon coming Messiah.

I Beat Some of the Men and Pulled out Their Hair

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab...I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. -Nehemiah 13:23,25

And I thought that Ezra was intense. Nehemiah was so impassioned when it came to motivating the Jewish remnant to remain true to the law of God, he took it upon himself to put a hurting on those who would jeopardize the favor of the Lord. Was his action justified?

Ezra arrived in Judah about 14 years before Nehemiah and, as you may remember, was very much distressed that so many the people, including many leaders and officials, had married women from nations that worshiped other Gods (see Ezra 9). Ezra's intercession brought about a national repentance.

But now, it is a decade and a half later and Nehemiah is governor of Judah having led the people in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and repopulating the city. Nehemiah is responsible for instituting a number of reforms in

Most people would consider Nehemiah's action excessive and abusive

connection with a renewed adherence to the law of Moses. He happens upon some men of Judah and discovers that they have married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, who have for their gods, Dagon, Molech, and Chemosh, respectively. Nehemiah is not ashamed to report that, *I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair.*

Now, I expect that most people would consider Nehemiah's action excessive and abusive. And though I believe "church discipline" is woefully lacking in the North American church and we Christians are far too unassertive, I readily admit that Nehemiah's form of discipline would be counterproductive today. But in defense of Nehemiah, consider the following: He lived in a different culture where this kind of action was not necessarily considered excessive; as governor, he had the authority to mete out punishment and justice as he saw fit; the fact that he took personal responsibility to upbraid these men was evidence that he saw it as a very serious matter; he specified that seriousness to these men by reminding them that this was the very thing that brought Solomon down (v26ff); he had zero tolerance for the relapse of what had been cleared up 14 years earlier because it was mainly due to the worship of foreign gods that Israel and Judah were sent into exile; and finally, remember that Nehemiah accomplished in 52 days something that the Jewish remnant was unable to do in 92 years.

Intense? Definitely. Excessive and abusive? Maybe—maybe not.

But the City of Susa Was Bewildered

Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews--young and old, women and little children--on a single day...the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered. -Esther 3:13,15

The book of Esther is about how a plot to annihilate the Jews was thwarted, and how justice prevailed because of the courage of a young woman and the fervent prayers of the people of God. One can't help but notice the similarity of this story to the Nazi holocaust. It is chilling.

In the year 474 B.C., many Jews were still living in Babylonia because of their exile into captivity more than one hundred years prior. In fact, they were scattered all over the vast Persian empire and its 127

One can't help but notice the similarity of this story to the Nazi holocaust

provinces. One of the capitals of Persia was the citadel of Susa in Babylon. Here, Xerxes reigned as emperor. His top royal official and drinking buddy was a guy named Haman. The king commanded that whenever Haman entered the king's gate, the officials there were to kneel down and pay him honor. But there was a Jew named Mordecai who would not do it. This enraged Haman and *he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes (v6).* He talked Xerxes into issuing an edict that, on a certain day, every Jewish man, woman and child, would be executed. When the edict was issued in Susa we read that, *The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.*

Bewildered indeed. What merciful sense would it make to anybody in Susa or the rest of the Persian empire that the king would approve this heinous plan? Xerxes, who was probably an alcoholic (see 1:7-10, 3:15, 5:6, 7:2), approved it, but it was Haman who instigated it. Like Hitler, who reportedly blamed a Jewish doctor for his mother's death, Haman's demonic hatred went beyond his disdain for one Jew. And this is why Susa, and all peace loving people since then, have been bewildered at the devilish schemes that the Jews have had to face.

The Jews have certainly not been the only holocaust or genocide victims in the history of the world. But the horrors of their saga have truly been bewildering. The only thing more dumbfounding may be their survival and resurgence as a modern nation.

If I Perish, I Perish

“Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me....When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” -Esther 4:16

When you come to the point that you are willing to risk your own skin for the sake of a higher purpose, you have embarked on the road to greatness. It is only then that you can be sure that you will be ready to fulfill the call of God on your life when the time comes. Esther is our example.

It is not that Esther had no trepidation about fulfilling the calling to intercede for the fate of her people. King Xerxes had already set the date for the genocide of the Jewish people. And even though Esther was Queen, the rule of law in the king’s court was that anyone who dared to try to enter the imperial court without a summons from the king would be executed—unless the king was in a good mood that day and he made an exception. Since Xerxes was a drinking man and had shown himself to be unpredictable, Esther would be taking her life into her hands if she tried to see him.

Ironically, Esther would be in greater danger with her silence than with her testimony

But try she must. Her uncle and former guardian, Mordecai, had informed her about the king’s edict to annihilate the Jews. He pointed out to her that it was very likely that she had come to the royal position *for such a time as this* (v14). While Mordecai was overt about being a Jew, it was not known that Esther belonged to the race of Israel. She could have tried to avoid the impending holocaust by hiding her identity, but Mordecai had prophesied to her that if she tried to save her own skin and remained silent, *relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish* (v14). Ironically, Esther would be in greater danger with her silence than with her testimony.

