

DISASTER

God's Warning Bell



**"If a calamity
occurs in a city
has not the LORD done it?"**
(Amos 3:6)

MOSES C. ONWUBIKO

Disaster: God's Warning Bell

“If a calamity occurs in a city
has not the Lord done it?” (Amos 3:6)

“Buy truth, and do not sell it”
(Proverbs 23:23a).

Are you aware that sound Bible teaching is a precious and priceless piece of spiritual jewelry? Indeed, church history has shown how difficult it is to come by, especially in Christianity today. So when God, from His jewel box of grace, exposes us to pearls of Truth in His infallible and inerrant Word, we ought to embrace and cherish them without reserve. Sound Bible teaching and its application are the treasures that give us the capacity to enjoy abundant life and unprecedented blessing for today, tomorrow and eternity. Therefore, my beloved, “buy truth” (stay rooted in sound biblical teaching), for truth “...is better than jewels; And all desirable things cannot compare with her [it]” (Proverbs 8:11).

inside cover
(text in style of cover)

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Dedicated to John G. and Jan Brunner:

My bosom friends whose passion and love for the work of
God's Kingdom have become a source of great encouragement
to me in every sense of the word!

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My endless gratitude is poured out without measure to God the Father for His gracious plan of salvation and for the indwelling of His Holy Spirit, the greatest teacher of all time. To crown my overflowing gratitude, my standing ovation goes to my Master and Best Friend, King of kings, Lord of lords, the Bright Morning Star—my eternal Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. His unparalleled sacrifice on the cross two thou-

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sand years ago paved the way and made it possible for me—the undeserving one—to communicate His infallible Word through this book.

Moses C. Onwubiko

Word of Hope

But a natural [unsaved] man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised (1 Corinthians 2:14).

This is the truth of God's Word. Therefore the information in this book cannot benefit you unless you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. The good news is that you can trust the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation right this minute, right where you are, and be eternally saved!

The news gets even better: salvation is a free gift! It is the epitome of God's grace. What's more, this gift is very simple to obtain. It's as easy as ABC. In the book of Acts a man desperate for his eternal destiny asked this urgent question of Paul and Silas: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). Scripture provides the one and only answer: "They [Paul and Silas] said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household [if they also believed]'" (Acts 16:31).

It really is that simple. Faith alone in Christ alone!

Elsewhere the apostle John declared, "But these [facts, including unique miracles that Jesus Christ performed] have been written [recorded] so that you may [have the evidence to] believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing [in Christ alone] you may have [eternal] life in His name" (John 20:31).

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Later, the same apostle affirmed, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ [the Savior] is born of God” (1 John 5:1). “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever [including you] believes in Him shall not perish, but [will] have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Contrary to popular belief, salvation is not based on morality or good works. It truly is a free gift (Romans 6:23). The apostle Paul emphatically stated, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works [i.e., good works], so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

It's faith alone in Christ alone! That's grace. That's God's way. The only way! There is no other way. Believe on Him and be eternally saved. Right now, you may wish to pause and heed the exhortation of the Holy Spirit:

“For He says, ‘At the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.’ Behold, now is...‘the day of [your] salvation’” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

You can receive this great and awesome gift of salvation and be forever saved by simply telling God the Father, “God, I am placing my trust entirely on Your Son Jesus Christ as my Savior.” The Bible gives the only assurance you need: “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey [the command to believe in] the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36).

The moment you believe, you will, for the first time, be indwelt and filled with the Holy Spirit, who in turn will enlighten you as you read on.

Restoration to Fellowship

If you are already a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you need to ensure that you are filled with the Holy Spirit. He will open your eyes to the truth communicated herein so you may comprehend and appreciate “with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth” (Ephesians 3:18) of His unchanging Word! Sin ruptures our fellowship with God and robs us of the filling of the Holy Spirit, the greatest teacher of all time. In preparation for our study, you may want to pause, search your soul, and acknowledge all known sins to God the Father. The Bible is crystal clear: “If we confess our [known] sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our [known] sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness [unknown or forgotten sins]” (1 John 1:9).

Dear Heavenly Father,

We approach Your throne of grace with an offering of thanksgiving and petition for all who will be reading this book. We pray that it will tremendously challenge and bless us all.

Father, we humbly ask that You revive us with Your truth so that the impact of Your infallible Word will reverberate and reign supreme in our souls. May this book cause us all to take a fresh look at both personal and national disasters. Please challenge us to turn to You. We lift our prayer in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Preface

What is the origin of disaster? The answer to this question has been widely argued and debated for centuries. Our task in this book is to demonstrate through Scripture that God alone is directly or indirectly behind every disaster, both personal and national. We concede that it will not be an easy task; however we rely solely on the mentorship of the Holy Spirit to aid us in our work.

This book is divided into two parts:

- Part I—A Panoramic View of God
- Part II—Disasters in Relation to the Sovereignty of God

As we examine God's sovereignty in relation to the course of human history, we shall see that God is in control, not our circumstances. We shall take a look at the balance of God's love and His justice. We shall also take time to examine individual and national disasters.

God uses calamities as warning bells. There are just two exceptions: in some cases He uses them as a means of strengthening His obedient children (James 1:2-4) or as a test, as in the case of Job. With these exceptions, we view every disaster as God's warning bell. We ought not to explain disasters away. There is a *reason* for everything that takes place under God's sovereign rule. This is why King Solomon tells us: "In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity [disaster]

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consider [reflect, examine your life]—God has made the one as well as the other” (Ecclesiastes 7:14).

With this in mind, our objective shall be twofold: first, to demonstrate God’s sovereignty over the universe and His awesome control of human history; and second, to examine human suffering, disappointment, and disaster from the viewpoint of Scripture.

As this reprint of *Disaster: God’s Warning Bell* goes to press, the United States was recently hit by a terrorist attack on the Boston Marathon. That same week, a fertilizer plant in West, Texas, caught fire and exploded, leaving a crater ninety feet wide. Just one week later, a nine-story building in Bangladesh collapsed with 2,500 garment workers inside and the death toll rose to 1,127.

Around the world there was a massacre that occurred in Oslo, Norway, and floods ravaged China, India, and Pakistan. A two-year civil war in Syria and the Arab Spring has brought dramatic clashes and changes in the Arab world. The news is full of disasters in countries all around the world. No one is exempt.

Though personal disasters never make the news, they can be devastating. We all know of someone who has lost their job or their home or—even worse—a loved one. God is still seeking our attention and devotion. Disasters will occur until we have exhausted our human resources and turn to God.

We hope this book will be an eye-opener to the truth of Scripture and bring blessing to your life, your community, and your country.

Introduction

No doubt we are living in the most interesting time of human history. A time when science and technology reign supreme. A time when we have become competent in explaining almost everything under the sun that happens from a scientific viewpoint. We are quick to explain away the reason for extreme hurricanes, tornadoes, high-powered winds, catastrophic floods, sizzling heat, and bitter cold—just to name a few natural disasters—as weather events related to climate change.

It's a time when every one of us has been buried in a grave dug for us by economic geniuses, ever ready to link economic slumps to any reason the human mind can fathom—anything but God.

It's a time when “economic wizards” interpret economic downtrends in language designed to soothe for political gains. These economic geniuses are quick to pass the buck for recession from one disastrous incident to another. First it was 9/11, then the housing bubble burst, then high unemployment. They are quick to pass the buck for high inflation on to the high price for crude oil in the market. They never hesitate to pass the buck for people losing their homes on to the poor management of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac real estate funds. What's more, these “wizards” never run out of bucks to pass as they toss the blame for economic woes back and forth from one camp to another. Interesting times indeed!

It's a time of great advances in modern medicine, a time when experts waste no time in coming up with theories and

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reasons why there's an HIV/AIDS epidemic in the world. They are standing by to explain away the reason for any major disease outbreak with the very latest in medical propositions. What about the problem of the bird flu or the Asian flu epidemic? Haven't these also been explained away? The list can go on and on.

When it comes to analyzing and explaining disastrous circumstances, we look to everyone and to everything—except to God. Scientists claim that we have caused great problems by allowing pollution to destroy the ozone layer. They blame human beings, not God, for catastrophes in the world. Economists pass the blame for recession to any company that is lagging behind in the economic sector. Medical experts waste no time in explaining away major disease outbreaks.

It is alarming that we as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have joined in. We have joined meteorologists in attributing devastating hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods and every weather-related disaster to so-called Mother Nature instead of Father God. We are fearful to ascribe any catastrophic disaster to God who controls history. We reason, “No way, God couldn't do a thing like that.”

But could He? Would He?

Many religious leaders have been invited time and again on national television to help the rest of the world understand why a loving God would allow such disasters to take place. Over and over they have been offered a spotlight to declare the truth concerning God's sovereignty. They have been given golden opportunities to set the record straight with regard to equity between God's love and justice—and many of them have fallen short in their representation of the cause of Christianity. Some waffle in their explanations. Others credit disasters to the devil, rather than to God! Does the Scripture not credit every disaster in a city to God? If the Bible so states—and it does—why do we refrain from declaring the truth with boldness?

Consider the passage “[God] spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly; And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly” (2 Peter 2:5-6 KJV).

Henry Morris comments on the above passage:

These two verses speak graphically of two different kinds of terrible physical convulsions, both of which were divine judgments. The volcanic upheaval that sent fire from heaven pouring over the wicked cities of the plains was called an ‘overthrow’ (Greek *katastrophe*, from which, obviously, we get our English word *catastrophe*). Great upheavals such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and hurricanes are rightly called catastrophes.

But such events are only local or regional in extent and occur relatively often. There was one event, however, which was unique in all history. When God brought the ‘flood’ upon the ungodly antediluvian world, the word used to describe it was the Greek *kataklusmos*, and this word is never applied in Scripture to any event except the terrible Genesis Flood, when ‘the world that then was, being overflowed [Greek *katakluzo*] with water, perished’ (2 Peter 3:6). From these Greek words we derive the English word *cataclysm*.

There was never any flood like this flood! It covered all the world’s mountains, and everything on the land died, leaving great fossil deposits and great beds of lithified sediments all over the world.¹ These were the acts of God, the righteous one.

This question was put forth to the skeptics who were having a hard time believing that a loving God could be responsible for a disaster: “If an alarm sounds in a city, do people not fear?” Amos then asked another question: “If disaster overtakes a city, is the Lord not responsible?” (Amos 3:6 NET).²

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In other words, “Is it not the Lord Himself who brought the disaster to pass?” The question is posed in such a way that it begs for a “yes” answer. Yes, God is responsible! Amos was telling the audience of his day that God is behind every disaster in life. Other writers of the infallible Word of God agree. During the course of Job’s trial, God asked him a staggering question: “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, Or have you seen the storehouses [armory] of the hail, Which I have reserved for the time of distress [or disaster], For the day of war and battle?” (Job 38:22-23).

Nahum 1:3 tells us, “The Lord is slow to anger [because He is a gracious God] and great in power, And the Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. In whirlwind and storm is His way [of inflicting disasters], And clouds are the dust beneath His feet.” Speaking to the Jews in Judah through the prophet Haggai, God declared, “‘I smote you and every work of your hands with blasting wind, mildew and hail; yet you did not come back to Me,’ declares the Lord” (Haggai 2:17). It’s clear that God was responsible for their plight.

That’s just the beginning. The Psalmist had much more to say about this phenomenal concept: “He [God] makes the [devastating] winds His messengers, Flaming fire His ministers” (Psalm 104:4). Yes, you read it correctly. God uses hurricanes, tornadoes, and wildfires as messengers!

Every time these powerful winds pass us by, they should remind us of this passage, that they are God’s messengers on a mission. Psalm 119:91 says, “They stand this day according to Your ordinances, For all things [including floods, tornadoes and hurricanes] are Your servants.” We are told that the destroying agents of “Fire and hail, snow and clouds; Stormy wind, fulfilling [are in place to fulfill] His word” (Psalm 148:8). The Psalmist also wrote,

Those who go down to the sea in ships,
Who do business on
great waters; They have seen the works of the Lord,
And His

wonders in the deep. For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind, Which lifted up the waves of the sea. They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the depths; Their soul melted away in their misery. They reeled and staggered like a drunken man, And were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, And He brought them out of their distresses. He caused the storm to be still [majestic sovereignty displayed], So that the waves of the sea were hushed (Psalm 107:23-29).

What a God! The intriguing question is, who is responsible for disasters—on both a national level and in our personal lives? Is it “Satan and his minions?” No! Scripture claims otherwise: “The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these” (Isaiah 45:7). He causes our well-being but He also creates calamities; He manufactures them for His purposes. Other passages abound:

Behold, the Lord has a strong and mighty agent; As a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction, Like a storm of mighty overflowing waters, He has cast it down to the earth with His hand (Isaiah 28:2).

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, ‘I will make a violent wind break out in My wrath. There will also be in My anger a flooding rain and hailstones to consume it in wrath’ (Ezekiel 13:13).

‘I smote you with scorching wind and mildew; And the caterpillar was devouring Your many gardens and vineyards, fig trees and olive trees; Yet you have not returned to Me,’ declares the Lord (Amos 4:9).

Upon the wicked He will rain snares; Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup”(Psalm 11:6).

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Of course, the Bible clearly teaches that God is a God of grace, a God of love, a God who is full of mercy and compassion. But it also teaches that He is equally a God of justice. In spite of this, the question we are faced with is not whether God is responsible for disasters but rather, why would a loving and caring God be involved in devastating destructions? Why did He rain brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah that resulted in a total annihilation of its citizens? Why did He destroy the whole earth with the flood in Noah's day?

The question we should really ask is this: how can a just God *not* rain catastrophic and devastating hail and storms on a nation that scoffs at His justice? God is under obligation to balance love with justice.

Think of yourself as a loving and caring parent. How would you handle the issue of your children's total disregard of the rules and regulations in your household? Wouldn't you apply whatever disciplinary measure necessary to deter them from becoming full-blown delinquent children? Would you ignore their bad behavior and look the other way? Think of it. We know that every loving parent would be consumed with finding the right solution. Would a perfect loving God not take at least the same pains with us, His children?

Governments institute laws for maximum punishment of notorious criminals to deter heinous crimes. They may be sent to prison, receive a life sentence, or in some cases, they may receive capital punishment. What would our world be like if we were without laws and enforcement officers? Who would still be alive if, whenever anyone is angry, they murder the object of their anger with no consequences for their action? If we as human beings have a system of maintaining law and order, how much more does our omniscient Creator, who in His omniscience knows the right disaster to apply in every circumstance to keep His world in check. The good news is that before God administers discipline, He gives us grace.

Throughout history, God has given us servants: prophets, pastors, and teachers to help us understand His ways and plan for our lives. He has given us His Word, which reveals to us the consequences of disobeying His mandates and also the blessings of obedience.

It's only when we rebel against His mandates that He resorts to the use of agents of disaster as a warning bell to deter us from continuing down the path of disobedience and keep us from total collapse. That's justice! God applied this timeless principle to the Southern Kingdom, those of the tribe of Judah, in 606 BC. Because of their colossal spiritual failure, God sent the Babylonians, who took them into captivity for seventy years. But that was after they drew their last check from the bank of God's long-suffering (Proverbs 29:1).

In light of this, Scripture tells us,

And the Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, until there was no remedy. Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles (2 Chronicles 36:15-19).

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That's God's justice in operation. The passage tells us that God's long-suffering was exhausted. His justice moved Him to action and He judged them. Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781) hit the nail on the head when he admonished the people with these sobering words: "Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever."³ Eight years later, George Washington in his inaugural address (1789) said, "The propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself [God] has ordained."⁴

Billy Graham, an American evangelist, expressed the same concerns when he lamented, "If God spares America, He will owe Sodom and Gomorrah an apology!" Sodom was destroyed because of immorality. Gay and lesbian lifestyles were prevalent in that part of the world and today, America and many other nations are rapidly heading down that same path. It's disheartening to consider that some churches are now giving their blessing to same-sex marriages while lawmakers give these couples equal rights in society. That's not all; immorality has run rampant in every sphere of American life. We cannot turn on the television without hearing about the infidelity of some celebrity or political leader. Perhaps it was immorality that prompted Jefferson to utter his sobering words about God's justice. He may have been thinking about this passage:

But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you: I will appoint over you a sudden terror, consumption

and fever that will waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you will sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies will eat it up. And I will set My face against you so that you shall be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when no one is pursuing you. I will set My face against you so that you will be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee when no one is pursuing you (Leviticus 26:14-17).

God's justice cannot sleep forever. God warned that if we ignore His laws, He would send us terror: "I [God] will appoint over you a sudden terror." Sound familiar? Does September 11, 2001 ring a bell? We wonder why the terrorists were allowed to hit America so hard then, and now the bombing of the Boston Marathon in 2013. The rest of the world has seen its own disasters; no country has been spared. Scripture leaves us no room for wondering. God keeps His Word!

"When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7). He said that we shall flee when no one is pursuing us. Sound familiar too? We recall that following the incidents of 9/11, many people in America were running to stores buying duct tape and gas masks in preparation for a gas attack when no one was really pursuing them with gas or biological agents. The souls of the inhabitants of the United States of America continue to pine away on account of terrorism. But that's exactly what Scripture says will happen to a nation or to anyone if they fail to recognize the supremacy of Heaven or disregard the eternal rules of order which God has ordained.

What about economic depression? God warns us, according to the words of the prophet Ezekiel:

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Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Son of man, if a country sins against Me by committing unfaithfulness, and I stretch out My hand against it, destroy its supply of bread [agricultural economy], send famine [severe recession] against it and cut off from it both man and beast, even though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job [the faithful ones] were in its midst, by their own righteousness they could only deliver themselves,’ declares the Lord God (Ezekiel 14:12-14).

If you have been reading this introduction objectively, it would be unreasonable for you to still blame one political party or another for economic depression. How can anyone who accepts the Bible as the inerrant Word of God read all the Bible passages quoted and still attribute Hurricane Katrina or Superstorm Sandy to Mother Nature? Having accepted these biblical truths, there’s no reason why we should blame the depletion of the ozone layer for the extraordinary changes in our weather patterns. God is sovereign! “He [God] makes the [devastating] winds His messengers, Flaming fire His ministers” (Psalm 104:4).

Part I

A Panoramic View of God

How does God relate and interact with the affairs of man?

I | Comprehending the True God

Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other (Deuteronomy 4:39).

For You are the Lord Most High over all the earth; You are exalted far above all gods (Psalm 97:9).

Understanding who and what God is, is fundamental to our entire work because our attitude toward the God of the universe is directly related to how we perceive Him.

If we perceive Him as a created being, we will approach Him as we would other creatures. If we perceive Him as a god who manifests Himself through objects, we will approach Him through idolatry. If we perceive Him to be just another powerful higher being roaming around out there in space, we will approach Him as if there are other higher beings besides Him.

However, if we perceive Him to be an infinite, omnipotent, and sovereign being, we will approach Him as the only God of the universe with great awe and reverence.

While many of us have varied perceptions of God, the only true perception is that derived from Scripture. All others result in the worship of a false god and therefore end in idolatry. So it is very important to answer the question: Who is God?

I have asked others that question thousands of times as I have traveled around the world with the good news of Jesus

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Christ. The answer varies, depending on the people and their culture. One of the countries I visited has over 333 million gods and goddesses. Consequently, their definition of God can be summed up in one word: *confusion*.

Every religion other than Christianity has its unique definition of God, all of which differ from the God of the Bible. Even in the Christian community the perception and definition of God differs sharply from one denomination to another. I repeat: our attitude toward the God of the universe is directly related to our understanding of who He *really* is. It affects how we worship Him.

How does our comprehension of God influence our explanation of disasters? Those who ascribe disasters to “Mother Nature” are likely to view God as supreme but aloof, being disconnected from what is going on in the world. Those who deny God’s involvement in disaster often perceive Him as a being who manifests nothing but love.

That leaves those who accept that everything that happens does so under the sovereign directive, superintendence, and control of the Almighty God. They view everything, including disaster, through the lens of the infallible Word of God. They perceive God to be an infinite, omnipotent, and sovereign Being who directs and controls all events of human history.

The goal of this book is not to present an elaborate teaching about God but simply to demonstrate God’s sovereignty over the universe and His awesome control over human history, including disasters.

God is the Creator of the whole universe, yet He Himself was not created. God is sovereign! On this bedrock rests the building blocks of this chapter. What we know about the true God we know from His infallible Word, the Bible.

Some may ask: “Can the Bible be trusted?” To answer this question, let us briefly examine a few facts about the Bible.

The Uniqueness of the Bible

The good news is that God in His infinite grace made a way to reveal Himself to us. His handiwork is testimony to His existence (Psalm 19:1). He spoke to us through His angelic beings. He spoke through prophets like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others as well as through visions and dreams. People heard His voice! No one can legitimately make that claim for any god other than the God of the universe.

Above all, we have the final revelation of God through His Son Jesus Christ, who said to His disciples that He is the true representation of God the Father (John 10:30, 14:9). God's recorded Word is what we now call the Holy Bible, a book written by approximately forty authors over 1,500 years or so and completed in 98 AD.

The Bible is the guiding light of civilization and liberty, the oldest book in existence. More than that, it has withstood every assault for three millennia. Countless efforts have been made to obliterate it from the face of the earth. People have hidden it and burned it (Jeremiah 36:20-23), and God replaced it (Jeremiah 36:27-32).

Some governments, even today, have made possession of a Bible a crime punishable by death; the most bitter and relentless persecution has been waged against those who have faith in it. But the Bible is still alive (Hebrews 4:12). The fact that this book has survived so many centuries, despite such unparalleled efforts to banish and destroy it, is circumstantial evidence that the Great Being, God, which the Bible claims as its Author, has also been its preserver. We can rely on the Bible's claims.

It's intriguing to note that the human writers of the Bible lived hundreds of years apart and never had a discussion or compared notes. Yet their work has *no contradictions* whatsoever. Amazing, is it not? That's because the God of the Bible is an amazing God. In no other book can we find such coherency of thought and no other book contains fulfilled prophecy. It's from

this book that we learn all we know about the true God; and from the Bible we will, with great reverence, approach the subject of God.

Overview of God

Scripture never attempts to prove God's existence. It assumes that God exists and it calls those who do not accept this phenomenal revelation fools. "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good" (Psalm 14:1). They are corrupt. That sums up the reasons for their rejection of a Supreme Being.

God the Creator

We shall begin where the Bible does: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1)

Everything that is or ever has been made has a creator. If you have a cell phone, you know that someone designed it. Someone planned its size and shape. Similarly someone decided what should be metal and what should be plastic. And beyond looks someone decided upon the electronics and functionality. It's obvious that it didn't create itself. How much more so the complex and wondrous universe in which we live. The Psalmist indicted those who refuse to realize that every system must call for a designer. "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1).

The apostle Paul declared,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through [the sophistication of] what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations [of evolution etc.], and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools (Romans 1:18-22).

Twice a pilot has taken me through the cockpit of a plane and explained the function of some of its sophisticated instruments. Still, I wonder how a plane can take off, lift into the air, and fly to an altitude of 30,000 to 40,000 feet with a load of people and goods.

Moreover, how can it take off from a country like the United States of America and fly into the interior of Africa or Asia without getting lost? Though I know all this can be explained in relation to physics and aerodynamics, I still stand in awe.

This marvel of modern life was invented by two sons of a Christian clergyman. These two Americans, Orville and Wilbur Wright, are credited with inventing and building the world's first successful airplane in 1903.

The idea to build an airplane was first conceived in their minds, and with planning they built and flew the first flying machine—the forerunner of our modern airplane. In relation to their work, we can say that they pre-existed and were sovereign over the work of their hands. When they were building the aircraft, they had access to the craft, inside and out. They had total control. That's sovereignty! That goes for whatever man makes. What man makes, man controls.

God, the Creator, existed before all things. He created the universe and everything therein, including the Wright brothers. This implies that God is not bound by the universe, which He created. He is an infinite Being, and we are finite beings. God

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created everything we see, both animate and inanimate. He created them all, for a purpose that He hid within Himself. God owns all He created, including us, and therefore we must revere Him. God calls for His creatures to give glory to Him by means of worship (Isaiah 43:7).

Common sense tells us that it makes no sense to worship a product rather than its maker. The product is the result of the ingenuity of the maker and thus the maker should receive the praise. We make fools of ourselves when we worship objects or creatures instead of the One who made them. Creatures worshipping creatures rather than their Creator is idolatry, which is strongly opposed by God.

Let us now take a look at the one who created us and the world in which we live.

God's Infinite Power and Wisdom Revealed

We concede that with our finite minds, it would be too difficult to completely define a God with such creative and awesome power. To get our point across, let's consider God's dialogue with Job.

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'?

Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place, that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it? The earth takes shape like clay under a seal; its features stand out like those of a garment. The wicked are denied their light, and their upraised arm is broken.

Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this.

What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years!

Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle? What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth?

Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass? Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens when the waters become hard as stone, when the surface of the deep is frozen?

Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their sea-

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sons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?

Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, "Here we are"? Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens when the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth stick together? (Job 38:4-38 NIV).

Now that we have surveyed God's amazing creation, we turn our attention to God Himself. Though it is impossible to completely know or define the infinite God of the Universe, with reference we offer a definition consisting of what is known.

Defining the Infinite God

"God is an invisible, personal, and living spirit, distinguished from all other spirits by several kinds of attributes: metaphysically, God is self-existent, eternal and unchanging; intellectually, God is omniscient [all knowing], faithful, and wise; ethically, God is just, merciful, and loving; emotionally, God detests evil, is long suffering, and is compassionate; existentially, God is free, authentic, and omnipotent [all powerful]; relationally, God is transcendent in being, immanent universally in providential activity, and immanent with his people in redemptive activity."⁵

This definition, as we can see is quite lengthy. Westminster offered a more concise definition: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."⁶

You can see that defining God is no simple task, for no finite being is capable of giving a complete and concise definition of an infinite Being. The God of the universe is way too big to be

squeezed into a one-paragraph definition by finite little creatures like us. Simply, God is One who possesses the divine attributes with neither beginning nor ending. He is eternal, immutable, truthful, loving, righteous, just, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and sovereign and manifests Himself in three distinct personalities and functions.

God is bigger than any definition man can come up with! He is beyond our total comprehension. How can we define a God who sees everything, knows everything, hears every language, and simultaneously controls everything? What an awesome God! Let us examine yet another essential biblical teaching: the Godhead.

The Godhead

The Godhead is commonly referred to as the Trinity. The word *Trinity* has been a bone of contention for centuries, even among Christians. This concept has caused many religious groups to shy away from embracing Christianity, alleging that Christians worship three gods. But do Christians worship three gods? No, not at all! Worshipping three gods would be tantamount to idolatry.

There are two prerequisites to delve into defining and understanding the Trinity: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, and acceptance of the Bible as the totally infallible, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God.

The Trinity in Progressive Revelation

We know from Scripture that the Jews throughout their history were acutely aware of the oneness of God: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4). But we should bear in mind that God did not reveal Himself to man all at once. He did it bit by bit—progressively. This progressive revelation came to an end in the last book of the Bible, in

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Revelation 22:18. The apostle Paul attested to this when he said: "Which in other generations was not made known...as it has now been revealed" (Ephesians 3:5).

When the Lord sent Moses on a mission to Egypt, he said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14).

Who at that time would ever have thought that the "I AM" that came to Moses was actually the Son of God (John 8:58)? Not until the New Testament did God's revelation progress to the point that He chose to reveal Himself to man through the God-Man, Jesus Christ. After Jesus had paid for the sins of the entire human race on the cross, His earthly ministry ended and He ascended back to Heaven from whence He came (John 6:38).

At this point, the apostles, especially Paul, went to work weaving together Old and New Testament revelation. Only then did they know what we know today about the awesome God of the universe. After the apostolic teachings, it became clear that Jesus Christ is God (John 1:1; Philippians 2:6-8; Hebrews 1:2-3, 8-12; Colossians 1:15, 19, 2:9).

The Jewish people had known for ages that God is One; but not until the incarnate state of Jesus Christ did it become fully apparent that though He is One God, He exists in three personalities. This startling revelation ultimately led to the theological coinage of the word *Trinity*. Understanding that it is impossible to completely define the infinite God of the Universe, we respectfully offer a definition of the Trinity from what is known.

Defining the Trinity

God is One, who—without a beginning, in eternity past—elected to manifest Himself in three distinct personalities, with three distinct functions, each having identical essence. They are co-eternal, coequal, and co-infinite with perfect harmony.

B.B. Warfield defined the Trinity more concisely: “There is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence (existence).”⁷

The Bible reveals the Persons of the Godhead as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

- God the Father is the first Person of the Trinity. *Father* is used here not in the natural sense of parenthood as some religious people think. Rather, He is designated as a father in the same manner as an earthly father who assumes authority in a household. The Father is invisible “God [the Father] is spirit” (John 4:24).
- Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, came to reveal the Father “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He came to pay for our sins and to be an example for us. “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps” (1 Peter 2:21; also note verses 20-25).
- The Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity is our Helper. He is an invisible spirit who helps us to understand the Word of God and gives us the power to live the Christian way of life. “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26).

Three Persons in One God

An important question a religious man may ask is “If Christians don’t worship three gods, then why is each member called God?”

That’s a very good question. In fact, theologians have used many illustrations in attempting to answer this challenging question. We concede that no one has come up with a perfect illustration yet, and perhaps no one will. When a finite creature, no matter how brilliant, tries to explain an infinite Being beyond what Scripture reveals, he will always fall short.

All three Persons share in the name of the Godhead: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Though each has a different function, they are united as One in the Godhead. The Son of God Himself declared “The Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (John 10:38).

The three Persons, though each referred to as God, are interconnected in information sharing. They are co-sovereign, co-omniscient, and interdependent in all their decision making and actions and are of the same essence.

We can go on explaining this phenomenal concept and yet never exhaust the biblical teaching about an infinite God, whom Scripture revealed to be three-in-one but not three independent gods. Scripture has helped us identify the members of the Godhead, and this verse depicts all three: “Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased” (Luke 3:21-22 KJV).

According to Scripture, the purpose of the baptism of Jesus Christ was solely for John the Baptist to identify Jesus as the Son of God (John 1:30-34). And what better confirmation than the testimony of the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus Christ and the voice of the Father coming from heaven.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus Christ, after commissioning His

disciples, charged, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Here again the Trinity is clearly revealed. Jesus Christ also identified the Father as a separate member when He prayed in John 11:41-42 (KJV): “And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.”

When we read the gospel of John with an open mind, we should come to the conclusion that God has been revealed to us in the Person of Jesus Christ. John clearly stated this as his purpose: “But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31).

We now have a tiny bit of knowledge of who the true God is and how He manifests Himself in three distinct personalities and functions. So why do many, even Christians, still worship creatures rather than the Creator Himself?

Uniqueness of Christ

Jesus is the only visible member of the Godhead. He is called the Son not because He was physically born of the Father, but relative to His service. He revealed the Father to us (John 14:9). Jesus Christ Himself recognized the authority of His Father and said, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38).

With regard to Jesus, Scripture references abound, He is both Creator and the One whom the Father offered as a sin offering for the entire human race.

In the beginning [eternity past] was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God [the Son, co-eternal,

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coequal and co-infinite with God the Father]...All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being (John 1:1,3).

For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him (Colossians 1:16).

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8; see also 2 Corinthians 5:21). He is the only One whom the Father appointed as an offering for our sins and the only means of salvation. That is why the apostle Peter was so emphatic in declaring: “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Trinity: Basis for Relationship with God

Christians maintain that only those who accept Christ as Savior will go to heaven. That may sound too extreme and too narrow-minded, but understanding and accepting this is a matter of life and death!

John the Baptist said, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey [who refuses to believe on] the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36).

The biblical teaching of the Godhead or Trinity makes a sharp demarcation between Christianity and religion. Christianity is not a religion but a relationship with God based on the merits of Jesus Christ.

Religion is man seeking to gain God's favor through man's good deeds. It is nothing but man's total disregard of God's

only provision of redemption through the Person and the work of Jesus Christ. Religion is the devil's invention. The true God of the Bible abhors religion in all its ugliness and deception.

Some ministers of the gospel have occasionally been asked on national television, "Can anyone other than a Christian go to Heaven?" This is a straightforward question that requires a straightforward answer; but unfortunately many have wavered and waffled in their answers. In contrast, when the apostle Paul faced off with the religious crowd of the Jewish nation, he did not shrink, he did not waffle—he did not waver from declaring them to be lost.

In Romans we read, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:1-3).

Simply put, one's attitude toward the Person and the work of Jesus Christ will determine where one will spend eternity: with God in Heaven, or separated from God in Hell. The eternal repercussions of rejecting Christ are sobering.

Jesus Christ Himself affirmed it, as recorded in John 8:24, "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He [God the Son, the Savior], you will die in your sins," and in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father [in Heaven] but through Me." How much more emphatic can He be?

With this overview of God and the Trinity we are ready to examine His sovereignty.

2

The Sovereignty of God

For the Lord Most High is to be feared, a great King over all the earth. God reigns over the nations, God sits on His holy throne (Psalm 47:2, 8).

We are about to examine another essential attribute of God: His sovereignty. Proper understanding of God's sovereignty is critical for correct interpretation of disasters in our lives. Keep in mind that it's not within the range of this chapter to settle the issue of God's sovereignty, as this subject has been hotly debated for centuries.

Overview of God's Sovereignty

Without ample knowledge of God's sovereignty over human affairs, no one would dare attribute disaster to Him. But a measure of understanding on this subject will help us relate to the sovereign control of God over the universe, including disasters. A grasp of this subject will surely make us appreciate the saying that God is the Lord of history!

Sovereignty is a theological concept as well as a component of God's essence. We noted that no finite mind can fully comprehend an infinite God, let alone completely define Him. God is greater than our human minds can fathom, though many great theological scholars have helped us in understanding the God of the universe, based on God's revelation of Himself to man.

Scripture tells us His ways are beyond our complete understanding. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9).

How much higher is Heaven than Earth? The answer in one word: *immeasurable!* With this in mind, we will define sovereignty as it is revealed in Scripture.

Sovereignty in Relation to God’s Justice

Sovereignty means that the Creator-God has absolute control of all things. He directs and superintends all events of the universe in accordance with the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11).

All of God’s attributes are interwoven and should be viewed as an inseparable cohesive unit. For instance, an explanation of God’s sovereignty should take His justice into account. There must be a balance between the two as is true for all the components of His essence.

With this concept in mind, imagine God’s justice and His sovereignty as weights perfectly balanced on the Supreme Scale of Heaven. In interpreting Scripture we work from clear passages of Scripture to obscure ones. That’s a rule of hermeneutics, the art and science of textual interpretation. Scriptural references abound concerning God’s justice. Therefore we shall first take a look at a few of the clearer passages on justice in order to understand the more obscure passages on sovereignty.

Moses affirms in Deuteronomy 32:4, “The Rock, His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.” In Psalm 89:14 we read that “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of [God’s] throne.” In Job 34:12, “Surely, God will not act wickedly, And the Almighty will not pervert justice.”

In other words, a just God cannot tilt the scale of justice in favor of anyone, no matter what. The apostle Paul, in Romans

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2:11, reinforces this truth with these words: “For there is no partiality with God.”

Some passages of Scripture are hard to understand, which unfortunately both “the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16). We have no excuse whatsoever for explaining the truth away just because we cannot arrive at an answer we desire. Worse still, we injure ourselves when we scramble here and there and lift Scriptures out of context to defend our position. We are to be informed by Scripture and change our ways to conform to it. We are not to bend Scripture to match our preconceived outcome. God is just, and on this foundational truth we will continue our study.

God is Sovereign. King David wrote: “The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all” (Psalm 103:19). He reigns on high; He reigns supreme (Psalm 113:5). Truly there are many things we cannot fully comprehend about God’s work; nonetheless, whatever He does from His sovereignty reflects His perfect character as a righteous and just God.

One may ask, “Does it mean that God is the creator of evil, too, since He is the creator of all things?” Far from it! God is not the creator or the originator of evil. Rather, a rebellious thought was first conceived, incubated, and hatched into full-blown evil by Satan when he rebelled against God (Isaiah 14:12-15).

That’s not all. Satan was successful in deceiving a third of the angelic beings by luring them into joining him in his attempt to overthrow his creator (Revelation 12:4, 7-9). Their effort failed, as we would have expected, but not without eternal repercussions. Sin was born. There and then, God made a demarcation between Himself and the rebellious ones (Isaiah 14:12-16).

But the rebellion did not end there. After God created Adam and Eve, Satan indwelt a serpent and deceitfully sold his lie to Eve, persuading her to rebel against God’s authority, just as he

himself had done long ago. As a result of Satan's well-crafted deception, both Adam and Eve rebelled against the rule of their heavenly Father-God (Genesis 3:1-7). This is how evil was born on earth. In Paul's epistle we read, "Therefore, just as through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world [by way of Adam and Eve's propagation], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned [by way of our inherited sin nature]" (Romans 5:12).

Where was God when all these things happened? Why didn't He in His sovereignty stop them? Scripture is silent on these questions, therefore we should be also.

For the sake of illustration, let's assume one morning a jogger runs past a car parked on the street with the engine running. An hour later on his way back the engine is still running with no one in sight. Can it be automatically assumed or deduced that the owner forgot the car because he left his engine on all that time? Not really. He may have left it on for some reason unbeknownst to the casual passerby, maybe to charge the battery.

Was the owner of the car under obligation to tell anyone who passes by why he left the engine running? Doesn't he have the right to do what he pleases with his own car? Of course he does.

With that in mind, we read the words of Paul, the great apostle:

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.' So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' On the contrary,

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who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? (Romans 9:14-21).

Two factors govern the passage in question. The first is the justice of God, and the second is His omniscience. The apostle knew that reading a passage like this might tempt some to call God unjust. Knowing that, Paul thundered back with these words: "There is no injustice with God, is there? *May it never be!*"

Sadly, some renowned Bible communicators, with good intention in their exposition, misapplied this passage and a few others, which resulted in their theology of limited atonement. They claimed that God, in His sovereignty, chose some to eternal life while rejecting others. Based on this premise they built a teaching that Jesus Christ died on the cross only for the chosen ones. John Calvin, a proponent of this theology, called it a "horrible decree."⁸ This theology does not agree with Hebrews 10:10, which tells us that Christ died once for all.

An impartial judge would never consider limited atonement as just. If it were a just ruling, that would make God unjust. Is God unjust? Paul says, "May it never be!" What the apostle meant was that God, like the car owner in our analogy, has the right to do what He pleases so long as neither His justice nor any other attribute of His essence is altered.

Now let's briefly examine the hardness of Pharaoh's heart in relation to the sovereignty of God.

Hardness of Pharaoh's Heart

When Romans 9:14-17 is taken at face value, one is inclined to conclude that Pharaoh had no choice as to the hardness of his heart, that he could not have changed his mind even if he had

wanted to. “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth” (Romans 9:17).

If God could raise His creature for the purpose of destroying him because He is a sovereign God, what kind of God would He be? For one thing, He would not be a compassionate God. But Scripture tells us that He is. “The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made” (Psalm 145:9 NIV).

God’s instruction to Moses at the burning bush gives insight. “But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion. So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that he will let you go” (Exodus 3:19-20). The simple phrase “I know” is crucial here. It is the key that unlocks Romans 9:14-17. It highlights God’s omniscience.

This tells us that God in His omniscience knows all that is knowable and that He foresaw the events of the exodus. God could have begun by saying, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart,” but He did not. God knew from eternity past that this pharaoh was a particularly stubborn man who was motivated by a lust for power. God revealed to Moses “Pharaoh’s heart is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go” (Exodus 7:14).

God knew that Pharaoh would react to God’s judgments by becoming more and more stubborn. Exodus 8:15 tells us that Pharaoh hardened himself: “He hardened his heart and did not listen...as the Lord had said.” What did the Lord say? He said, “I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you....”

Now, pause and follow this train of thought closely. The Lord said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go” (Exodus 4:21).

There seems to be a contradiction between Pharaoh’s choices and God’s sovereignty. But there is none. A careful

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observation of Moses's experience with Pharaoh sheds light on this. Note, in Exodus 5:2, Pharaoh's stubbornness was clearly demonstrated "But Pharaoh said, 'Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and besides, I will not let Israel go.'"

Moses performed miracle after miracle, and yet Pharaoh's stubbornness continued. "Yet Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said" (Exodus 7:13).

Did God cause Pharaoh's heart to harden? No. That would jeopardize His holiness. The Hebrew word for *harden* has other connotations—the most obvious of which is "to twist" (as a rope) or "to wring." God knew from His omniscience that this particular king of Egypt at this particular time would be consumed by his power lust and would be the divine solution to free the Israelites from their bondage. God was now ready to give Pharaoh over to a "depraved mind" (Romans 1:28).

Consider the commentary of the editors of the *New American Standard Bible*: "Those who have long persisted in the ways of evil reach a point at which they are unable to distinguish right from wrong or good from evil. They grow hardened and morally incorrigible. Without doubt this was the state of Pharaoh. Being a man accustomed to the abuse of power, he steeled himself against all sense of justice and mercy. In Romans 1:24 God is said to have given up immoral men to the path they were determined to follow. In the same way, God allowed Pharaoh to follow the course he was determined to follow. God did not force him to act in any evil way nor did He by divine decree determine that Pharaoh would not repent if he so chose."⁹

God knew that Pharaoh would not turn to Him and be saved. Pharaoh believed himself to be god. God knew that miracles would not cause him to consider the God of the Israelites. God knew that only by extreme pressure would Pharaoh comply with God's demand to let the Israelites go (Exodus 3:19). God knew all that! That is omniscience.

In his stubbornness, Pharaoh would now act as God's servant in two ways (Psalm 119:91).

- First, God would use Pharaoh's stubbornness as a platform, "The wrath of man shall praise Him" (Psalm 76:10). Through miracles God would create a frame of reference for His people, Israel. "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson, how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I performed My signs among them, that you may know that I am the Lord.'" (Exodus 10:1-2).
- Second, God would use the occasion to demonstrate His power throughout the world: "But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain [God's sovereignty kept him alive], in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth. Still you exalt yourself against My people by not letting them go" (Exodus 9:16-17).

There we have it on record! "You exalt yourself against my people." Pride is a heinous sin and God cannot implant a spirit of pride in anyone (James 1:13). He can only judge pride wherever it rears its ugly head. "Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord; Assuredly, he will not be unpunished" (Proverbs 16:5).