So, what does she have to lose? “If I perish, I perish.” That, my friends, is freedom. It is not a “what-the-hell?” death wish. It is coming to the place where it doesn’t matter if you save your life, or reputation or anything else you once held dear for the sake of a higher calling. It is a state where you are ten-thousand percent more likely to reach your destiny. He who is willing to die for his calling is the one who will live the most for it. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mk 8:35).

“If I perish, I perish.” This was the attitude that Esther needed to fulfill the calling of her time. It may be the one we need to fulfill ours.

Xerxes Gave Queen Esther the Estate of Haman

So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided. That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. -Esther 7:10-8:1

The Bible and the kingdom of God are replete with ironies. How ironic that a childless and barren elderly couple would be the progenitors of a natural and spiritual family that would bless all the nations of the earth. How ironic that sin and death were conquered by a Lamb who was led to slaughter without opening his mouth. How ironic that the most feared persecutor of the church became its greatest apostle.

Part of the irony of God has to do with what you might call poetic justice. In the case of Haman, the “*enemy of the Jews,*” as the book of Esther calls him,

Sublime ironies, poetic justice and wonderful paradoxes belong to our God

there was much of it. What has become one of my favorite stories in the Bible is found in Esther 6. Haman, the king’s top official, hates the Jews, especially Mordecai. One sleepless night, the king, Xerxes, reviews the chronicles of his kingdom which record how a plan to assassinate him had been foiled by Mordecai. “What has been done to recognize this man?” the king asks. Nothing. Just then Haman enters the court of the king, and the king, wanting to find a way to honor Mordecai, asks Haman, “*What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?*” Haman, thinking he must be the one the king wants to honor, suggests that the honored man be put on the king’s horse with the king’s robe and be led through the city with an official proclaiming his honor. So the Xerxes says to Haman, “Great, go get Mordecai and you be the one to proclaim his honor in the streets.” Poetic justice. And later, when the true vileness of Haman was exposed, the king had him executed on the gallows Haman had built specifically for Mordecai. More poetic justice. To top it off, that same day, the estate of Haman was handed over to Esther, who put Mordecai in charge of it. All this reminds me that the French philosopher, Voltaire, once pronounced that within one-hundred years, the Bible would be a forgotten book found only in museums. A century later, his estate was occupied by the Geneva Bible Society as a hub for Bible distribution.

Remember: Pride goes before a fall (Pr 16:18); to truly live you must die (Lk 9:23-24); strength comes through weakness (2 Co 12:9); you receive by giving (Lk 6:38); God delights in making the “know-it-all” ignorant (Mt 11:25-26); if you fear God, you need not be afraid of Him (Pr 19:23). Sublime ironies, poetic justice and wonderful paradoxes belong to our God.

Roaming Through the Earth

The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." - Job 1:7

Who is Satan, where is he and what does he do? To get the full picture, one must take a comprehensive look at the entire biblical witness, but here in the book of Job we get some insight for answers to those three questions.

Satan is known as “accuser,” for that is what his name means in the Hebrew language. So here in the book of Job when we read that “Satan” came before the Lord,” it could be translated “The Accuser” came before the Lord. In Zechariah, we find a vision of Satan standing beside the High Priest, Joshua to accuse him. In Revelation 12:10 we learn that *Satan is the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night.* This coincides with the concept here in Job that Satan was or is able to gain an audience with God in order to incriminate those who live on the earth. Notice that it is the righteous whom Satan is bent on accusing. It can be safely surmised that Satan cannot stand those who *fear God and shun evil* (v8).

***Notice that it is the righteous
whom Satan is bent on
accusing***

When asked by the Lord where he has come from, Satan replies, “*From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it.*” We can deduce from this statement, and from what we know about the state of mind of demons (see Matthew 12:43), that there is no posture of rest for Satan. He is roaming and going back and forth. He is the farthest thing from a happy camper that you will ever find. He is neither happy, nor a camper. Why does he roam? Because he is looking for people to devour (see 1 Peter 5:8). This is why the Lord asked Satan, “*Have you considered my servant Job.*” In all of Satan’s roaming and going back and forth, there is no doubt that he indeed had considered Job and wanted to unleash his accusing tongue and destructive hands on the man of God. But the Lord had put a “hedge” around Job and his family and Satan could not get at him. When the Lord decided to prove the faithfulness of Job by bringing down that hedge of protection, we are sobered by the destructive nature and ability that we see displayed by this accuser.

We need to be tough-minded and vigilant because Satan is still doing that roaming thing. But not for long.