Now we can examine Paul's words, "For this purpose I have raised you up."

The word that the apostle Paul translated "raised you up" (Romans 9:17) in its original context in the Old Testament (Exodus 9:16) literally means "to stand."¹⁰

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S.R. Driver says that it means “maintain you alive.” “The causative form of this verb means ‘to continue according to him’¹¹ or ‘you were preserved.’”¹²

We are faced with this critical question: When did God raise Pharaoh up? Was he born stubborn? Or programmed to be stubborn? A careful examination of how Paul used the word in Greek suggests that it happened at a point in time, which settles any idea that Pharaoh was born or made that way. God gave Pharaoh over to his own stubbornness. God used it to accomplish His plan.

God's sovereignty played no role in Pharaoh's stubbornness. He was already a stubborn king! Consider the phrase “I will harden his heart.” This indicates a future action that clearly expels any thought that God's sovereignty controlled his heart from birth.

Pharaoh was already stubborn and cruel toward the Jews even before the burning-bush incident, as clearly demonstrated in the following passage from Exodus:

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land.’ So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel. The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously; and they made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them.

Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah; and he said, ‘When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see *them* upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live’ (Exodus 1:8-16).

In using the phrase “I will harden his heart,” essentially, God was essentially saying to Moses, “I will keep Pharaoh, who is locked up in his stubbornness, alive until my full power is displayed in Egypt.” God allowed Pharaoh to remain alive and in power so that He could finish the ten plagues that were tailored to manifest His dynamic power among His people and around the world. God could have used just one plague that caused Pharaoh to comply. He could have taken Pharaoh’s life after His first miraculous sign, but He didn’t! God wanted to keep Pharaoh alive to accomplish His plan and purpose. Each plague proved the God of Israel was stronger than any of Egypt’s gods, even Pharaoh himself.

God reserved the tenth plague as His ultimate test, which He knew would cause Pharaoh to comply. “But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion. So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles [ten of them] which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that [the tenth one] he will let you go” (Exodus 3:19-20). We can never emphasize God’s omniscience enough: “*I know.*”

God in His infinite wisdom and sovereignty made the decision to demonstrate His power when that particular pharaoh was on the throne. A handful of pharaohs who were not friendly to the Israelites had come and gone, but God waited. He could have even waited until another pharaoh came to the throne and still have been within the 400 years that He foretold to Abraham (Genesis 15:13), but He didn’t. God alone decides the time, the place, and the means of accomplishing His will and purpose. He reserves the sovereign right to show

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compassion for whatever reason best known to Him on whom He wishes. "I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Romans 9:15).

We see that God in His sovereign, infinite wisdom created both angelic and human beings as free agents with volitional responsibility. God holds us all accountable for our decisions and actions. Sovereignty superintends every decision and every action to ensure that it does not interfere with His Divine Decree, which is reflected in Ephesians 1:11.

Dr. Paul Enns stated, "The decrees are reflected in Ephesians 1:11 in that He 'works all things after the counsel of His will.' Question 7 of the Westminster Shorter Confession states: 'The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath ordained whatsoever comes to pass.'"¹³

I believe the free will of man is one aspect of that which "He hath ordained."

The Free Will of Man

Two main schools of thought exist with regard to the will of man in relation to God's sovereignty. One is that man has free will, and the other is that man is not a free agent. Scripture abounds with verses in favor of the position that God in His sovereignty created man with the freedom to choose. In Genesis 1:26, we read, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'"

When God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness," He was saying: Let Us create man as an intelligent being, with self-consciousness and self-determination. This is the substance of God's image. God has a will, and He

chooses to bestow this aspect of His image upon man. That is God's prerogative. That's divine design!

God delegated to Adam the authority to name all the animals. "And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. And the man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field" (Genesis 2:19-20).

In addition to giving Adam the privilege of naming all the animals in the perfect environment of the garden, God tested Adam's ability to exercise his free will. Read what Genesis says about the only test in the garden: "Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you [exercise your free will and] eat from it you will surely die'" (Genesis 2:15-17).

That's a test of the will! Let there be no misunderstanding. The fact that man is created in the image of God does not in any way put man on par with God in His sovereignty, nor does it imply that man is free to do all he wishes, whenever and wherever. Rather, in the eternal counsel of God, He made a decision to create man as a free agent with limiting boundaries.

Though man has free will, there are things that he cannot do even if he wants to, and there are things God will compel and impel man to do even if he has no intrinsic desire to do so. This is because on one hand, man is created as a free agent; on the other, man is equally a slave of his Creator-God (Psalm 119:91). This is like raising cattle in a fenced ranch where there's limited freedom for them to wander here and there within the ranch. They cannot go beyond the set boundaries even if they want to. That's how God created us—with limitations.

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In the case of Adam and Eve, both used their free will against God's prohibition, and the consequence was not only their spiritual death but the spiritual death of the entire world (Romans 5:12).

Some have argued that after Adam and Eve's sin, known as the fall, man's will was corrupted, and as a result, man can no longer make any decision apart from God working in man. This is where the two schools of thought disagree.

When one carefully scrutinizes the Scriptures, it becomes clear that man after the fall still has free will and is responsible for his decisions. This is just what Adam experienced both before and after the fall.

Let us examine four passages, two in the Old Testament and two in the New.

Now when Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, 'The people might change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.' Hence God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea; and the sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt (Exodus 13:17-18).

It is clear that if God, in His omniscience, had not taken them by the way of the wilderness, they could have gone back to Egypt against God's plan to bring them to the Promised Land. This shows free will for they could have changed their mind and made their way back to Egypt.

"Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost" (Isaiah 55:1).

The prophet Isaiah, through the Holy Spirit, issued an invitation to the unbelieving Jews—and to anyone today for that matter. It's obvious that those to whom Isaiah spoke were capable of responding to his invitation. While they were not capable of understanding Isaiah's message apart from the illuminating ministry of God the Holy Spirit, they were capable of making a choice to give the prophet a hearing. That's free will!

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

The Lord, speaking to a crowd, gave that invitation to the unsaved. Obviously the invitation is made to all who are weary, not just to a few. This invitation, like Isaiah's, is based on the fact that man has the ability to give the message a hearing. We know that unsaved man cannot comprehend spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:14), but he has the ability to choose to go and give the messenger a hearing. That too is free will!

We see this all the time. Often people, of their own volition, attend evangelistic meetings and still leave unsaved. The fact that they went illustrates their freedom to choose. That they leave unsaved is yet another illustration of free will to choose. Saul of Tarsus was a perfect example. The unsaved Saul heard Stephen give a very thorough gospel message, which he rejected (Acts 7). He used his free will to “kick against the goads,” as our Lord indicated in Acts 26:14.

Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many

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alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually (Acts 10:1-2).

Here was a Gentile who believed in the God of the Jews. At one point in his life, he became aware that there must be a supreme being out there and desired a relationship with this being. In his “unquenchable thirst,” he made the choice, though spiritually dead, to seek out the God of the Jews, as we see from the quoted passage. That’s free will in operation!

If we choose to go against God’s divine principles that He has established for us, sooner or later God will respond with discipline. That’s exactly what the Bible teaches. This prepares us to examine the integrity of God in the next chapter, which will further illuminate God’s righteousness and justice as they relate to disasters.

3

The Integrity of God

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne
(Psalm 89:14).

This passage reveals the foundation of God's integrity. Civil engineers agree that the strength of any building depends on the strength of its foundation. This implies that any crack in a foundation will result in a crack in the structure built upon it. The integrity of God is built on the foundation of His righteousness and justice. So any compromise of His righteousness or justice is a compromise of His integrity as a whole. This truth is a fundamental principle of this book.

Often we find ourselves guilty of humanizing God: we assign to God human attributes and behavior patterns and then explain God's way of doing things from the human point of view. That is a colossal error on our part. We do this in many ways. For instance, we assign human love, which is merely emotion, to God. We then explain the love of God as we would explain human love. We assign human emotion to God and label Him sentimental.

But God is neither human (Hosea 11:9) nor sentimental (Numbers 23:19). In reality there is an immeasurable gap between us and God. The Lord declares, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways,... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Now we are poised to examine the righteousness and justice that make up God's integrity. Let's begin with righteousness.

Righteousness

Righteousness is a state of absolute holiness, of moral and majestic purity, totally devoid of evil or sin. "Because God is morally pure, He cannot condone evil or have any relationship to it (Psalm 11:4-6). In His holiness, God is the moral and ethical standard; He is the law. He sets the standard."¹⁴

In comparison, man possesses relative righteousness, but God is absolute righteousness. It's part of His essence. God's righteous standard demands that His creatures be holy, just as He is holy (Leviticus 19:2). We cannot get around His demand. None of us is capable of being holy unless He makes us holy. God makes us holy through the imputation of His righteousness when we trust in His Son, Jesus Christ, alone for our salvation (Genesis 15:6; Romans 3:22; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 10:10).

God must preserve His righteousness. Scripture tells us "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You cannot look on wickedness with favor" (Habakkuk 1:13). In other words, He cannot look the other way when His laws are violated. This is also true of any government with integrity. It cannot look the other way when its citizens violate the laws of the land. Likewise, God's righteousness stands on guard to condemn anyone who shows disregard for His laws.

This paves the way for us to examine the second component of His integrity, which is justice.

Justice

Humans are sentimental by nature. We make a costly mistake if we think that God is equally sentimental. God is a judge. Sentiment cannot coexist with justice; sentimentalism in a court

of law is a recipe for partiality. Scripture settles it once and for all that with God there is no partiality (Romans 2:11). He is a God of justice (Ezra 9:15). Contrary to prevailing opinion, God's point of contact with us after the fall of Adam is not love per se. It is justice motivated by love, whereby He meets with us at the hill of Golgotha where His justice crushed His Son Jesus Christ mercilessly on the cross of Calvary to pay for the sins of man (Isaiah 53:3-10). Without the payment of the cross, there can be no reconciliation or peace between sinful man and just God.

So justice is the point of contact between a Holy God and sinful man. This does not in any way eliminate the love of God. God is love, as the Bible tells us (1 John 4:8). His love for us is undiminished no matter our status quo (Jeremiah 31:3). After all, it's out of His unfailing love that He offered His uniquely born Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as a substitute, in payment for our sins (John 3:16). Nonetheless, His love is not our point of contact. God's attributes are interwoven but manifest themselves attribute by attribute. When God judges, He does so motivated by love—but what we see is His justice.

God's love is entirely different from human love. Human love is nothing but a balloon of emotion. It waxes and wanes and is fed by sentiment. That's totally the opposite of God's love, which is stable and never changes. That is good news for us all! None of us in our sinful nature have what it takes to attract God's love. To say this in a simple way, we displease God all the time, because in us dwells nothing good (Romans 7:14-25; Ecclesiastes 7:20). That is true even for the very best of us.

The Psalmist recognized this and asked, "If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" (Psalm 130:3, KJV). The answer is clear: God deals with us on the basis of His matchless grace. Jeremiah, recalling God's grace, said, "This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never

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fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:21-23).

Righteous & Justice in Balance

In perspective, the justice of God and His righteousness go hand in hand. They complement one another for the preservation of God's integrity. When there is even one iota of a violation of His righteous standard, His righteousness will condemn the action and, consequently, His justice will respond to satisfy His righteousness.

Today many theologians seem to ignore the Bible and are reluctant to ascribe disasters to God. They conclude, “A caring, loving God could never, ever, do anything harmful to anyone.” They believe that the attacks of 9/11 could never be the handiwork of God. They forget that the only begotten Son of God, whom the Father loves dearly, was bitterly crushed on the cross by God the Father Himself.

God's justice always reigns in equal proportion to all His attributes. We see it in balance with love and justice in Isaiah's prophecy:

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed...But the Lord was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief (Isaiah 53:4-5,10).

You read it correctly! “But the Lord was pleased To crush Him.” Why? God had to do so in order to satisfy His righteousness. Man sinned; God's righteousness condemned it outright. So the justice of God provided the solution. Sin had to be judged. A penalty had to be paid. So God in His infinite grace

sent His Son as our substitute. Justice followed through by rendering judgment on His Son.

The issue is justice, not love. It explains why God could destroy Noah's world with a flood and rain fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. That's justice!

You are not alone if you ask, "Why are many evil people roaming about with no apparent consequences in sight?" Jeremiah asked such a question. "Righteous are You, O Lord, that I would plead my case with You; Indeed I would discuss matters of justice with You: Why has the way of the wicked prospered? Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease?" (Jeremiah 12:1). That's a good question. But think about it. Were it not for the grace of God, none of us would still be alive today (Psalm 130:3).

Justice delayed is not justice denied. If someone's business activities have been unscrupulous, and he seems to be getting away with it, that does not in any way mean that God is unconcerned. Just because someone has been violating every norm and standard with no visible consequences does not in any way nullify the justice of God.

By delaying justice, God is showing us another aspect of His awesome character. He is showing us that He is a compassionate God, a long-suffering God. Scripture tells us, "Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished'" (Exodus 34:6-7).

God gives us ample time to mend our ways. That's His grace in action! But there is a limit to what God can tolerate from our acts, thoughts, and decisions before He administers justice.

4

The Folly of Idolatry

Then God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me’ (Exodus 20:1-5).

So, what is idolatry? It’s a creature honoring and worshipping creation in any of its forms. “Ultimately in the [New Testament] idolatry came to mean, not only giving to any creature or human creation the honor or devotion which belonged to God alone, but the giving of any human desire a precedence over God’s will [1 Corinthians 10:14; Galatians 5:20; Colossians 3:5; 1 Peter 4:3].”¹⁵

People tend to be unaware that idolatry is not just worshipping a creature or part of creation rather than worshipping the Creator. Idolatry goes much deeper than that. It is having communion with demons!

Tragically, any nation that is involved in idolatry sets itself up for national disasters, which God, in His justice, administers from the Supreme Court of Heaven. That goes for individuals, too. God is strongly opposed to idolatry and consequently punishes anyone who takes part in any form of idol worship.

God Reveals Himself

It is comforting to know that the true God of the universe has never left the human race without evidence that He exists. God's revelation of Himself to man through the natural manifestation of His glorious power is clearly visible, as the apostle Paul cited in Romans 1:20: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." It is God's choice to make Himself known to His creatures.

Imagine that an Internet friend is flying from China to the United States of America, excited to meet a friend he has known for years only online. Wouldn't he send his friend his most recent photo with height and other descriptive clues so he could identify him when he meets him at the airport? Of course he would. Then it follows: wouldn't the Creator-God—whose intention in the creation of man is to have a relationship with him—give all the clues needed to know that a supreme, intelligent Being must have been responsible for man's creation?

God in His infinite wisdom revealed Himself to us in such a way that we can have a personal relationship with Him if we so desire—and we are without excuse if we fail to do so. Every human being knows within himself that there is a supreme, intelligent Being who, in some miraculous way, brought everything into existence. When it comes to accepting this truth three groups of people emerge.

Suppressionists

They know that a supreme Being exists but choose to suppress the truth of His existence within themselves. They move into evolutionism, atheism, environmentalism, and the like. They would be quick to accept Charles Darwin's theory of evolution or his disciples' big bang theory, rather than accept a

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biblical argument, such as the teleological argument which deduces that “order and useful arrangement in a system imply intelligence and purpose in the organizing cause.”¹⁶

Paul Enns elaborated on this:

The world everywhere evidences intelligence, purpose and harmony; [suggesting] a master architect behind all this evidence. The Psalmist sees the magnificence of God's creation in the universe and recognizes that it testifies to His existence (Psalm 8:3-4; 19:1-4). God's harmony is observed throughout the universe and world: the sun being ninety-three million miles distant is precisely right for an adequate climate on earth; the moon's distance of two-hundred-and-forty thousand miles provides tides at proper level; the earth's tilt provides the seasons. A conclusion is clear that God, the Master Designer, has created this magnificent universe...the alternative, that the world happened 'by chance,' is no more possible than a monkey's being able to create a work of Shakespeare on a typewriter by haphazard play on the keys.¹⁷

Misguided

This group of people, by observing the manifestations of God's firmament in creation, come to the conclusion that there must be a supreme Being out there somewhere, and they desire a relationship with this Being. Through misinformation stemming from ancestry and cultural influences, they seek to establish contact with this being through idolatry. This explains why people in every country are involved in one form of idol worship or another.

We mentioned earlier a religion with 333 million gods and goddesses. That number is not an exaggeration! People of that culture worship almost everything, ranging from human beings, cows, rabbits, and rats to inanimate things such as stones, bones,

mountains, and the like. In response, the true God who knows the heart of men sends truth-bearers to those seeking to know the Supreme Being of the universe. The Bible tells us, “For the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him” (1 Chronicles 28:9).

We see the reality of this when we note that the apostle Paul went to idol worshipers two thousand years ago, as recorded in Acts 17:16-34. We see this today in our missionary journeys as thousands of people have become free from the bondage of idolatry. They have embraced the true and only God of the universe by grace through faith alone in Christ alone. What freedom!

True seekers

They too have come to the conclusion that there must be a supreme Being; however, they reject outright the idea of Him being found in objects of creation. Consequently they do not pursue idolatry in their desire to know Him. God has used His power to do everything needed to make Himself known to such yearning hearts. We hear remarkable testimonies about how true seekers yearned for the true God and consequently found Him.

One wonders, “What sense do creatures make out of worshipping creatures?” Is not the Creator greater than the sun, the moon, and the stars; creatures of the air, like birds; creations on the land, such as human beings, animals, trees, and stones; and creatures of the waters, such as fish and water snakes that He has created?

Who is superior—that which is created or the One who created it? Consider the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar made several millennia ago according to Scripture (Daniel 3:1). We pose the question, “Who can we credit with power, lordship, and honor—the image or the goldsmith?” The goldsmith because he

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had all the power within himself to fashion the image in any shape he chose. Does it make sense that glory, praise, and worship be directed to the image itself instead of to the goldsmith for his superb handiwork?

But that's exactly what we do when we create things and make them objects of our worship. That's folly! Psalm 96:7 commands us, "Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength." Just as the goldsmith formed a golden image so God is the One who has formed the universe and it's creatures. Images have no life, no power, and cannot be of help in times of need. We become fools if we worship the handiwork of man or God rather than the Creator-God Himself. The Psalmist wrote, "For all the gods of the peoples are idols, But the Lord made the heavens" (Psalm 96:5).

But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, The work of man's hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; They have eyes, but they cannot see; They have ears, but they cannot hear; They have noses, but they cannot smell; They have hands, but they cannot feel; They have feet, but they cannot walk; They cannot make a sound with their throat. Those who make them will become like them, Everyone who trusts in them (Psalm 115:3-8).

The folly of idolatry is further expounded upon by Jeremiah. "For the customs of the peoples are delusion; Because it is wood cut from the forest, The work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. They decorate it with silver and with gold; They fasten it with nails and with hammers So that it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they, And they cannot speak; They must be carried, Because they cannot walk! Do not fear them, For they can do no harm, Nor can they do any good" (Jeremiah 10:3-5).

Let us be sober in our thinking. How can something that requires our help to make it stand be capable of helping us stand on our feet physically, materially, financially, or otherwise? Or how can idols that have ears but cannot hear be able to answer our cry when we call for help in time of need? They cannot!

The words of the true God spoken through the prophet Jeremiah are striking: “Thus you shall say to them [idolaters], ‘The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under the heavens’” (Jeremiah 10:11). The annals of history are piled high with the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophesy. Where did many of those idols in the Asian seaquake of December 2004 go when the tsunami struck? They were washed away! They couldn’t escape as some people did, because they could not walk nor run. They could not help themselves escape an historic disaster, let alone help anyone else. What happened during Hurricane Katrina to the many in New Orleans who worshipped the power of voodoo? The protective amulets were useless and couldn’t help anyone. Why then do we worship and ascribe glory to idols?

“Thus says the Lord God, ‘I will also destroy the idols And make the images cease’” (Ezekiel 30:13). God has spoken; that settles it! If God says, “They will perish,” He will make good on His Word. The question is, why do some worship that which is destined to perish? Why do people worship things that, in times of disaster, cannot even defend themselves, let alone anyone else?

But as for the true God, the Bible tells us this:

There is none like You, O Lord; You are great, and great is Your name in might. Who would not fear You, O King of the nations? Indeed it is Your due! For among all the wise men of the nations And in all their kingdoms, There is none like You. But they are altogether stupid and foolish In their discipline of delusion— their idol is wood! Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, And gold from Uphaz, The work of a craftsman and of the hands of

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a goldsmith; Violet and purple are their clothing; They are all the work of skilled men. But the Lord is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, And the nations cannot endure His indignation...It is He who made the earth by His power, Who established the world by His wisdom; And by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens...Every man is stupid, devoid of knowledge; Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols; For his molten images are deceitful, And there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of mockery; In the time of their punishment they will perish (Jeremiah 10:6-10,12,14).

This brings us to the danger of idolatry.

Man's Worship of Demons

Idolatry is one of the major reasons why a righteous and just God disciplines individuals or an entire nation. Why does God often punish a city or nation severely because of its involvement in idolatry when idols are without life? It is because idolatry is one of the few avenues of direct contact with demons. The worship of idols is interaction with demons! Demons influence humans to influence the world around them, which in turn causes evil to skyrocket.

When the cup of evil is full to the brim in a nation, God chooses the time and the manner to rain down disaster in order to curtail evil. The righteousness of God demands that evil must be checked. That is a task for the justice of God. Lack of knowledge of what occurs when sacrifices are offered to idols is dangerous and is explained by the apostle Paul: "What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons" (1 Corinthians 10:19-20). Paul is

saying that what they offer to idols they are offering to a demon. An idol is nothing, but behind every idol is a demon.

The apostle John wrote, “And the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues [of the Great Tribulation], did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons [by means of]...the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk” (Revelation 9:20).

God spoke to Moses in Exodus 22:20 emphasizing that He does not, cannot, and will not tolerate idolatry: “He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the Lord alone, shall be utterly destroyed.”

Simply stated, when idolatry reigns in a nation, it increases and eventually engulfs every facet of society. Such a nation is actually begging for a disaster as Ezekiel 7:5 foretold: “Thus says the Lord God, ‘A disaster, unique disaster, behold it is coming!’” God must extinguish the flame of evil. Looking back, we can say that Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami of 2004, and the 9/11 attack on the United States were unique disasters.

Parents devise appropriate measures to bring order to their house when it is in total chaos because of our children’s delinquency. Why then do we blame God if He employs disaster as a means to keep His world from self-destruction? Why do we say, “How can a loving God do such a thing?” when as parents, we can, and do?

But there is another subtle form of idolatry, the worst kind, which often entraps many believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the subject of the next chapter.

5

Whitewashed Idolatry

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

Little children, guard yourselves from idols (1 John 5:21).

Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ sharply rebuked the religious crowd of His day with these striking words: “You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:26-27). He also said, “Woe to you! For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it” (Luke 11:44).

Whitewashed and *concealed tombs*—how revealing those words! When we hear the word *idolatry*, our minds quickly take off to Africa and Asia, where idol temples can be sighted all around. It never dawns on us that we may actually have concealed idols in our own homes, backyards, banks—even in our hearts! Of course it’s easy to see a conventional statue or image in a temple as an idol. But do we also identify being preoccupied with winning the lottery as idolatry? What an image may be to one culture, the preoccupation with money as the solution to happiness is to another. Both could find themselves involved in idolatry.

Today our culture has become so comfortable with the trappings of idolatry that we don't even see it. Many are absorbed in the popular television program *American Idol*. Wealth and fame drive us. "Eighty-one percent of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds said getting rich is their generation's most important or second-most-important life goal; fifty-one percent said the same about being famous."¹⁸

Recall that *idolatry* means "not only...giving to any creature or human creation the honor or devotion which belonged to God alone, but the giving of any human desire a precedence over God's will."¹⁹ Simply put, concealed idolatry is the most dangerous because of its deceptive nature. Consider three types of concealed idolatry: idolatry in the heart, idolatry of money, and idolatry of materialism.

Idolatry in the Heart

Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them [through prayer] at all? (Ezekiel 14:3).

King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, exhorts us in Proverbs 4:23 to "Watch over [our] heart[s] with all diligence, For from [them] flow the springs of life." But we tend to forget that our heart is a spiritual battlefield. We are not talking about the organ that pumps blood to the body but "the mind,"²⁰ which is our information-processing and decision-making center. What goes into the heart comes out in actions—in other words garbage in, garbage out. It is important to realize that what is outside cannot ruin a person, but what is inside can.

Jesus Christ Himself stated this life-changing truth, as recorded in the book of Mark:

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And He said to them, 'Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him'...And He was saying, 'That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man' (Mark 7:18, 20-23).

There we have it: out of the heart of men, evil thoughts are conceived, incubated, and hatched into action. That explains why God judges us on the basis of the contents of our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7). Our hearts are where every action in life is manufactured. The decision to obey or not obey God's mandates and love Him with all our might is made in our hearts.

But how can we have idols in our hearts? We may have them and not even know it. Concealed idolatry is deceptive and therefore the most dangerous because we could actually be involved with demons without realizing it. This concealed idolatry can only be revealed by the guiding light of the Word of God. It is frightening to realize that we could be very active in our local church and still be trapped in this deceptive form of idolatry.

This type of idolatry can spin off in different directions. We may have celebrities of whom we are great fans. We spend our time, money and energy watching their games or concerts and following their lifestyles in great detail on television and in magazines. Do you know more about your favorite music group, movie or sports stars than you do about Jesus Christ? Has your enthusiasm for them overshadowed your spiritual life and become idolatry of the heart?

If an opportunity to see one of your favorite stars conflicts with attending a church service do they win hands down?

Remember, idolatry of the heart is giving to any creature or human creation the honor or devotion that belongs to God alone.

But what if we miss church just once, to see a special once-in-a-life time live event? What's the big deal? It *is* a big deal! At that point, we are saying in our hearts that our fellowship with the star we idolize is more important than our fellowship with God. That's equivalent to idolatry.

The apostle Paul taught that our attitude toward things can be translated into idolatry (Colossians 3:5). In essence, idolatry is not just worshipping carved images; it's equally giving priority in our hearts to anything over God's will! Paul concluded that such behavior incurs the wrath of God (Colossians 3:6).

Idolatry of Money

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon [money] (Matthew 6:24 KJV).

“God and money are portrayed not as employers, but as slave owners. A man may work for two employers, but since ‘single ownership and full-time service are the essence of slavery (Tasker)’ he cannot serve two slave owners. Either God is served with single-eyed devotion or He is not served at all. Attempts at divided loyalty betray, not partial commitment to discipleship, but deep-seated commitment to idolatry.”²¹

Money can be a good thing if pursued and used in a right way. Often we misquote Scripture by saying that money is the root of all evil; on the contrary, 1 Timothy 6:10 states, “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith [doctrinal truth], and pierced themselves with many griefs.” It's our love of money that makes the difference! It's *“love of money”* that is

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the taproot of *“all sorts of evil.”* Our attitude toward money will make or break us in life.

Many of our jails are filled with people who have “pierced themselves with many griefs” because of their love of money. Many marriages and friendships have been wrecked because of conflicting attitudes about money.

How can the pursuit of money be synonymous to idolatry? The answer is found in one’s attitude. Jesus Christ was emphatic in His assertion. We cannot serve or be preoccupied with God and at the same time be preoccupied with money. One or the other will be shortchanged. God or money—which one comes first? That is the issue.

How can we gauge whether we are serving God rather than money? It’s a question every one of us has to honestly answer for ourselves. The test is in our attitude. We can give ourselves a quick test by answering these questions:

- What is my priority in life?
- Could I give up all my money if that were necessary to serve God’s purpose for my life (Matthew 19:16-23)?
- When the choice to make more money or attend Bible study presents itself, which one do I choose at the expense of the other?

Any attempt to divide loyalty is not partial commitment to discipleship, but rather a symptom of idolatry of money. The truth in 1 Timothy 6:9 remains unchanged: “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.”

Idolatry invites discipline from God. It is always a recipe for disaster. We are now ready to examine the last of our three topics, materialism.

Idolatry of Materialism

Welcome to the graveyard of materialism. The “I want more, more, more, more” syndrome has buried many in the cemetery of covetousness and idolatry. Human wants are insatiable. We want this, we want that. Sooner we get this, later we get that, and then we want this and that all over again! It is an endless circle of wants.

Let there be no misunderstanding. There is nothing sinful about us desiring to have one thing or another in life. It is the obsession and unquenchable passion for more infused into the desire itself that make us idolaters, and consequently the enemies of God (James 4:4).

Greed manifests lack of contentment and best describes materialism. Spiro Zodhiates made this comment about greed: “Greed, desiring to have more than one has, not because it is insufficient but because others have more. Such desire is called ‘idolatry.’”²²

The test for a mental attitude of materialism is simple: do I constantly find myself dealing with “I want more, I want more”? If so, this could signal involvement in whitewashed idolatry, the most subtle of all. We call it *whitewashed* because we can hardly see anything wrong about our uncontrollable lust for things, especially if we are in the position to afford them. We even have a socially acceptable name for it—keeping up with the Joneses—and most television commercials shamelessly promote it.

Wanting to acquire more and more things in life is the outward sign of something more than meets the eye. The obsessive passion to acquire it all is a sure sign of a heart that is devoid of spiritual vitality. It’s a picture of a heart that has been deceptively infiltrated with and influenced by demonic thinking. Much more, it’s a heart that lacks the absolute peace and tranquility that God alone provides.

What is the relationship between materialism and demonism? They go hand-in-hand. We cannot ascertain the origin of mate-

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rialism other than to say it's the fruit of the sin nature and it has been with us since the fall.

The relationship between the two was brought to the surface through the apostolic teachings and their vigorous attack on Gnosticism, which “taught that [the] body is evil, and since it is evil in itself and cannot be redeemed from its evil ways, it might as well do whatever it wants.”²³ In other words, live it up, because hope is in the here and now! Such a thought alone is evil. Essentially, materialism promotes the false idea that we can fill the God-shaped vacuum in our soul with material things. Only God can fill this void. The question confronting us is, are we materialistic? Or better, how can we determine if we are?

Ask yourself, right now, am I preoccupied with anything other than Christ my Savior? Is there anything that, if I lost it today, I would be devastated? Am I content with what I have, no matter how little? Can I say the following, like the apostle Paul? “Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need” (Philippians 4:11-12).

If you were to lose everything as Job did, could you confidently make his words your own? “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). We must be cautious for we cannot be materialistic and still claim to be living the spiritual life. Simply, materialism is whitewashed idolatry!

John the Apostle wrote, “Do not love the world nor the [material] things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world

is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

James, in his epistle, did not hesitate to rebuke his audience sharply, because of the enormous consequences of idolatry on Christendom: “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). He is saying that we cannot have it both ways. When we choose material things over God, we distance ourselves from Him by our involvement in idolatry. We cannot afford that choice.

In 1 Timothy 6:11, Paul the apostle exhorted Timothy, “But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness.”

And John, the last apostle, had these encouraging words for us all: “And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:20-21). That’s the Word of God!

Remember this is a spiritual battle and Satan loves to throw us off our course. He particularly likes to do so in ways that we can’t see or don’t recognize. Hopefully this has alerted you to areas of danger that can be identified and rooted out, so you may continue to grow in grace.

Now that we have examined God, His sovereignty, His integrity, and the dangers of idolatry, we are prepared for an in-depth examination of God’s sovereignty over disaster.

Part II

Disasters in Relation to the Sovereignty of God

Why does everyone, whether a believer or an unbeliever, go through disasters in life?

6

God's Sovereignty Over Disaster

The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all (Psalm 103:19).

Recall that *sovereignty* means that the Creator-God has absolute, supreme, airtight control in everything as He directs and superintends all events of the universe in accordance with the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11). His sovereignty undergirds all events of history, no matter how minute. That means there are no accidents or coincidences in the affairs of His Kingdom. No disaster, personal or national, occurs without His permission. Satan cannot cause one iota of havoc in the world except when permitted by God. This should be very comforting to us who are obedient to God's plan, knowing that Satan cannot lift a finger against us without God's permission (Job 1:8-12; Luke 22:31).

There are primarily two ways God uses disaster to keep history in check, namely indirect control and direct control.

Indirect Control

The future is as clear as the past to sovereign, omniscient God. He knows all the knowable, including the actual and the probable. For instance, He knows what could have happened had President George W. Bush not won the presidential election of 2000, just as He knows what could have happened had Al Gore

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won after the recount. God does not have human fallibility; nothing ever slips through His hands. Nothing could ever prompt God to say “oops” because He is in total control. We know that God’s ultimate goal in all He does is to bring glory to Himself. Consequently, whatever God permits Satan to do, He permits because the end result will glorify God.

This was exemplified in the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. God in eternity past knew the outcome of Christ’s death, but Satan didn’t. Satan thought that by getting rid of Christ he would bring an end to God’s ultimate plan of salvation for man. Did he succeed? No!

The apostle Peter said,

“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered over by the pre-determined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power...Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ [the Savior]—this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:22-24,36).

We know that God cannot be involved in any form of sin or evil. He cannot collaborate with Satan and his demons in their evil operations. However, God is the Master in using the by-products of their devious work to accomplish His overall plan.

What a joy to know that God is an expert in bringing a sensational result out of a hopeless situation! This knowledge should soothe our souls. Psalm 76:10 highlights this phenomenal truth: “For the wrath of man shall praise You; With a remnant of wrath You will gird Yourself.” There are many biblical

examples of God using the work of Satan and his minions to accomplish His divine objectives.

Joseph was a perfect example. In a dream, God made a promise to promote Joseph to a position of leadership. But because of his brothers' intense jealousy and hatred toward him, they sold him into slavery in Egypt, hoping to cancel the possibility of Joseph ever ruling over them (Genesis 37:18-28). The devil influenced those siblings to act without pity toward their brother Joseph in an attempt to foil God's plan for Joseph. Did they succeed? No, not a chance!

Egypt was precisely where God wanted Joseph to go. God used the dirty work of those callous brothers to accomplish His plan and purpose. Over time, God promoted Joseph to the position of prime minister of Egypt, fulfilling His plan. Thirteen years later, Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him, fulfilling what Joseph had seen in his dream (Genesis 42:6).

After revealing himself to them, Joseph soothed their panic-stricken hearts. "But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.' So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them" (Genesis 50:19-20).

This is a great illustration of "the wrath of man shall praise You." Joseph's brothers "meant evil against" their younger brother in what they did, but "God meant it for good." He turned their evil work into a blessing for Joseph and ultimately his family and the entire nation of Israel. The apostle Paul in Romans 8:28 said, "And we know that God causes all things [including the work of Satan] to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." That is sovereignty!

God cannot and will not allow any disaster, misfortune or disappointment to take place in the affairs of His Kingdom

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unless it will bring Him glory. It's that simple. That is indirect control.

Direct Control

Sovereignty guarantees that God's decree, the counsel of His will, will ultimately come to pass. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that God decreed this universe would last for 20,000 years before its destruction and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:10-13). In this example His sovereignty would guard it from self-destruction until His decree comes to fruition (Matthew 5:18).

God can utilize any measure or means required to curtail and deter any person, community or nation that is working contrary to His decree. We know that everything is at God's disposal: tornadoes, hurricanes, scorching heat, and floods, just to name a few. Satan and his demons are also God's servants (Psalm 119:91). He can use their actions to accomplish His plan. God's plan must be fulfilled! That is what we mean when we say that God controls history.

Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors. Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it (Isaiah 46:8-11).

God's decree always come true. For example: God decreed that the world would become populated. He created our first parents, Adam and Eve, and commanded them to fulfill His pur-

pose to populate the whole planet Earth (Genesis 1:28). However, in Noah's day, evil threatened to shatter God's plan. But God used the first weapon of mass destruction on record to protect His plan. God brought the first rain ever, which caused an unequalled catastrophic flood. It destroyed the entire human race and all living creatures except Noah and his family, the righteous ones, and a pair of each of the earth's creatures (Genesis 6-9). In brief, we read from Moses' account:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually...And the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them' (Genesis 6:5,7).

The Lord then said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation'...It came about after the seven days, that the water of the flood came upon the earth. In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on the same day all the fountains of the great deep burst open, and the floodgates of the sky were opened [God created them, and He alone opened them]. The rain fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights...The water prevailed fifteen cubits higher, and the mountains were covered. All flesh that moved on the earth perished, birds and cattle and beasts and every swarming thing that swarms upon the earth, and all mankind (Genesis 7:1, 10-12, 20-21).

What total destruction! We see God can use any means to accomplish His purpose and still be a righteous God. Today, capital punishment is sometimes used to rid society of evil. We see that God does the exact same thing. He uses whatever means He

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deems best to keep His creation in check. Just as He used the flood as a weapon of mass destruction in Noah's time, God, the unchanging One, still uses floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes directly or indirectly to accomplish His purpose.

God began afresh with Noah's family. He repeated the same mandate that He had given to Adam and Eve, to populate the world (Genesis 9:1). God wanted them to increase in number and cover the earth. His intention was for man's population to grow to the point where it could be grouped into nations, with national autonomy and boundaries and cultures. This would help keep evil in check. If a nation was influenced by evil through its culture, God could deal individually with that nation, rather than the whole world. But did they listen to God's mandate? Not really. They chose to disobey Him.

Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words. It came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.' And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. They said, 'Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.' The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. The Lord said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city (Genesis 11:1-8).

That's right. They basically had a congregational meeting, and the outcome was "Let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." That's in total defiance of Genesis 9:1: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." What did God do in response? He used the disaster of a language barrier to force them to comply.

We see that God can use any means to accomplish His purpose. The nationalities we have today, thanks to different languages, are fingerprints of the sovereign God. With boundaries in place, every nation can maintain its territory so that evil can be contained. God administers justice on an individual and national basis, as was the case with Sodom and Gomorrah.

Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because the inhabitants of that land were involved in every kind of evil. They condoned homosexuality contrary to what the Bible states (Leviticus 18:22). This is now happening in many countries, including the United States of America, where civil liberty statutes are giving a green light to same-sex marriage. Some churches even bless such an unbiblical union before God. Tolerating what God condemns invites the justice of God.

The founding fathers of the United States gave these warnings: "The propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself [God] has ordained" (George Washington)²⁴, and "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever" (Thomas Jefferson).²⁵

Sin is like erosion and must be checked; otherwise God's purpose in creation would be obstructed before it was accomplished. In Sodom, the flood of evil was overrunning to the point of encroaching on its neighboring countries. Evil was threatening God's plan, as in Noah's time.

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Consequently God had to do something to curtail evil in that part of the world. “And the Lord said, ‘The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave.’...Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground” (Genesis 18:20; 19:24-25). We see God didn’t use any indirect agent; He did it Himself. That’s direct control!

All disasters have a source. We should not try to explain away uncontrollable suffering in our life, nor the reason why all doors seem to be slamming in our face. We need not attempt to explain away unusual weather-related catastrophes and economic woes. We need not explain away disasters such as 9/11 in the US or the 2008 attacks in Mumbai by pointing fingers at one another. We need not blame anyone but ourselves. We need not shift blame to industries for contributing to the so-called global warming. God is in charge, not global warming! Could it be that the Lord is trying to get our attention through all these disastrous events in our lives? “When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” (Amos 3:6 NIV; see also Exodus 4:11).

Meditate on these questions:

- Who creates tornadoes?
- Who controls tornadoes, God or Satan?
- If a tornado passes through our town with a devastating result, who then can we say is behind it?

If we say Satan, that would be a mistake in logical thinking! In reality, if God created it, if God is in control, we can affirm that all disasters are the handiwork of God directly or indirectly.

Dr. H.A. Ironside said,

There are no second causes with Him. 'Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?' asks the prophet [Amos 3:6]...[Calamity] cannot come save as permitted by the Lord. And knowing that 'all things work together for good to those who love God, who are the called according to his purpose,' why should the believer either doubt or fear? Waves may roll high, stormy winds may beat tempestuously, all to which the heart had clung may seem to be swept away, but Christ abides unchanged and unchangeable, the everlasting portion of those who trust His grace.²⁶

* * *

Before we close this chapter, we need to point out that not every disaster in life is a result of disobedience, as we saw in Job's experience. In his case, God gave Satan access to the "fire of God" (Job 1:16) and His wind (Job 1:19), so that he might use them as weapons of disaster against Job. But Job passed his test, remained faithful to God in disaster, and was restored twofold. There are no accidents in God's plan, and Satan would be jobless without a renewable—and revocable—case-by-case work permit from the Sovereign God.

In the wake of disaster, all we are left with is reflection. The main question we should ask ourselves in the aftermath of disaster is this: what message is God endeavoring to convey to us?

7 | Decoding God's Message in Disaster

And for many days Israel was without the true God and without a teaching priest and without law. But in their distress they turned to the Lord God of Israel, and they sought Him, and He let them find Him. In those times there was no peace to him who went out or to him who came in, for many disturbances afflicted all the inhabitants of the lands. Nation was crushed by nation, and city by city, for God troubled them with every kind of distress (2 Chronicles 15:3-6).

Every disaster in life is coded with a message that requires discernment, reflection, and wisdom to decode. Disaster is a signal from God: it is His warning bell.

In Ezekiel's day, the people knew of a similar system:

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Son of man, speak to the sons of your people and say to them, "If I [God] bring a sword upon a land [a disaster], and the people of the land take one man from among them and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword [of disaster] coming upon the land and blows on the trumpet [or rings a bell] and warns the people, then he who hears the sound of the trumpet [or bell] and does not take warning, and a sword comes and takes him away, his blood will be on his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning; his blood will be on himself. But had he taken warning [taken God's warning

bell seriously], he would have delivered his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and [God's] sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand” (Ezekiel 33:1-6).

Before we comment on this passage, we need to consider the obvious challenge of decoding the message of a bell. When I was growing up, we had a bell in our village, which served four purposes. It was used as a daily time clock and was also used to call people for worship. It was used in an emergency to quickly gather the men to the village square. Finally, it was used as a mourning bell when there was a death in the village. The challenge for us was being able to decipher the meaning of every bell. I learned to listen carefully because different patterns of rings signaled different events. For instance, if there was a death, one would hear a dozen rings at intervals of ninety seconds each. Soon, everyone would be asking, “Who died?”

God in His infinite wisdom uses the bell of disaster to send us a message. We hear it but are we decoding it? Often we don't because...

- we are too busy to pause and decipher each pattern;
- we are quick to explain away God's warning bells, attributing disasters to anything other than God; or
- we often tend to completely ignore the ringing.

The purpose of this book is to sound a warning to us all. Every communicator of Bible truth ought to take notice of God's Word through Ezekiel. We are responsible for sounding God's alarm in our generation! As Christian ambassadors, believers are responsible to share God's message with those in

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our periphery. We are responsible to let people know that “the justice of God cannot sleep forever.”

Nothing ever happens in the universe apart from God's sovereign will and purpose. Every disaster, no matter the magnitude, has an embedded code of God's signature (Amos 3:6). Every disaster, from a car wreck to a tornado or to major events like Hurricane Katrina and 9/11, is a messenger from on high. That's what the Bible says! “He makes the winds His messengers, Flaming fire His ministers” (Psalm 104:4).

Recipients of God's Messages

To whom does God send His messages? His messages reach three types of people: the unsaved, the reckless believers, and God's obedient children. No one is exempt. The unsaved, the carnal and the spiritual all share in one form of disaster or another. Let's take a look.

Unbelievers

God—in His infinite mercy, longsuffering, righteousness, and justice—has a limit to how far He can let us go in our evil ways before He rains judgment on us. He extends to us ample grace before judgment. However, if we continue to ignore His grace, sooner or later, His justice takes over, “The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, And the one who loves violence His soul hates. Upon the wicked He will rain snares; Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup” (Psalm 11:5-6).

The embedded message from God is that we need to examine our own lives in light of eternity. In this instance, the warning bell is telling us, “Time is running out; make peace with God through Jesus Christ before it's too late!” It's telling us to heed His message of hope through the gospel and thus pursue the spiritual path of study and application of sound Bible teaching.

Scriptures abound with references to people who have embraced God's grace through disaster. King Nebuchadnezzar is a perfect example of those whom the Lord humbled through the embedded message of disaster. God used insanity, which left him totally devastated in the wilderness for seven years until he acknowledged God's grace (Daniel 4:28-37).

Saul of Tarsus, before his conversion, is another example. Over and over he ignored God's invitation to embrace His grace through faith alone in Christ alone (Acts 7:1-8:3). Saul stiffened his neck until the Lord struck him from his horse and blinded him with the light of His glory. This compelled him to change his course (Acts 9:1-16). That's grace!

If disaster is the only thing that gets our attention, then there is no better way for God to convey His love toward unbelievers than through disasters piled one on top of another. Why is that? If God can get your attention through overwhelming difficulties, which in turn causes you to put your trust in His Son, He has done the most for you. He has saved you from the lake of fire for all eternity.

But there are those who experience disasters, one after another, and still refuse to obey God, Pharaoh being an example.

There's no reason for you to resist the Almighty, to continue in disobedience until it's too late, as the rich man did in Luke 16:19-31. Gambling with your eternal destiny is the worst kind of gamble, period! Once death catches up with you, without Christ, your hope of spending eternity with God is forever lost.

Don't let anyone deceive you by telling you that hope awaits if you should die without Christ. That's a false hope! Scripture is crystal clear on this: "And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Reckless Believers

I deliberately chose the word *reckless*. We wreck our lives when we ignore our spiritual life. We wreck our lives when we live a mediocre spiritual life. We wreck our lives when all we do is show up in a Bible study and take good notes but never allow God's Word to influence our thinking and action.

The apostle Paul had a word of caution for Timothy (and us), saying,

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, *reckless*, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women [exploitation] weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth [to the point of allowing the Word to influence their thinking] (2 Timothy 3:1-7, emphasis added).

Sooner or later God will say, "Enough is enough; it's time for a wake-up call of disaster!" "And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges [afflicts] every son whom He receives'" (Hebrews 12:5-6).

What better way to illustrate these passages than to consult the story of the prodigal son. The Bible tells us that the prodigal son began his journey as a son in a wealthy family and, through

bad decisions, wrecked his life. Pleasure was more important to him than his relationship with his father. This caused him to rebel against his father's daily instruction and care. His choice of high living drove him out into the world, where pleasure abounded. God sent disaster in his reckless lifestyle until He backed him into a corner (Luke 15:14-16).

But when he came to his senses [through reflection], he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men"' (Luke 15:17-19).

We know that the prodigal son represents a believer. He is a son in the family, and furthermore, he knows that he has broken fellowship with his father. He exemplifies what a reckless believer is all about. A disaster was God's chosen way to show His displeasure with his reckless lifestyle (Psalm 119:67, 71).

God's Obedient Children

These are believers in Christ who diligently learn and apply God's Word daily, to His glory. To them, living is for Christ and dying is for Christ (Philippians 1:21; Romans 14:8). However they are not disaster proof. They are not free from suffering. But they never view disaster as divine discipline, but rather as a blessing in disguise. An obedient servant knows within, as Job did, that his suffering is not as a result of sin. Suffering for obedient children is not regarded as discipline (James 1:2). They consider it an honor that the sovereign, omnipotent God has considered them worthy to be strengthened through suffering, that they may learn how to fully rely on God and be of service to Him.

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In suffering, these obedient believers are trained in how to maximize God's divine provisions of His Word and the fruit of His Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Through suffering, they are trained to be proficient in handling the shield of faith (Ephesians 6:13-16; Hebrews 5:13-14). That's grace disguised as suffering.

Can we think of anyone in the Bible who best fits this profile of a righteous one who suffered? Job, of course. He is described as a man of spiritual integrity, whose spiritual life was unequalled (Job 1:1, 8); and yet, with the exception of the God-Man Jesus Christ, Job experienced disaster like no other.

What is the essence of suffering for God's obedient children? Scripture has the answer: "Although He [Jesus Christ] was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey [trust in] Him the source of eternal salvation" (Hebrews 5:8-9). Suffering, then, is part of God's amazing plan for His children. He uses suffering to aid us in developing spiritual capacity for abundant blessing (Hebrews 5:9 compared with Philippians 2:8-11).

It is hard for us to imagine that the righteous One, Jesus Christ, who had no iota of sin in Him, still went through the furnace of suffering. Every growing believer experiences suffering, as Jesus did, to learn obedience and develop capacity for blessing (Philippians 1:29).

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

God's ultimate purpose is to mature us. He wants His very best for His obedient children (Psalm 34:10; 84:11). This cannot be emphasized enough: suffering is God's vehicle that propels the obedient Christian forward in his spiritual life and sets him on the path of blessing. That explains why Job said,

“But He knows the way I take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold [purified]” (Job 23:10). Suffering made Job shine brighter than before, to the glory of the Almighty (Job 42:10-17). “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved [tested and passed], he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (James 1:12).

Two Kinds of Suffering

This raises an important question: How does one tell the difference between divine discipline and suffering for blessing?

Scripture has the answer. Divine discipline makes one totally uncomfortable. It comes with unbearable pain. All spiritual tranquility is removed. Our reckless lifestyle has removed us from divine power. We have no peace, no joy, and no patience—the by-products of the Holy Spirit—to help us deal with the disaster in our lives. Above all, we don't study or apply the truth in our soul. We cannot think in terms of biblical principles. We are miserable! Tragically, some have even ended their lives because of the intensity of such suffering.

But disaster that is tailored for blessing does not cause havoc in the soul; nor does it hamper a believer's inner tranquility. He has access to joy, peace, patience, and longsuffering (Galatians 5:22-23). These keep the believer vibrant in a time of testing.

Let's look at two believers who endured multiple disasters in their lifetimes: one as discipline and the other for blessing.

King David: Suffering for Discipline

We know about King David's ultimate spiritual failure, how his sins of adultery, hypocrisy, and murder ruptured his fellowship with God. Eventually, God in His grace got his attention through unbearable suffering, as David himself explained:

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When I kept silent about my sin [when I ignored it], my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me [with divine discipline]; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer [no spiritual energy] (Psalm 32:3-4).

O Lord, rebuke me not in Your wrath, And chasten me not in Your burning anger. For Your arrows [of disaster] have sunk deep into me, And Your hand has pressed down on me. There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation; There is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities are gone over my head; As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me. My wounds grow foul and fester Because of my folly. I am bent over and greatly bowed down; I go mourning all day long. For my loins are filled with burning, And there is no soundness in my flesh. I am benumbed and badly crushed [by the finger of God]; I groan because of the agitation of my heart [unbearable suffering]...My heart throbs, my strength fails me; And the light of my eyes, even that has gone from me. My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague; And my kinsmen stand afar off. Those who seek my life lay snares for me; and those who seek to injure me have threatened destruction, And they devise treachery all day long (Psalm 38:1-9, 11-12).

This is a perfect illustration of unbearable suffering. King David, like the prodigal son, had no spiritual power available to him. The pipeline of God's Word to his soul was blocked. What a contrast! The same person who used biblical thinking when he met Goliath face-to-face (1 Samuel 17:47) became a totally different person. God in His infinite wisdom sent David a message through suffering.

Job: Suffering for Blessing

What about Job? His suffering, unlike David's, was suffering for blessing. But how did he handle it? With poise! With divine-viewpoint thinking. Let us examine some of his doctrinal thinking when disaster hit him hard. After a long list of disasters were reported. Job said,

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

“Though He slay me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15).

“But He knows the way I take; When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held fast to His path; I have kept His way and not turned aside. I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food” (Job 23:10-12).

“And as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26).

What an obedient believer! What a demonstration of the dynamic power of the Word of God, even in dark times! What a comfort to know, as Job did, that though God tries His obedient children through disaster, He will see them through when His purpose is completed. That's exactly why James exhorts us to “Consider it all joy” (James 1:2).

We have just studied how God communicates to all of us by way of disaster. We are now ready to examine national disasters to see what kind of warning bell they serve as in a nation.

8

The Warning Bell of National Disaster

Just as it takes many trees to make a forest, it takes many people to form a nation. The foundation of a nation begins with a husband and wife, builds to a family, a community, and eventually becomes a nation. Therefore, the status of the husband and wife affect the entire family and their nation. Unhealthy marriages become a catalyst that kicks off a chain reaction—which if unchecked, will result in a national breakdown.

This explains why God takes marriage seriously. “Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Hebrews 13:4). That’s the Word of God, and God keeps His Word! Tom Elliff, the former Southern Baptist Convention president said, “A society that doesn’t value the institution of marriage is a society headed toward destruction, which can already be noted in the way many children from broken homes perform once outside those homes.”²⁷

This is true of any nation! Marriage is not the focal point of our study. We simply mention marriage to demonstrate that a bad marriage inevitably brews turmoil in a family, which in turn brings turmoil to the entire society. When there’s a breakdown in marriage, children pay heavily!

While a married couple is the foundation of a family, children are the future of a society. No wonder God takes the issue of raising children equally as seriously as marriage. King Solomon tells us: “Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when

he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). We can either take on the duty of training our children now and have a blessed harvest in the future or we can neglect our duty and pay later. We reap what we sow. Tragically, it appears that many parents are already in the harvest field with tears.

Home is where a nation is conceived, incubated, hatched, and nurtured. It is the place for parents to rear children properly. The state of children is important inside and outside the family. Often we underestimate the consequences of unruly children in a community. But look at what is happening in America today. Untrained children rule everywhere. They rule at home, in schools, and in our society. School violence is just one manifestation. Who was not in shock in April 2007, when thirty-two young students lay dead at Virginia Tech because a gunman went on a rampage? What about other school shootings, from Columbine to Sandy Hook? Unruly children out of control. Those are just incidents in schools; what about violence on streets, in shopping malls, in movie theaters and other places? Other countries have their own tragic stories to tell.

Innocent lives are wasted daily, which makes a strong case for divine judgment! Undisciplined, naughty children can develop into evil terrors in a nation, which in turn beg for national discipline in the form of disasters from God’s justice.

When it comes to equipping children to become well-mannered adults of tomorrow, home is the primary training ground. All others, such as local churches, schools, and military bases— though equally essential—are merely field camps. A child who is deprived of discipline and training in the home is always at the mercy of God’s grace, as we all are. In essence, a delinquent child is a time bomb that only God can defuse. This is accomplished when the individual accepts the free gift of God, through faith alone in Christ alone, and subsequently avails himself of the teaching of the life-changing Word of God (Romans 12:2).

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Chuck Colson, who founded Prison Fellowship and became intimately connected with those incarcerated, states, “We live in an era when families have broken down, and busy parents neglect their duties...The great criminologist James Q. Wilson says all his studies have led to the same conclusion: crime begins when children are not given adequate moral training, when they do not develop internal restraints on impulsive behavior.”²⁸

Home Sweet Home

Home is where children are trained to be productive members of society—where parents sacrifice time and money to train their children in order to provide peace, both at home and in society (Proverbs 29:17). Children mirror what they learn by observation. Actions are the most powerful teaching aid in a child’s world.

Parental conduct is the first gospel children know before they are able to read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. What are we teaching our children by our actions and our words? Are we teaching them anything worthwhile? Whatever we sow in our children, that we shall reap at harvest time (Galatians 6:7).

God has provided a system for order and peace. He has ordained parents as the head of the household. He has also given a divine mandate to children: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12, Ephesians 6:2). This is the only one of the ten commandments with a promise.

Why is that? Because children are the parents of tomorrow, the hope of a nation. We know that incorrigible children who remain in a state of anarchy are without hope and without a future. God’s justice stands ready to shower blessing on the children who adhere to His mandates and are obedient to their parents. Likewise, His justice is ever ready to lower the boom of

disaster on those who disregard His Word. “He who curses his father or his mother, his lamp will go out in time of darkness” (Proverbs 20:20). “When the wicked increase, transgression increases; But the righteous will see their fall” (Proverbs 29:16). This is the Word of God!

Look around, do you see any delinquent children who are doing remarkably well in life, especially in difficult times? No. Delinquent children have no future, apart from God’s grace, and difficult times come as punishment to a society filled with incorrigible children.

Why is America suffering with unruly children who are causing horrific events in society? Recently three young men ages 15, 16, and 17 shot and killed a 23-year-old “just for fun” because they were bored.²⁹

One merely needs to look at the divorce rate. Broken marriages make the task of rearing obedient children very difficult. That’s one reason God said, “I hate divorce” (Malachi 2:16). God knows the devastating impact of divorce on children.

Divorce Rate in America

The divorce rate in America today has reached an all-time high. Tom Elliff asserted that “America has become saturated in a ‘divorce culture.’”³⁰ Some researchers believe that more than 50 percent of all marriages in America end up in divorce. One researcher went a step further in cataloguing the divorce rate statistically: “First time married, 50 percent; second time, 67 percent; and third time, 74 percent.”³¹ It was even broken down to a daily average, which amounts to about 3,571 divorces.³² That’s 3,571 shattered homes in America every day!

Elliff went on to say, “Any breakup of a marriage is a funeral of a home, which is something more Christians need to take seriously...It’s one thing to grieve over 3,000 people who died in the World Trade Center, and I did grieve over that, but

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if that day was like every other day in America, more than that many homes died.”³³

Who can argue that disaster in marriage is anything less than disaster in the rearing of children? Our children are casualties of shattered homes. Beyond broken marriage, 41% of children in the U.S. are born out of wedlock and for women under 30 the statistic rises to 50%.³⁴ When we add all this up, we can clearly trace one cause of national disaster.

But there's hope when children are brought up in the fear of God.

God—the Center of Life

A profound knowledge of the Creator-God is the beginning of a well-balanced life. When God is *not* the center, things fall apart.

King Solomon, at one point, had a spiritual relapse, devoting his time and money to a frantic search for happiness, but all to no avail. When he recovered from his reckless and costly experiment, his words of advice were sobering: “The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person” (Ecclesiastes 12:11-13).

The Psalmist said, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do His commandments; His praise endures forever” (Psalm 111:10). There can be no debate about this! A child who is brought up in the fear of God is a child who will have a long life and find favor with God and man; he will prosper even in hard times (Proverbs 3:13-24 compared with Psalm 1:1-3).

God knew the impact of His Word on children: that's why God commanded, through Moses:

You [parents] shall therefore impress these words of mine on your heart and on your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall teach them to your sons, talking of them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road and when you lie down and when you rise up [principle of repetition]. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates [so that they can be read over and over], so that your days and the days of your sons may be multiplied on the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens remain above the earth (Deuteronomy 11:18-21).

When God is removed from a home, it will ultimately cause disaster in that household, and its ripple effect will resound out into the streets of society. A non-God-fearing home is a time bomb waiting to explode. This brings up the issue of the church in society.

The Church

A Bible-based church is not just a meeting place; it is a house for teaching God's life-giving Word, so vital for the guidance of a society. Not all local churches meet the biblical criteria. A church should be a place of inculcation and reinforcement, which are basic principles of teaching.

A church should reinforce the fundamental biblical truth that parents teach their children at home. It goes beyond the basics to advanced truth, which is essential for healthy living and productivity in a society (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Simply stated, a *Bible-based* church is another training camp for a wholesome community, in that it teaches its audience that a relationship with God is the key for spiritual living, harmonious rapport in marriage, friendship, and tolerance.

The Impact of the Church in Rome

Historically we can trace the role of the Church all the way back to the rise and fall of Rome. Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) wrote, "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman Empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom."³⁵

During this time period (96 to 180 AD), the Church was on fire for the Lord! Churches of this post-apostolic era were grounded in the Scriptures and produced spiritual-minded believers who shaped the golden age of the Roman world, portraying the principle: "Righteousness exalts a nation" (Proverbs 14:34).

Further, it has been remarked with more ingenuity than truth that the virgin purity of the Church was never violated by schism or heresy before the reign of Trajan or Hadrian, about one hundred years after the death of Christ. We may observe with much more propriety that during that period, the disciples of the Messiah were indulged in a freer latitude both of faith and practice than has ever been allowed in succeeding ages.³⁶

When the church at Rome lost its influential power on society, the spiritual integrity holding up the empire went with it. Rome gradually declined and eventually collapsed altogether. Rome did not come about in a day, nor did its fall. The same is true today. When churches implode, homes and society fragment and eventually destroy a nation from within.

Consider the Church in Great Britain

Great Britain has a similar history. When Christianity came to British soil, it arrived with the gospel and the Latin Bible. That soon changed. In 1538, “Henry VIII issued a proclamation ordering ‘one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English’ to be placed in every church in England.”³⁷ He also ordered that it be placed where all could read it, ordering the clergy “that you shall discourage no man from reading or hearing of the said Bible but you shall expressly stir, provoke and exhort every person to read the same.”³⁸

With the translation of the Bible into English and its adoption as the highest authority for an autonomous English Church, the history, traditions, and moral law of the Hebrew nation became part of the English culture; became for a period of three centuries the most powerful single influence on that culture...It became the national epic of Britain...Everyone knew the Bible. In many homes, it was the only book in the house and so was read over and over until its words and images and characters and stories became as familiar as bread. Children learned long chapters by heart.³⁹

What a period in the history of Great Britain! Christianity’s impact on the nation, and the entire world, was unequalled. It changed British dominance and power in the world. Its sphere of influence became so great that it was said that the sun never set on the British Empire. But again, the death of the Church in Great Britain was the defining moment that ended the greatness of the British Empire.

Death of the Church in Great Britain

Britain has been in spiritual turmoil for quite some time now. A headline in *USA Today* captured my attention: “Is God dead in

Europe?”⁴⁰ The article went on to say, “Western Europe, the cradle of modern Christianity, has become a ‘post-Christian society’ in which the ruling class and cultural leaders are anti-religious or ‘Christophobic.’”

The same newspaper released a survey of church attendance both in Europe and America. The two are almost running neck-in-neck! Thirty-three percent of [Christians] in America say that they attend church service at least once a week, and in Europe, 32 percent claim to attend the same more than once a month.⁴¹

Sadly, Britain has detached itself from the spiritual glue that held the empire together for centuries. In 2006 our missionary team was disheartened by what we saw as we walked through the streets of London. Some of the great gothic churches had been converted into condominiums, entertainment venues, and offices, or even mosques, Hindu temples, and carwashes! Imagine, the God-ordained buildings that once housed mighty men of God are now being converted into homes and offices for the “post-Christian society.”

“Is God dead in Europe?” If so, what effect does that have on England? What about America? Is God about to be declared dead in America? If so, not without consequences.

Perhaps this explains many unprecedented national disasters. They are God’s warning bells. No individual or nation can expel God from their lives and at the same time expect blessing from God. “The propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself [God] has ordained” [George Washington].⁴²

The Role of School in a Society

School should be a training camp for the education of children, where their orientation to authority is fine tuned. It is not just a place to learn math and writing skills but also manners and

proper conduct for the good of students and society. To accomplish all this, students must first be taught to respect their Creator-God, for therein is the beginning of success (Proverbs 15:33).

The founding fathers of America were keenly aware of the importance of making God the center of students' lives. They overwhelmingly endorsed the *McGuffey's Reader* by William Holmes McGuffey (1800-1873) as a cornerstone of learning in all schools. His work had such a profound effect on students that he was considered "the schoolmaster of the nation." His textbook was "the mainstay in public education in America until 1920. As of 1963, 125 million copies had been sold, making it one of the most widely used and influential textbooks of all time."⁴³

In the foreword, McGuffey wrote, "The Christian religion is the religion of our country. From it are derived our prevalent notions of the character of God, the great moral governor of the universe. On its doctrines are founded the peculiarities of our free institutions."⁴⁴ McGuffey's book taught students the importance of prayer, the consequences of alcoholism, and much more. His book left an indelible mark on students across the nation for over a century.

Prior to his work, the Continental Congress had, in 1782, authorized that Bibles be printed as "a neat edition of the Holy Scriptures for the use of schools."⁴⁵ Students were taught the role of God in life: the Bible was their manual for the true meaning and purpose of life.

What was the initial purpose of our now prestigious educational institutions in America? Harvard University, the first institution (1636), was founded for the primary purpose of training an educated clergy. Its students' handbook had this rule: "Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, John 17:3 and therefore to

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lay Christ in the bottome, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning. And seeing the Lord only giveth wisdom, Let every one seriously set himself by prayer in secret to seeke it of him Proverbs 2, 3.”⁴⁶

Yale University, founded in 1701, had an almost identical policy for its students. The requirements for the students included: “All scholars shall live religious, godly, and blameless lives according to the rules of God’s Word, diligently reading the Holy Scriptures, the fountain of light and truth; and constantly attend upon all the duties of religion, both in public and secret.”⁴⁷ Princeton University, founded in 1746, was no exception. The university’s official motto was “Under God’s Power She Flourishes.”⁴⁸ We should note that 106 of the first 108 schools in America were founded on the Christian faith.⁴⁹

When any learning institution deprives students of exposure to the knowledge of the true God, sooner or later it will produce students who will contribute to the downfall of the nation. Consider public schools in America today.

Respect for God’s Word in a society will not make that society perfect. I wholly agree with Francis A. Schaeffer, a great evangelical thinker of the twentieth century: “People have never carried out the biblical teaching perfectly. Nonetheless, wherever the biblical teaching has gone, even though it has always been marred by men, it not only has told of an open approach to God through the work of Christ, but also has brought peripheral results in society, including political institutions.”⁵⁰ He added, “To whatever degree a society allows the teaching of the Bible to bring forth its natural conclusions, it is able to have form and freedom in society and government.”⁵¹

* * *

In summary, the cumulative causes of national breakdown in a society are:

- indifference to God's Word;
- high rate of marriage collapse;
- uncontrolled child delinquency;
- apathy toward the local church; and
- diminished values in school systems.

In response, God sends a message of warning to a nation that goes this route showing His dissatisfaction with its way of life. He sends warning bells of disaster via terrorism, financial troubles, earthquakes, and extreme weather including tornadoes, hurricanes and devastating floods.

These are just a few of His messengers of national disaster. We cannot afford to ignore the infallible Word of God:

Behold, the Lord has a strong and mighty agent; As a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction, Like a storm of mighty overflowing waters, He has cast it down to the earth with His hand (Isaiah 28:2).

Therefore, thus says the Lord God, 'I will make a violent wind break out in My wrath. There will also be in My anger a flooding rain and hailstones to consume it in wrath' (Ezekiel 13:13).

If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it? (Amos 3:6).

To further illustrate these points, the next chapter will discuss national disaster in relation to God's sovereignty.

9

God's Warning Bell in Judah

To understand how God deals with nations, we will examine how God dealt with His chosen people. We shall clearly see that God rules supreme and understand the principle that Jesus Christ controls history. This chapter shall also serve as a foundation for the interpretation of the justice of God as He administers justice nation by nation.

We begin by examining God's love, mercy, longsuffering, and justice through Jeremiah, who said,

The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, until there was no remedy. Therefore He [God] brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He [God] gave them all into his hand (2 Chronicles 36:15-17).

Out of His kindness, God chose the Jews and made them His own special people. Israel, though a small nation, carried with her a unique trademark of sovereign ownership by God. Israel, like no other nation, has a special standing with God. That is still true today and continues into the future.

In Scripture, they are called a “holy people unto the Lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 7:6 KJV), “the apple of His eye” (Zechariah 2:8), “a people for His own possession” (Deuteronomy 7:6), “a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6), “ministers of our God” (Isaiah 61:6 KJV), and “like a wife” (Isaiah 54:6).

Israel is compared to a wife, which explains why God takes anti-Semitism personally (Genesis 12:3) and explains why God’s wrath falls on any person or nation that hates her. As a loving husband, wouldn’t you take it personally if someone abused your wife? I would; God does too, as revealed in Numbers 24:9, “Blessed is everyone who blesses you, And cursed is everyone who curses you.”

The Jews should be honored for being a special people unto God, for being the channel whereby God revealed Himself to the human race. They were the custodians of divine revelation (Romans 9:4-5). Whatever we know about the true God of the universe, we have come to know because of the Jewish Bible. In studying it, we learn about God’s essence and discover that He is just and righteous in all His ways (Psalm 145:17). It becomes clear to us that God, not “Mother Nature” or any other agent, is the supreme superintendent of every disaster in life.

A brief history of the Jews is worthy of our attention. We will examine their rise from bondage in Egypt, the era of their golden age, and their exile—back into bondage.

Israel’s Rise from Bondage in Egypt

God’s people were liberated from Egypt in 1441 BC, after God wrought ten powerful miracles, the last being the death of every firstborn in Egypt (Exodus 12:29-31). God, not “Mother Nature” or some kind of disease epidemic, was responsible for the death of every firstborn in Egypt. Scripture dismisses any possible confusion as to who might be responsible: “Now it came about at midnight that the Lord struck all the firstborn in

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the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of cattle” (Exodus 12:29).

What if one morning we woke up only to hear in the news that every firstborn in our land was dead? Whom would we say is responsible? Read the passage one more time. “Now it came about at midnight that the Lord struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt.” Scripture never shrinks from crediting disasters to the omnipotent sovereign God. We shouldn't shrink either. When disasters occur we should ask what kind of message God is sending us, not who is responsible.

The Father-God called His children, the Israelites, out of bondage and made them into a nation. He established a system of law and order to govern them and keep them from self-destruction. He spelled out His blessings for their obedience to His Law:

Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord your God: Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country...Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl (Deuteronomy 28:1-3, 5).

On the other hand, curses were promised for disobedience:

However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed [economic disaster] (Deuteronomy 28:15-17 NIV).

He continued:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity [disaster]; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants (Deuteronomy 30:15-19).

God has spoken. The burden of faithfulness to His Word is on His shoulders. God tells us in Jeremiah that He is watching over His Word to ensure its fulfillment (Jeremiah 1:12). The implication then is that God's justice is ready to respond to enforce His commands as spelled out in Deuteronomy 28:1-5 and 28:15-17. His justice stands on guard. If the people of Israel choose to obey, God will bless them, and if they choose to disobey He will curse them.

The same is true for us, for everything on earth is His (Psalm 24:1). God is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He does not show any partiality (Romans 2:11). God cannot treat us differently. In other words, He manifests His justice to the entire world with equity. Understanding this will give us much-needed insight to interpreting historical trends. It will help us understand disasters. Moreover, the context will leave us no room to doubt the source of all disasters, both personal and national.

The Rise of Israel's Golden Age

A brief history is needed in order to appreciate God's grace toward Israel. We have already noted Israel's emancipation from slavery at which time she became a priest-nation unto God. A careful scrutiny of Scripture reveals a rugged road of ups and downs in her history. The book of Judges in particular reflects the commands of Deuteronomy 28:1-5 and 28:15-17. This book recorded a chaotic period in Israel's early history. Again and again they rebelled against God's Law, and He responded as per His injunction:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt so that you would not be their slaves, and I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you: I [God; no one else] will appoint over you a *sudden terror*, consumption and fever that will waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you shall sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies will eat it up. I will set My face against you so that you will be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee when no one is pursuing you (Leviticus 26:13-17, emphasis added).

God's resolve to discipline them if they should disobey His mandates did nothing to dissuade them. Over and over they rebelled against God and His sovereign rule. In their rebellious attitude to theocratic rule they demanded a human king like other nations (1 Samuel 8:1-5). Imagine the folly and arrogance of trading the God of the universe for a human king as your ruler. That was their final manifestation of apathy toward God. This demand was a turning point in Israel's history.

But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to judge us.' And Samuel prayed to the Lord. The Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them. Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day—in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also' (1 Samuel 8:6-8).

So, God appointed Saul, the Benjaminite, to be the first king of Israel. This proved to be a disastrous experience for both Saul and his subjects. Saul was spiritually unprepared, and so were the people of Israel. He could not stir them toward God because he himself was not going in God's direction. Consequently, his rule ended tragically.

So Saul died for his trespass which he committed against the Lord, because of the word of the Lord which he did not keep; and also because he asked counsel of a medium, making inquiry of it, and did not inquire of the Lord. Therefore He [God alone] killed him and turned the kingdom to David the son of Jesse (1 Chronicles 10:13-14).

Israel celebrated the birth of their monarchy, yet Saul failed to lead the people back to God. Then David, "*a man after [God's] own heart*" (1 Samuel 13:14) came to the throne. He was a spiritual giant. He set the bar of obedience to God's Word beyond the reach of his contemporaries. He was a reference point for other kings who followed in his spiritual footsteps. He was constantly on God's radar for "the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth, that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His" (2 Chronicles 16:9).

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This verse brings to mind the famous words of Henry Varley that so inspired Dwight L. Moody, "The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to Him."⁵²

David's obedience can be contrasted to Saul's failure. David led the nation back to God, and God rewarded him. "One of Saul's basic mistakes had been his insensitivity to Israel's religious institutions, particularly the central shrine and priesthood. But David grasped the importance of Israel's spiritual heritage and sought to perpetuate and promote it. Israel could not have been truly united unless its political leader was also its religious leader. [By bringing the ark, long neglected by Saul,] to Jerusalem and [establishing it in a tent home, David] made his city the religious as well as political capital [a] master stroke [which] greatly enhanced his people's loyalty to him."⁵³

"Righteousness exalts a nation" (Proverbs 14:34). Simply, Israel's spiritual renewal combined with David's spiritual wisdom spiraled the nation to an unprecedented height, generally referred to as Israel's Golden Age. David's military conquests were unparalleled. "The most powerful kingdom in Western Asia, Israel's borders stretched from the desert to the Mediterranean, and from the Gulf of Aqaba to the outskirts of Hamath on the Orontes."⁵⁴

In David's old age, his son Solomon, who succeeded him, came into the spotlight. As a youth he was spiritually well-grounded in his home (1 Kings 2:1-4; 3:3). He came to the throne when the time was right. His father for forty years had "forged Judah and Israel into a military entity able to dominate its neighbors."⁵⁵ Solomon joined in and for another forty years took the nation on a path of "mercantile enterprise bringing unprecedented wealth and fame."⁵⁶ David, followed by Solomon forged a unique monarchy. It was a role model for centuries in Israel's history, but trouble was on the horizon.

The Road Back to Bondage

Israel split into two nations and each ended in captivity, in exile. One went quickly and the other more slowly, but both deserted God and both returned into bondage.

Prior to its division, the nation of Israel had already begun to experience spiritual decline. Solomon made a costly mistake. He disobeyed God's Law (Exodus 23:31-33) and married foreign women (1 Kings 11:1-3). God's mandate was meant to be a protection for Solomon for ultimately these foreign wives lured him into worship of their false gods (1 Kings 11:2-7). This failure brought about decisive action from God with lasting impact on the nation.

Now the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord had commanded. So the Lord said to Solomon, 'Because you have done this, and you have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant' (1 Kings 11:9-11).

The Lord fulfilled His Word. Immediately after the death of Solomon, the stage was set for the split of the nation Israel (2 Chronicles 10:16-18). A civil war ultimately split the nation into two opposing kingdoms: Israel and Judah, Israel being the northern kingdom and Judah the southern.

The Fall of the Northern Kingdom

Once the nation was divided into two, the northern kingdom retained the national name of Israel under the leadership of Jeroboam, and the southern kingdom was referred to as

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Judah. We shall briefly examine the northern kingdom's attitude toward God's injunction and God's response to their apathy.

Why did Israel fail?
Scripture tells us,

Now this [Israel's fall] came about, because the sons of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up from the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and they had feared [revered] other gods...The sons of Israel did things secretly which were not right against the Lord their God. Moreover, they built for themselves high places [for idolatry] in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. They set for themselves sacred pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree...They served idols, concerning which the Lord had said to them, 'You shall not do this thing' (2 Kings 17:7, 9-10, 12).

They had departed from God. What could be expected next? The Bible tells us that grace comes before judgment. "Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah through all His prophets and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments, My statutes according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants the prophets'" (2 Kings 17:13).

But God's warning was to no avail (2 Kings 17:14-17). Therefore, disaster for Israel was on the horizon. God raised Assyria, the most powerful nation in the world at that time (Isaiah 19:24), and used them to remove the people of the northern kingdom from their land in 721 BC.

"So the Lord was very angry with Israel [northern kingdom] and removed them from His sight; none was left except the tribe of Judah...Until the Lord removed Israel from His sight, as He spoke through all His servants the prophets So Israel was carried

away into exile from their own land to Assyria until this day” (2 Kings 17:18-23). God keeps His Word!

What was the reason for Assyria's victory over the northern kingdom of Israel? Israel's lack of manpower? No. The answer is revealed in God's sovereignty: “The Lord removed Israel from His sight.” That's exactly what the Bible says. That means all the flaming arrows of the Assyrians and their bloody swords that cut through the nation of Israel were the handiwork of God. He had blown His trumpet, and the calamity descended upon the people of Israel who were taken captive by the Assyrians. They had come full circle back into bondage.

The Decline of the Southern Kingdom

The southern kingdom too eventually went back into captivity. Their decline was slowed by periods of revival. Twenty kings sat on the throne of Judah after the death of Solomon. The first was his son Rehoboam and the last Zedekiah. The northern kingdom lived for 210 years (931-721 BC) and Judah for 325 (931-606 BC).⁵⁷ Judah outlived the northern kingdom by over a century. Why? Their *spiritual* life! The northern kingdom turned her back on God and sunk deeper and deeper into apostasy until there was no remedy but exile. Judah had a series of recoveries from their spiritual decline and thus experienced a measure of God's grace. God never takes pleasure in the destruction of anyone. He wishes that all should abandon their evil ways and seek Him (Ezekiel 33:11).

There is a connection between obedience to God's mandates and blessing as well as between disobedience and disaster. In Judah there were less than half a dozen obedient kings—the rest were anything but. The disobedient took the nation into spiritual darkness, which brought chaos and discomfort, while the obedient brought enlightenment, reformation, and a spark of spiritual awakening to their nation, which turned the country from chaos to tranquility.

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Judah eventually declined in their spiritual life to the point that they too were overrun and taken into exile as captives. The warning bell to us all is that if we follow Judah's path we could experience Judah's fate.

Now we are ready to examine a few of the kings, both the great and the evil. We begin with the first king, Rehoboam.

Rehoboam

When the kingdom of Rehoboam was established and strong, he and all Israel with him forsook the law of the Lord (2 Chronicles 12:1).

They “forsook the law of the Lord” which resulted in disaster: “And it came about in King Rehoboam's fifth year, because they had been unfaithful to the Lord, that Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem” (2 Chronicles 12: 2). Who was behind the invasion of Judah? According to the Bible it was God. “Then Shemaiah the prophet came to Rehoboam and the princes of Judah who had gathered at Jerusalem because of Shishak, and he said to them, ‘Thus says the Lord, You have forsaken Me, so I also have forsaken you to Shishak’” (2 Chronicles 12: 5). We see it was God who gave them over to their enemy.

Abijah

When Abijah sat on the throne of Judah, Jeroboam—the evil king of the northern kingdom—was still in power. The two were distinctly different in their spiritual lives. Abijah was preoccupied with the Lord (2 Chronicles 13:10-12), and Rehoboam was not (11:14-15).

Jeroboam assumed that his military edge of 800,000 men against Judah's 400,000 guaranteed victory. But he forgot King David's motto: “The battle is the Lord's” (1 Samuel 17:47).

In the heat of battle, Jeroboam's military campaign met God's upper hand.

Then the men of Judah raised a war cry, and when the men of Judah raised the war cry, then it was that God routed Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah. When the sons of Israel fled before Judah, God gave them into their hand. Abijah and his people defeated them with a great slaughter, so that 500,000 chosen men of Israel fell slain. Thus the sons of Israel were subdued at that time, and the sons of Judah conquered because they trusted in the Lord, the God of their fathers (2 Chronicles 13:15-18).

Half a million men dead in one day! God routed Jeroboam. Do we still doubt that God is behind every disaster, no matter how atrocious? That's not all. "Jeroboam did not again recover strength in the days of Abijah; and the Lord struck him and he died" (2 Chronicles 13:20).

Today, we would try to explain away such a large number of casualties and the death of Jeroboam. Time is ticking, and the immutable God is still on the throne. We need to make sure we are always on His side. If we are not we need to adjust in a hurry!

Asa

So Abijah slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city of David, and his son Asa became king in his place. The land was undisturbed for ten years during his days (2 Chronicles 14:1).

Immediately we find a connection. Ten years of peace is connected to obedience.

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Asa did good and right in the sight of the Lord his God, for he removed the foreign altars and high places, tore down the sacred pillars, cut down the Asherim, and commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers and to observe the law and the commandment. He also removed the high places and the incense altars from all the cities of Judah. And the kingdom was undisturbed under him. He built fortified cities in Judah, since the land was undisturbed, and there was no one at war with him during those years, because the Lord had given him rest (2 Chronicles 14:2-6).

The Lord kept Asa's enemies at bay for ten years. At the end of those years, the Lord permitted the powerful Ethiopian army to challenge Asa. Recall that we have already determined that not all disasters are related to spiritual failures. Here's a perfect example. "Now Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men and 300 chariots, and he came to Mareshah" (2 Chronicles 14:9). Asa was outnumbered by a ratio of almost two to one, for he had only an army of 580,000 men (2 Chronicles 14:8).

God often allows suffering or disaster to hit those who are obedient to His Word so that He might demonstrate His sufficiency in all things.

Asa turned to his God in prayer.

So Asa went out to meet him, and they drew up in battle formation in the valley of Zephathah at Mareshah. Then Asa called to the Lord his God, and said, "There is no one besides You to help in the battle between the powerful and those who have no strength; so help us, O Lord our God, for we trust in You, and in Your name have come against this multitude. O Lord, You are our God; let not man prevail against You" (2 Chronicles 14:10-11).

What a prayer from a soul saturated with God's Word! God is always faithful; consequently, in response to His Word (Psalm 50:15) "The Lord routed the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled. Asa and the people who were with him pursued them as far as Gerar; and so many Ethiopians fell that they could not recover, for they were shattered before the Lord and before His army. And they carried away very much plunder" (2 Chronicles 14:12-13). Can there be any doubt as to who handed the Ethiopians an untold number of casualties?

Jehoshaphat

Jehoshaphat was one of the finest kings in Judah's history. He was instrumental in the spiritual awakening during the turbulent years that eventually led to peace. There can be no tranquility in a nation until there is tranquility in the souls of its citizens which comes from the Word of God.

Realizing that God's Word is the life source of any people, Jehoshaphat emphasized the teaching of the Law. He employed teachers of Scripture and sent them to his people, "They taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the Lord with them; and they went throughout all the cities of Judah and taught among the people" (2 Chronicles 17:9). The result was a profound turning back to God.

We are not yet finished: "The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because"...of what? Because of his obedience to God's Word. "The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his grandfather David's earlier days and did not seek the Baals, but sought the God of his father Asa, followed His commandments, and did not act as Israel had. So the Lord established the kingdom in his control, and all Judah brought tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he had great riches and honor" (2 Chronicles 17:3-5).

God, in His sovereignty, permitted Jehoshaphat's neighboring countries to join in alliance against him. Militarily, he was

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outnumbered. What did he do? He turned to the Lord in prayer (2 Chronicles 20:3-12). God has told us that those who trust in Him will never be put to shame (Isaiah 28:16).

The Lord told Jehoshaphat not to fear, for He would fight the battle for him (2 Chronicles 20:15). God caused great confusion among the enemies of Jehoshaphat, and they fought one another until there were corpses everywhere (2 Chronicles 20:20-24). That's right—they ambushed themselves.

If such a thing were to happen today, would we somehow explain it away? How quick we are in explaining away incidents and our rationalization never includes God.

Because of the spiritual integrity of Judah under the leadership of Jehoshaphat, God gave them peace. And so we read, "And the dread of God was on all the kingdoms of the lands when they heard that the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel. So the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was at peace, for his God gave him rest on all sides" (2 Chronicles 20:29-30).

It's of paramount importance that we pause and consider all these connections so far in light of God's sovereignty. Recall that we defined sovereignty to mean that the Creator-God has absolute control of all things. He directs and superintends all events of the universe in accordance with the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11). Indeed, God is in charge. Always!

We saw in our connections the correlation between obedience and blessings and disobedience and disasters. Why then are we afraid to credit God for unusual outbursts of floods, earthquakes, terrorism, and such as punishment for our disobedience to His Word?

Jehoram

Jehoram was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem. He walked in the way of the kings of Israel, just as the house of Ahab did (for Ahab's

daughter was his wife), and he did evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Chronicles 21:5-6).

This evil connects to disaster.

Then *the Lord stirred up* against Jehoram the spirit of the Philistines and the Arabs who bordered the Ethiopians; and they came against Judah and invaded it, and carried away all the possessions found in the king's house together with his sons and his wives, so that no son was left to him except Jehoahaz, the youngest of his sons. So after all this *the Lord smote him* in his bowels with an incurable sickness. Now it came about in the course of time, at the end of two years, that his bowels came out because of his sickness and he died in great pain. And his people made no fire for him like the fire for his fathers (2 Chronicles 21:16-19, emphasis added).

Again we see God's sovereignty in operation. First, He stirred up the spirit of the Philistines and Arabs who invaded Judah and made the lives of the inhabitants miserable. That's a warning bell from Heaven. Second, "the Lord smote [the king] in his bowels with an incurable sickness." Finally, the Lord took him out: "Now it came about in the course of time, at the end of two years, that his bowels came out because of his sickness and he died in great pain."

We would do well to remember the God of Jehoram still reigns supreme. His justice is unchanging. All disasters in life are encoded with a message, and so let us be experts in decoding them. In times of calamity, let's reflect.

After the death of Joash, the youngest king in Judah's history (seven years old), the land went into spiritual darkness. God sent them warning bells through military defeats. Then, Hezekiah took the throne and brought the nation back to God.

Hezekiah

It can never be emphasized enough: Blessed is any man or nation that submits to the sovereign rule of God (Psalm 33:12). Hezekiah, the last reformer, understood the justice of God. He knew the blessings of obedience and consequences of failing to obey. Therefore, like David, he chose to obey God (2 Chronicles 29:2) and ignited a spiritual reformation in the nation.

When there was chaos in a nation, the priests were the ones to be indicted first (Malachi 1:6). Hezekiah knew what had happened in the northern kingdom and wanted to implement reformation in the southern kingdom to avert God's wrath. He challenged the people to turn back to the Lord.

Then he said to them, 'Listen to me, O Levites [servants of the Most High]. Consecrate yourselves now, and consecrate the house of the Lord, the God of your fathers, and carry the uncleanness out from the holy place. For our fathers have been unfaithful and have done evil in the sight of the Lord our God, and have forsaken Him and turned their faces away from the dwelling place of the Lord, and have turned their backs. They have also shut the doors of the porch and put out the lamps, and have not burned incense or offered burnt offerings in the holy place to the God of Israel' (2 Chronicles 29:5-7).

Right away we see the first point of connection: unfaithfulness, evil, turning from God. King Hezekiah made the connection between their spiritual condition and their national suffering:

"Therefore the wrath of the Lord was against Judah and Jerusalem, and He has made them an object of terror, of horror, and of hissing, as you see with your own eyes. For behold, our fathers have fallen by the sword, and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this" (2 Chronicles 29:8-9, emphasis added).

Hezekiah offered the solution: “Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the Lord God of Israel, that His burning anger may turn away from us” (2 Chronicles 29:10). Remember God tells us “And [if] My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

The priests responded and turned to God (2 Chronicles 29:12-19), and Hezekiah restored temple worship (2 Chronicles 29:20-30:1-9) and reinstated Passover (2 Chronicles 30:13-27), which had been abandoned for a long period of time. “Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah; and he did what was good, right, and true before the Lord his God. Every work which he began in the service of the house of God in law and in commandment, seeking his God, he did with all his heart and prospered” (2 Chronicles 31:20-21).

He prospered; or better, the Lord prospered him because his spiritual life was in order. We cannot experience true prosperity until our spiritual lives meet the mandates of heaven. It's comforting to know that “the Lord is with you when you are with Him and if you seek Him, He will let you find Him. But if you forsake Him, He will forsake you” (2 Chronicles 15:2). He will not forsake you as His child: rather, He will give you over to severe discipline.

As for Hezekiah, he had led the nation back to the Lord. But soon, he would be ambushed by the world's most powerful nation, Assyria. Once again, God would use that event to demonstrate the difference between obedience and disobedience. To this effect we read, “After these acts of faithfulness [to the Lord] Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah and besieged the fortified cities, and thought to break into them for himself” (2 Chronicles 32:1). Hezekiah called on his God for help (2 Chronicles 32:20), and He responded.

God stopped the war even before it began: “Then it happened that night that the angel of the Lord went out and struck

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185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men rose early in the morning, behold, all of them were dead” (2 Kings 19:35). That’s 185,000 struck dead in one night! Who struck them dead? The Lord! He sent the most powerful king home totally devastated and totally defeated. If this passage doesn’t convince us that the Lord is the Lord of battle, which one could?

This prepares us to take a close look at King Zedekiah, the final king of Judah before its Babylonian captivity.

Zedekiah

Sooner or later, those who are apathetic and indifferent to God’s Word will draw their last check from the bank of grace! Judah went through a barrage of warning discipline. A few good kings were not able to stop the downward spiral of all the bad kings. Evil king Zedekiah (2 Chronicles 36:12) was the last straw. He exhausted the account God had earmarked “grace for Judah.”

The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, until there was no remedy (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

God prepared Jeremiah, the last prophet, who gave the final warning to Judah. He preached relentlessly for twenty-three years to warn them. Grace always precedes judgment. This book is a heartfelt call to all who read it to consider your ways; who knows, this book could be your final warning.

Jeremiah himself tells us,

From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, these twenty-three years the word of

the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened. And the Lord has sent to you all His servants the prophets again and again, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear, saying, ‘Turn now everyone from his evil way and from the evil of your deeds, and dwell on the land which the Lord has given to you and your forefathers forever and ever; and do not go after other gods to serve them and to worship them, and do not provoke Me to anger with the work of your hands, and I will do you no harm.’ Yet you have not listened to Me,” declares the Lord, “in order that you might provoke Me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm (Jeremiah 25:3-7).

Yes, they had reached the point of no return. This could happen to anyone, or any nation for that matter. We should cease explaining away unusual floods, all-out hurricanes, tornadoes, or even recessions. These are God’s messengers (Psalm 104:4). Let us not keep on ignoring God’s warnings, as Judah did, until our last check is used up!

The Lord is warning us. Will we heed His voice? “For He says, ‘at the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.’ Behold, now is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, now is ‘the day of salvation’” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Judah Goes into Captivity

We need to pay close attention to the fall of Judah, the southern kingdom. Look for the hand of God: “Therefore He [God] brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans [eleventh dynasty of Babylon] who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; *He gave them all into his hand*” (2 Chronicles 36:17, emphasis added).

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Jeremiah, the last prophet to Judah, tells us in his own words, “Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Because you have not obeyed My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will send to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land and against its inhabitants and against all these nations round about; and I will utterly destroy them and make them a horror and a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. Moreover, I will take from them the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years’” (Jeremiah 25:8-11).

The Lord called Nebuchadnezzar, “My servant,” even though he was a ruthless, heartless, and dubious king. Scripture tells us that all things, and people, are God’s servants (Psalm 119:91). This means that every vessel is at His disposal. How striking!

That’s what sovereignty is all about. Judah went into exile because of its attitude toward God’s commands. No nation is indispensable. We must conclude that any nation that follows in the footsteps of Judah is likely to suffer a similar fate, though it may be in varying degrees, since no two nations are alike.

* * *

We saw the effectiveness of Asa’s intercessory prayer in his time of trouble, which leads us to briefly examine prayer in conjunction with our study. Let us look at what Asa knew that enabled him to pray so effectively.

Intercessory Prayer in Time of Trouble

Prayer is a powerful weapon when used in accordance with God’s will. We often think that prayer is like a switch we can flip

on when we are in a jam or one of life's dark rooms. It is, but prayer functions under divine principles. Like electric lights, all its wiring must be properly connected, otherwise the light will not come on when the switch is turned. Similarly, the electrical prayer line must be in order.

As a student of the Word of God, doesn't it concern you to hear that national prayer would be conducted by a nation that is disconnected from God? National prayer devoid of reverence for God is nothing but a mockery. Moreover, a nation that disregards the Word of God is a nation that angers God with its prayer. "He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, Even his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9). "So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood" (Isaiah 1:15).

Prayer is conditional (2 Chronicles 7:14). Obedience to God's Word is the wire that connects our prayer to God's power (1 John 3:22; John 15:7). God's promise in Psalm 50:15, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me," is for the obedient children of God (Psalm 34:17). It doesn't work for those who are disobedient to His Word (Psalm 50:16). That's why many prayers go unanswered.

10

God's Warning Bell in America

I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever (Thomas Jefferson).

Will America outlive Rome? We ask this question because there is a great parallel between the empire of Rome and America as well as between America and Judah. Most historians agree that Christianity had a favorable impact on the world of the Roman Empire. As we studied earlier in this book, that impact reverberated throughout the empire and spread into other European countries, such as Great Britain.

Russell Kirk said, “Both the direct influence and the indirect influence of religion [Christianity] upon American society were incalculably strong.”⁵⁸ C. Gregg Singer said, “A Christian world and life view furnished the basis for this early political thought which guided the American people for nearly two centuries and whose crowning lay in the writing of the Constitution of 1787.”⁵⁹ The unparalleled blessing of this biblical view is revealed in Scripture: “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, He [God] makes even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Proverbs 16:7).

Singer wrote,

Whether we look at the Puritans and their fellow colonists of the seventeenth century, or their descendants of the eighteenth century, or those who framed the Declaration of Independence

and the Constitution, we see that their political programs were the rather clear reflection of a consciously held political philosophy, and that the various political philosophies which emerged among the American people were intimately related to the theological developments which were taking place.⁶⁰

In view of this, we recall the words of McGuffey (1800-1873), the schoolmaster of the United States of America: "The Christian religion is the religion of our country. From it are derived our prevalent notions of the character of God, the great moral governor of the universe. On its doctrines are founded the peculiarities of our free institutions."

Larry Schweikart, a professor of history at the University of Dayton, wrote, "Religious revivals washed over America in six great waves, ranging from the Puritan migration and Great Awakening of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries...Throughout the 1815-1860 period, religious enthusiasm characterized American culture, from the churches of New England, to the camp meetings on western frontiers, to the black slave churches of the Old South.⁶¹ In addition, he said, "hundreds of thousands of Americans found answers to their profound spiritual questions in Protestant Christianity."⁶²

Historical Backdrop

Judah, Rome, and America have much in common historically regarding their relationship to the God of the universe. Judah and Rome deserted God before they were wiped from the pages of history. We examine them to see what lessons America should learn in order to avoid the same fate.

First, let's briefly discuss the Roman Empire.

Roman Empire in Brief

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) in his *Decline and the Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788), said that “any particular society that has departed from the great body of the nation, or religion to which it belonged, immediately becomes the object of universal as well as invidious (unenviable) observation.”⁶³

As the happiness of a future life is the great object of religion, we may hear without surprise or scandal that the introduction, or at least the abuse of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.⁶⁴

Gibbon also noted the following five attributes that marked the end of Rome:

- first, a mounting love of show of luxury (affluence);
- second, a widening gap between the very rich and the very poor (among countries in the family of nations as well as in a single nation);
- third, an obsession with sex;
- fourth, freakishness in the arts, masquerading as originality, and enthusiasms pretending to be creativity; and
- fifth, an increased desire to live off the state.

It all sounds so familiar. “We have come a long road...and we are back in Rome.”⁶⁵ Simply stated, Rome suffered injury from within when Christianity lost its impact on the purpose and mission of the people of the Roman Empire. From that point on, Rome spiraled downward until it was no more.

This takes us back to the southern kingdom, Judah.

Judah and God's Justice

We have already detailed the fall of Judah, but let's look at the pattern of God's justice. We saw how God prepared Nebuchadnezzar and used him as an instrument of punishment for Judah because of its disobedience toward the principles of Judaism. God in grace sent them warnings again and again, but they were ignored. Finally justice prevailed (2 Chronicles 36:15) and because of their colossal spiritual failure they were taken into exile in 606 BC.

We have seen the similarity between Rome and Judah. If these two nations suffered tragically because of their attitude toward God, and the United States shares spiritual bonds with them, we may conclude that the US will suffer too if it turns away from God. Maybe we are already departing and thus have begun paying the price.

Breakdown of Christianity in America

For many days Israel was without the true God, without a teaching priest and without law. But in their distress they turned to the Lord God of Israel, and they sought Him, and He let them find Him. In those times there was no peace to him who went out or to him who came in, for many disturbances afflicted all the inhabitants of the lands (2 Chronicles 15:3-5).

We see that the first indictment was on the priests. It can never be said enough: breakdown in a society starts with gross negligence of the accurate communication of Scripture or a total abandonment of divine establishment all together. We see this from coast to coast—people mishandling Scriptural truth (2 Timothy 4:3-4). The effect of the accurate dissemination of God's Word cannot be measured!

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Russell Kirk quotes Rowland Berthoff in his ground-breaking study of order and disorder in American society: "The history of American society strongly suggests that if men subvert or abandon the values embodied in a well-ordained institutional structure, and so dismantle the social foundations for cultural achievement and spiritual serenity, they proceed at their own grave peril."⁶⁶

America has frequently experienced spiritual coldness only to bounce back to God. There was the period of the Great Awakening as well as other times of revival. That was equally true of Judah. We saw that Judah regained spiritual momentum under the energizing spiritual guidance of kings like Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah.

But Judah and Rome eventually reached the point of no return and lost God's glory in their kingdoms. Hence we should never have the attitude of "Let's live it up: we will bounce back as we always do." Rather, our attitude should be that of a humble mind with a change of mental attitude toward the God of the universe, hoping that we are not already on our way out.

We ask, "In what ways have we lost our hold on Christianity?" Judah asked a similar question in Malachi 3:7 when their land was in disarray. We will look at just a few of our many spiritual relapses and the decisive response of the Supreme Court of Heaven.

We previously saw the awful divorce statistics that leave children caught in the crossfire as statistics. Satan continues to attack marriage and family, as he knows they are the pillars of our society. Times may change but the principles of the Word of God are timeless.

God no longer speaks to us today as He did in times past. When we read Scripture, we need to reflect on the passages and make a connection to our time. For example "If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act." (Leviticus 20:13). What God calls an abominable act, America now calls sexual orientation. We see the sharp contrast between our view and God's.

On May 15, 2008, the California Supreme Court ruled that excluding same-sex couples from marriage is unconstitutional, effectively creating same-sex marriage in California. That should get our attention in light of the justice of God. The passing of Proposition 8 in California, on November 5, 2008, barred same-sex marriage, which was a sign of hope for America. But now the United States Supreme Court has vacated Proposition 8 and struck down the Defense of Marriage Act.

Legalization of same-sex marriage, in defiance of God's moral law, begs for divine judgment. It's a satanic attack on the divine institution of marriage. It's an attempt to erode God's Word and eventually destroy the divine institution of marriage. God takes such an attack on His Word seriously and swiftly responds through the warning bells of disasters such as terrorism and economic depression. No doubt about it! Anyone who ignores God's Word will incur His wrath "A man who wanders from the way of understanding will rest in the assembly of the dead" (Proverbs 21:16).

God's Warning Bell via Terrorism

Liberal theologians and secular commentators did a profound job in explaining away the disaster of 9/11. They invoked every means to aid them but the Bible. They argued, how can a loving God allow such heartless people to do such a thing to His creatures?

But what does the Bible say? God specifically said that if we disregard His Word, one way He will get our attention will be to send us a sudden terror. Since 9/11, America has remained in a state of "consumption and fever" that continually wastes away her eyes and causes her soul to pine away. Think of the constant fear that generates from Homeland Security with their alerts as to threat levels. And now we fear the homegrown terrorists that brandish guns killing innocent youth in our schools and on our

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city streets and military personnel on our own soil. The Bible tells us that it's a terrifying thing for man to fall into the hands of the Living God (Hebrews 10:31).

When we carefully scrutinize Scripture, it appears that the United States of America is facing similar divine discipline as Judah, Rome, and Great Britain. The parallels between our present experience and the record of Scripture are clear (Leviticus 26:14-17). Recall that immediately after the 9/11 attack, people flooded stores across the nation, buying duct tape and sealing off their doors and windows in fear of a poisonous gas attack. There wasn't any gas attack on the horizon, but we were already fleeing. God keeps His Word!

What's the purpose of God's warning bells? The answer, in four words: *to get our attention*. God said "If also after these things [warning bells] you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins" (Leviticus 26:18). *Seven times more*. Who knows what else God has coming our way if we continue on the path of defiance? We have experienced the warning bells of terrorism, but they only got our attention for a few weeks. Consider another warning bell.

Economic Disaster

Both the Roman Empire and Judah experienced economic woes when God was no longer central in their affairs. America has begun to share that fate. We should never forget that God is in control of both blessings and cursings. Housing markets and financial institutions cannot collapse apart from God's endorsement. That's sovereignty! Isaiah tells us that God is the One who forms light and creates darkness, the One who causes well-being and creates calamity (Isaiah 45:7).

The Lord also warns, "Son of man, if a country sins against Me by committing unfaithfulness, and I stretch out My hand against it, destroy its supply of bread, send famine against it, and cut off from

it both man and beast [economic woes], even though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job [believers of spiritual integrity] were in its midst, by their own righteousness they could only deliver themselves,' declares the Lord God" (Ezekiel 14:13-14).

Does the above passage sound familiar? One just has to note the climbing prices at the grocery store. Moreover, many cannot find employment and many more have had their homes foreclosed. The truth of the matter is that any student of God's Word should be able to trace our current turbulent times back to Scripture.

We can take any market volatility and demonstrate how it can quickly choke our economy. Fluctuating oil prices can quickly alter market dynamics. Transportation costs send a shock wave of price increases across other markets which gets passed on to the consumer and can drain your bank account in a hurry. Profit margins can evaporate in an instant and an industry goes bankrupt and jobs disappear. We cannot ignore or outsmart God.

Unfortunately, many of us do not see the finger of God in these events. Economists tell us one thing one day and another the next. They are not in control; they can only report on events that God brings about. Of course, if you are a student of history or the Bible, it will all sound familiar. It was true in the time of Rome and equally true in the time of Judah.

God sent warning bells to them, but false prophets deceived them with a false message of security. Jeremiah, the last prophet to sound a message of warning to Judah, tells us: "They [people of falsehood] have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, Saying, 'Peace, peace,' But there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). Are we being consoled superficially by the economists who keep promising us an economic rebound by the next quarter? We are heading for trouble unless we hear God's warning bells and change our mind toward Him?

We are now ready to look at one more fragment, the breakdown of Christian influence in our nation.

Taking God Out of Our Society

References to God and the Bible have been removed from public schools and government buildings. The Ten Commandments, the basis for an orderly society, can no longer be posted in those places. Children who are unchurched may grow up never hearing “thou shalt not kill” and we wonder why we see an increase in incidents of school violence. Opponents to God and the Bible tell us that people should be free from religion. But history tells us that God was ever present in the founding of our nation and the government at that time.

Consider this: the first chairman of the American Bible Society was Thomas Jefferson. Moreover, in 1782, the “Congress of the Confederation granted approval to print a neat edition of the Holy Scriptures for use of schools”⁶⁷ Times have really changed.

Fisher Ames, 1758-1808, a congressman from Massachusetts, stated,

Should not the Bible regain the place it once held as a school book...? We have a dangerous trend beginning to take place in our education. We're starting to put more and more textbooks into our schools...We've become accustomed of late of putting little books into the hands of children containing fables and moral lessons...We are spending less time in the classroom on the Bible which should be the principal text in our schools...The Bible states these great moral lessons better than any other manmade book.⁶⁸

Singer pointed out “that the recently successful efforts to remove the Bible and all Christian activity from public schools must be understood in the light of the alliance between theological [liberals] and political democracy.”⁶⁹ The alliance of both sectors, theological and political, are bonded by the glue of liberalism and its progressive ideas.

Who would we call the nation's schoolmaster today? It used to be William Homes McGuffey (1800-1873), but the ideas of Europe are our newest self-appointed schoolmaster. The truth is that one cannot give what one does not have. Europe cannot give us spiritual light, because their own light has been extinguished.

Consider: "A fierce controversy over any mention of Europe's Christian heritage erupted in 2004 when officials were drafting a constitution for the European Union...Any mention of the continent's religious past or contributions of Christian culture—in a preface citing the sources of Europe's distinct civilization—would be exclusionary and offensive to non-Christians, many argued. Former French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing, who presided over the process, summed up the dominant view: 'Europeans live in a purely secular political system, where religion does not play an important role.'"⁷⁰ See the difference? Or as they say in France, *Vive la différence!*

We see that Christianity has no value in modern-day European society whose aim is to make sure America joins them in their world of postmodernism. Europe is a spiritually dried-up land, and America appears to be heading down the same path.

In his 2001 book, *The Death of the West*, conservative commentator Patrick Buchanan argues "that a European-style 'de-Christianization of America' is the goal of many liberals—and they are succeeding. Court decisions that have banned school-sponsored prayer, removed many Nativity scenes from public squares, and legalized gay marriage are part of the problem as is the legal effort to erase 'In God We Trust' from US currency and 'under God' from the Pledge of Allegiance. Europe is showing us where this path leads. It is not the right path for America."⁷¹

Spiritual integrity subdues evil, and lack of it opens the door for evil (Proverbs 14:34). Tony Blankley in his book, *The West's Last Chance*, sounded an alarm of the threat of Islamic extremism, but noted that the real threat to the West, particularly to America, is a loss of *spiritual bearing*. He said,

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For centuries, the Christian faith and its embodiment in the Church formed, shaped, inspired, and governed Europe. But now the question on many minds is whether Europe will no longer be a Christian continent, but a predominantly Muslim launching pad for terrorist assaults on a still proudly Judeo-Christian America.⁷²

We need to do one thing, and one thing alone: return to God now! That is the only hope for a glorious country for us today and for our children and grandchildren in the years to come. We must heed the warnings God sends us. There's no benefit in explaining away disasters in our nation or lives.

We are now ready to examine one of the pivotal ideas of this book: *reflection*.

11

Gateway to Reflection

Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word...It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes (Psalm 119:67, 71).

As we come to the end of our study, we are reminded that we live in a sin-fragmented world, a world of great turmoil, frequent strife, and endless instability. Of course, all this was brought about when God's perfection in creation was lost in the Garden through Adam's disobedience (Genesis 2:16-17). What we see around us today—the bad, the ugly, and the evil—are all the by-products of the fall (Genesis 3:1-7). God's perfect creation was stained by sin throwing everything into chaos.

The fall brought genetic mutation and disease into our world. Chronic aches and pains as we age are part of the package. Our nervous and immune systems deteriorate with age, and we become more vulnerable to illness. Even the young can have major health challenges, and we all suffer minor health concerns, like flu, headache, or stomach upset. These are unavoidable facts of life.

Minor illnesses, such as headaches, are not our focus, but terminal illness and major disasters are. Recall that not all disasters are a result of discipline and so not all terminal illnesses are a result of sin. Keep that in mind as we go forward.

We must become people of prudence who are masters of deciphering disasters. We should stop the habit of explaining

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disasters away. We need to be people of reflection, for reflection is where we find hope in the midst of dilemma.

Reflection is an act of soul retreat whereby one honestly searches the soul, retracing his lifestyle and past actions to determine cause and effect.

There is a purpose in everything God does. We know that God, in His sovereign will and purpose, controls every event of human history in accordance with His eternal counsel. There are no accidents, bad luck, or good luck in His plan. Instead, there's a divine message in every dilemma in life.

The Message in Disaster

Generally, God sends a message to us through disaster. This message is directed to three groups of people: the unsaved, the carnal believer, and the spiritual believer.

The Unsaved

God in His infinite grace and mercy—who never desires that anyone should perish but rather that everyone should have a change of mind toward His plan for the human race (2 Peter 3:9)—uses disaster to attract the attention of the unsaved. God is calling to them through disaster, just as He called to Saul en route to Damascus (Acts 9:1-5).

Usually, when one motions for attention (for example in a social gathering), everyone stops and listens. Similarly, disasters such as terrorist attacks, cyclones, hurricanes, earthquakes, unusual droughts, fires, floods, tornadoes, and scorching heat—just to name a few—are all God's warning bells. God is saying, "May I have your attention?"

The Believer in Prolonged Carnality

God uses disaster to compel carnal believers to get back on track spiritually. We see this from the confession of the Psalmist: “Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word...It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes” (Psalm 119:67-71). Pain forced the Psalmist to turn back to God. Israel’s experience with disasters throughout its history is also a perfect example of this concept, as we saw in chapter 9.

What goes into our minds comes out in our actions. When we cease to saturate our souls with God’s ideas and thinking we subscribe to worldly ideas and thinking, which are controlled by Satan. Sooner or later, God will call for our attention through disaster, as He did with Israel, “In those times there was no peace to him who went out or to him who came in, for many disturbances afflicted all the inhabitants of the lands” (2 Chronicles 15:5). Does that sound familiar? God inflicted them with mental pain and anguish according to His injunction (Deuteronomy 28:15-30) and “in their distress they turned to the Lord God” (2 Chronicles 15:4).

Advancing Believers

Disaster is often God’s way of helping spiritual believers develop capacity for extraordinary blessing (James 1:2-4). We saw this in the life of Job.

The challenging question is: How can we accurately decipher and classify disasters in our lives? The answer is simple: self-examination (2 Corinthians 13:5). That’s right, reflection (Haggai 1:5). God will not give us a warning sign and then leave us clueless as to what the sign means. God, in His grace, has given us the ability to decipher our experiences. The problem with is we often live in denial. God always leaves us with enough information to connect the dots, but we fre-

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quently fail that simple test. Many times distraction is our worst enemy. It robs us of the time and concentration needed for reflection.

To complicate matters, by nature it is hard for us to forget ill-treatment by others. We can trace the date, the time, and the exact place where someone wronged us. How good we are at connecting those dots. Some can even connect the dots of their bad experiences all the way back to childhood. Yet how quickly we forget when it comes to remembering what we have sowed when harvest time comes. That is the time to reflect and remember so we can connect the dots of when and where we sowed a seed, as well as what type of seed and the manner in which we sowed it. This is how we decipher and decode messages from God about what is going on in our lives.

Maybe the real issue is laziness. We often become mentally lazy when it comes to connecting the past with the present. That must be conquered if we aspire to reap God's blessing in time and eternity. Scripture is so clear on the law of harvest: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption [destruction], but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life [blessing]" (Galatians 6:7-8).

Sowing Seeds of Disaster

There's a direct link between our work and our reward. We shouldn't have a difficult time interpreting our disasters if we are sowing seeds of evil (Hosea 8:7). We shouldn't have a hard time deciphering our difficult circumstances if our spiritual life is in disarray (Hebrews 12:6). The truth remains, when we sow disobedience we shall harvest disaster! When we sow seeds of disregard to God's Word as a nation, sooner or later we shall reap every form of disaster.

We shall take a look at three examples to illustrate this idea: post-exilic Judah, Jacob, and finally my personal experience of resisting God's will.

Post-Exilic Judah

We've discussed Judah's colossal spiritual failure, which begged for divine discipline. That discipline came in the form of seventy years in Babylonian captivity (2 Chronicles 36:15-21). God, in His grace and in faithfulness to His Word, orchestrated her return to Jerusalem when the time of His discipline was over (2 Chronicles 36:21-23; Jeremiah 25:11-12). How did God do that? God motivated King Cyrus of Babylon to issue a decree in 538 BC in favor of the Jews, which released them to Jerusalem for its reconstruction. That's sovereignty!

In conjunction with the reconstruction of Jerusalem, they were to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians when the Jews were taken into captivity. But they became so busy rebuilding their own homes that they ignored the reconstruction of God's temple, which remained in shambles.

Our attitudes today often reflect their attitudes. Many of us today don't care much about God's business. We don't care about missionary or outreach activities. Just as the people of Judah were busy with the construction of new homes, today we find ourselves consumed by materialism and busyness. It's the same negligence, but in a different form.

Solving God's Puzzle

What did God do? His justice responded by sending a drought throughout the land of Judah, which resulted in famine (Haggai 1:11). There was great dismay and disbelief about their agricultural disaster, but they knew that it was the hand of God. Can we relate to their experience in any way?

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God wanted them to solve the riddle of their economic disaster; He wanted them to connect the dots. “Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ‘Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your [beautiful] paneled houses while this [temple] house lies desolate?’ Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Consider your ways [reflect]!’” (Haggai 1:3-5). He asked them to connect the dots, to solve the puzzle.

“You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes” (Haggai 1:6). That’s right. “A purse with holes.” God was draining their earnings. Who says that God cannot be involved in disaster? “Consider your ways!” (Haggai 1:7).

Twice, God called for reflection. God was telling them that there’s always a connection between disobedience and disaster. “I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands” (Haggai 1:11). Who called the drought? Reflect.

If we agree with Scripture, that God caused the drought in Judah, then why would we fail to acknowledge God as the cause of a severe drought in California or Florida? Why pass the blame to “Mother Nature”?

We are reminded of the prophet’s question, “When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” (Amos 3:6 NIV). God wants you and me to take the time to search our own lives and determine whether there is a connection between our lifestyle and the troubles and closed doors we experience. He wants us to isolate and categorize every disaster, one by one, to see whether it has sprouted from the seed we are sowing or have sown in the past. Shall we do that?

Reflection Taken to Heart

As for the people of Judah, they did reflect. The result was a change of mind and change of priorities. Rebuilding God's temple became foremost in their minds, and when they returned to God's project, God responded with abundant blessing (Haggai 2:2-19).

We read, "Do consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month [the day they returned to God's project]; from the day when the temple of the Lord was founded, consider" (Haggai 2:18). In essence, God was saying to His children, "From this day onward...from this day you had a change of mind—from this day you had a change of priority—you will see the difference between blessing and cursing!"

Jacob's Seed of Deceit

Whatever a man sows, that he will reap in time of harvest. Remember the story of Jacob's deceit, how he deceived his father, Isaac, and pretended to be his brother, Esau, and thus stole his brother's blessing (Genesis 27). This caused a rift between Jacob and Esau, which caused Jacob to run away from home. But the seed of deception had already been planted.

His first harvest came unexpectedly. While in the house of Laban, he fell in love with Rachel, the younger sister of Leah. Jacob asked Laban what the bride price would be. The would-be father-in-law told him to serve him for seven years. Because of his love, the Bible tells us that seven years seemed to Jacob but a few days (Genesis 29:20). Seven years later Jacob could hardly wait for the marriage deal to be finalized.

Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her." Laban gathered all the men of the place and made a feast. Now in the evening he [secretly] took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him [in the dark]; and Jacob went in to her [thinking that he had slept with his true

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love]. Laban also gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid. So it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?” (Genesis 29:21-25).

Jacob actually asked, “*Why then have you deceived me?*” How quickly he forgot that he had sowed the seed of deception with his father when he wore goat skins to make his skin feel like that of Esau (Genesis 27:16-23). No one eludes the law of harvest: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption [destruction], but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life [blessing]” (Galatians 6:7-8).

God had a lesson to teach Jacob. God always disciplines in grace and in grace He allowed Jacob to work another seven years for Rachel, the desire of his heart (Genesis 29:28).

Twenty years later, Jacob's own children brought him another basket of deception when they sold his beloved son Joseph to Egyptian merchants. To deceive their father they brought him Joseph's multi-colored tunic, which they soiled in a pool of animal blood.

And they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, ‘We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not.’ Then he examined it and said, ‘It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!’ So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days (Genesis 37:32-34).

God can never go back on His Word. When we sow to the wind, we shall ultimately reap a whirlwind in time of harvest (Hosea 8:7). With this in mind, we now proceed to the last

illustration of the law of harvest—and my personal experience of resisting God’s will.

Resisting God’s Will

The apostle Paul asked whether anyone has been successful in resisting God’s will (Romans 9:19). Make no mistake: when God speaks, that’s *final!* That means all human debates and boardroom discussions must end. Sun, snow, rain, pull, push, or drag, the will of God will be done. We pay a costly price when we resist His will—price that can easily be avoided by obedience.

That was the case with Balaam, who wanted to curse Israel, contrary to God’s will (Numbers 22:12). He set forth to go against the will of God; consequently he paid dearly and finally with his life (Numbers 22:13–23:26).

That was also true for Jonah, whom the Lord asked to go to Nineveh. He chose to go against God’s will and paid a costly price too (Jonah 1:1-17). God could have provided a comfortable horse had Jonah gone willingly” instead God had to use a “submarine.” There’s no getting around God’s will. That’s the meaning of God’s sovereignty!

I learned that lesson the hard way. The truth of the matter is that God often uses closed doors, hardships, and disasters—one after another—to force us to comply with His will. Sovereignty always wins. No matter what!

I grew up in the small village of Amaba, in the southeastern part of Nigeria, a country that sits on the west coast of Africa. Born into a family deeply involved in a cult, I was locked up in ignorance of the True God. God graciously opened my eyes when I heard the gospel message on the crusade ground in our village. From the moment I believed in Christ, right then and there the Holy Spirit bestowed on me a spiritual gift of communication. I was still in the third grade when I trusted Christ and broke away from the religious bondage that had held our

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family for so long. As my parents and siblings were exposed to the gospel, one by one, they too responded by faith alone in Christ alone.

My spiritual gift became obvious to everyone around me. I was on fire for the gospel, and while still in elementary school, I began preaching in churches, trains, buses, schools, and villages. I knew what my spiritual gift was, and so did many pastors and villagers who heard me give the gospel on many occasions.

God brought me to the United States of America through a series of miracles. My eldest brother, Dr. C. Onwubiko, who came first, assisted me. This was most unusual because this privilege is passed down in birth order beginning with the eldest. But God in His grace saw fit to move me to the head of the line, leaving my elder siblings behind in Nigeria. Remembering this still fills me with humility.

When I came to this country of awesome opportunity, I had a dual ambition: attending seminary and becoming a neurosurgeon. The former was God's plan while the latter was mine. Seeing that God had blessed me with academic prowess, I pursued my medical ambition at the expense of His will for my life. Was I another Jonah?

God pursued me with love, compassion, grace, and discipline as I stubbornly pursued my medical career. God's will was for me to be in ministry, but my goal was to be in a surgery room. I rationalized this by saying that I would use the earnings from my profession to fund my ministry, which I planned to begin when I was fifty. What did it take to resolve this conflict? Disaster!

Solomon tells us that foolishness is bound in the heart of every child and that only the rod of discipline can drive stubbornness away (Proverbs 22:15). This is also true of God's children.

God—in His infinite love, grace, and justice—orchestrated disasters, one after another, as warning bells to force me to reflect and yield to His plan for my life. First, He inflicted me with an unusual headache that kept threatening my career, a

headache that baffled even the best neurologists. I knew it was the hand of God to redirect me, and yet I stubbornly forged along in my career path, despite my acute pain.

Then God took me through a series of car wrecks. I had eight close-call accidents in almost as many years. In my reflection, each time it was clear to me that God was sending me warning bells. But as soon as I recovered, I just repaired my car or got a new one if the car was totaled and carried on. I closed my ears to the warning bells. I had more options and more plans, but God was busy slamming every door I pried open.

For thirteen years I was in resistance mode. On many occasions, my wife asked me, “Are we experiencing divine discipline or something?” I said, “Oh no, it’s something else! We are learning the Word of God every day, and therefore this can’t be discipline.” But deep in my soul, I knew we were in trouble with the Supreme Court of Heaven. She knew that too, because she was convinced that ministry was God’s plan for me. She even suggested that I abandon everything and pursue my calling in life. I brushed her idea off in a hurry!

But one evening, when I was returning from work, the final warning bell came. I had a head-on collision with a drunk driver. My car was totaled beyond recognition. By God’s grace, I was able to crawl out of the window of the upside-down wreckage and miraculously emerge, without a scratch. Neither my wife nor the garage attendant could believe that the driver of that smashed car had survived the crash. Seeing that crushed car made me realize just how close I had come to being killed.

I called my brother from the hospital around midnight after the wreck. The first words that came out of my mouth, before I told him where I was and why I was calling so late, were “God still has a plan for my life.” My friend, that did it for me! The wrestling game was over. Pull, push, or drag, God will win. He won!

I had a change of mind and a change of direction similar to the experience of the post-exilic Judah in Haggai’s day. Because

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of their change of mind toward the plan of God, the Lord promised them great blessing (Haggai 1:14-15; 2:15-19). As the Lord would have it, in 1997, He used me as a vessel to establish Grace Evangelistic Ministries, Inc.—a ministry that He has blessed abundantly.

As you might expect, God, in His unfathomable grace, also took care of those frequent accidents and mysterious headaches. Ever since, I have not had any CT scans done on my brain, nor have I been involved in any accidents. What's more, God, in His infinite mercy, has showered us with blessings, in many ways totally beyond our imagination. In sixteen years and counting, my wife has never asked those repeated questions that she used to ask when I was in defiance of God's will for my life. Rather, she glories in the Lord! This does not mean that we are free from suffering. On the contrary, we experience a different kind of suffering in varying degrees, as our Lord promised every believer (John 16:33; Philippians 1:29), but with peace and joy (James 1:2; Galatians 5:22). That's the difference.

God has used this ministry to show His grace and mercy to many people around the world, including Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. Many have come to the saving knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You, too, can trust in Him and experience peace, if you have not already done so. Again, that's God's grace in action.

What redemption there is when we respond properly to a disaster in our lives that's tailored as a warning bell! I learned this lesson the hard way with many bruises, but you don't have to go that route. You don't have to wait. Reflect! His grace abounds.

Seek the Lord while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the Lord,
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God, For He will
abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:6-7).

In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity [disaster] consider [reflect]—God has made the one [blessing] as well as the other [disaster] (Ecclesiastes 7:14).

The disasters of Judah, Jacob, and my own experience hold valuable lessons. We can learn from the bruises of others and make application to our own life. Reflection and self examination are the keys to understanding the message God is sending us.

Self-Examination

King Solomon exhorted us, saying, “In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity [disaster] consider [reflect]—God has made the one [blessing] as well as the other [disaster]” (Ecclesiastes 7:14). This advice was given to us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit by the wisest man who ever lived. That alone is reason to take notice! And what was his main point? Reflection. God does not want us to take blessing and disaster in our lives for granted. He wants us to reflect.

Self-examination requires maximum concentration. It requires that we rid ourselves of every distraction that may interfere with our focus in connecting the dots with regard to our present suffering and our spiritual life. In our introspection, God the Holy Spirit will show us every dot in our souls, allowing us to connect them and make King David’s cries our own: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way” (Psalm 139:23-24). “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14).

What is the procedure for reflection? This question brings us face to face with a guide to self-examination, which will underscore the connection between the seed of disobedience and disaster.

Guide for Self-Examination

In this mental exercise, you are to take a long hard tour of your soul and apply the principle of reflection. Recall that reflection is an act of soul retreat, an honest search of the soul retracing lifestyle and past actions looking for cause and effect. You have the option of doing this exercise mentally or writing it out on a piece of paper. The following steps are suggested.

Step One

The first step is to deal with the foremost issue in life, namely, your spiritual life. You should ask yourself a series of personal questions, beginning with: How is my spiritual life? How serious am I about the study of God's Word and its application? We should be careful not to misconstrue attending church and Bible study on a regular basis and accumulating spiritual knowledge as all there is to living the spiritual life. Knowledge is the basis for application but application is a separate step of putting that knowledge into practice through the power of the Holy Spirit. Self-deception overtakes us if we regularly attend church but walk out the door never to look back until our next visit. Such believers are often said to "talk the talk, but not walk the walk" and can be worse than unbelievers in their manner of life. Others have just done their duty and don't even bother to talk the talk. Remember the words of the apostle Paul:

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into

households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, *always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of [point of actually applying] the truth* (2 Timothy 3:1-7, emphasis added).

Step Two

The next question is this: Am I resisting God's directive will for my life? In other words, is there anything the Lord is directing me to do in life that I am opposing outright? Does God want me to serve Him in the ministry or go somewhere and I am resisting with all my might? Again, these questions should be answered soberly. Recall that God used disaster to get Jonah to comply with God's will for his life (Jonah 1-3:1).

Step Three

Carefully evaluate the nature of your disaster, whether it has to do with sin or bad judgment on your part. If we use bad judgment and make a dumb decision, we will suffer the consequences. This is neither discipline nor blessing, but self-induced misery—though God can turn anything for good to those who follow Him. Beyond that, there are two conclusions:

- God in His matchless grace is sending you a warning signal to reverse your rebellious or carnal course before it's too late (Hebrews 12:6; Proverbs 29:1).
- God in His infinite wisdom is using the disaster to enhance your ongoing spiritual life in order to position you for supreme blessing (Job 23:10; James 1:2-4, 12; Romans 8:28).

When we are honest with ourselves in our reflection, the interpretation of our dilemma becomes much easier. When we are honest and respond to God's warning signal through

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acknowledgment of our failures (1 John 1:9) and adjust to His plan accordingly, God in His unfathomable grace will respond. The prophet Isaiah beckons us to “seek the Lord while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the Lord, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:6-7). That’s grace!

* * *

I conclude with a portion of a letter that my friend—as well as a partner on the frontline of the gospel—John G. Brunner, wrote to his friends and associates during a Memorial Day weekend:

But all is not well in our country. We are facing serious problems at home, as well as overseas. I really believe that, as individuals, we have drifted off course and are heading to the rock and coral reefs that will risk our ship of state. I am reminded of the following quote that seems to sum up the dreadful cycle of every civilization...Clarence Manion, the dean of the Notre Dame Law School from 1941-1952, boarded a plane sometime during the 1950s. One of the passengers recognized him and went over and sat down next to him. Dean Manion was doing some work, but he had to put it all away as this man began asking questions. He wanted to talk with the professor about the unfortunate condition of our country. Dean Manion listened patiently, conversed with him, and began making notes while the man was speaking. As the plane landed he got up, shook hands with the man...and handed him a slip of paper on which he had written these words:

“Man begins his existence in bondage,
and rises from bondage through spiritual faith,
from spiritual faith to courage,
from courage to liberty,
from liberty to abundance,
from abundance to selfishness,
from selfishness to complacency,
from complacency to apathy,
from apathy to dependence,
from dependence back to bondage.”

We are challenged by the prophets of old: “[If] My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). We must conclude that this divine solution is the only recourse for any person or nation that is under divine discipline because of disregard for God’s laws.

Before you put this book down, I would like for you to meditate on His Word:

Seek the Lord while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the Lord, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:6-7).

It is my heartfelt prayer that God, in His infinite mercy, would open our eyes, so that we may realize that we are just a couple of steps away from falling off a cliff. May He cause every one of us in this nation and around the world to reflect on our spiritual lives and to respond by amending our ways. May we take advantage of God’s loving-kindness, compassion and mercy, and return to Him. May the content of this book bring much needed revival and blessing in our lives and countries. It’s my

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humble prayer that the God of revival would revive us according to the riches of His grace in Christ Jesus. May He grant us our hearts' desires as we seek Him with all our hearts. This I pray in the name of the King of kings and Lord of lords, our Wonderful Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen!

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen (Ephesians 3:20-21).

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Endnotes

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