

A Book About Us

The Bible and Stages of Our Lives



GEORGE F. DOLE

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Preface

There are two very different ways of looking for guidance in the Bible. One way is to look for support for our own (presumably highest) convictions, and the other is to look for light on our quest for personal and social transformation. The first intent prompts us to search the Scriptures for particular statements that say what we want them to and then lift them out of their context. The second may prompt us to search the Scriptures for those fundamental principles that give coherent meaning to the bewildering twists, turns, and inconsistencies in the biblical narrative with a view to finding coherent meaning in the bewildering twists, turns, and inconsistencies of our own lives.

There are other ways of reading the Bible, of course. It can be read as history or literature, for example. If it is read devotionally, though—read as norma-

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tive for our lives—we are faced in the last analysis with a choice between constraining the text to agree with ourselves or constraining ourselves to agree with the text. One or the other, the reader or the text, stands under judgment. One or the other will emerge from the dialog transformed. If we take it to be, in any real sense, the Word of God, then surely it is we who need to be changed.

There is a problem, though. The Bible may be seen as normative, but it is not at all clear what norms it sets. It contains laws, to be sure, but they form only a relatively small part of the total text, and some of them are either unworkable (I have in mind the laws concerning the Sabbath and Jubilee years in Leviticus 25) or indefensible (for example, “Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death,” [Exodus 21:17]). Equally problematic are radically conflicting statements about the nature and will of a God who seems to be alternately compassionate and vengeful, loving and wrathful, constant and changing.

This inconsistency begins to make sense if we assume that the central focus of the Bible is not on God but on our relationship to God. It is telling us not simply what God has said but what we have heard. The present book assumes a kind of dual authorship of the Bible, with Divinity constantly at work through the agency of human community. To put it very simply, it assumes that Divinity was actually speaking in many different ways, and that the community was

often pathologically hard of hearing. It assumes that Divinity is still speaking, that our own hearing is far from perfect, and that it can make an immense difference if we admit both of these “facts” and pay attention to our own listening. We may not be able to hear what it says about God unless we face what it says about us.¹

The inconsistency makes overwhelming sense if we take seriously the fact that the Bible is essentially not a law code or a systematic theology, but a story. The theologian may insist that God is unchanging; the anthropologist knows all too well that we are not. Our relationship to Divinity changes as we move from childhood through youth and adulthood to old age and death. “When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 Corinthians 13:11). One of the most significant facts about us is that we change; but if this change is to make sense, it must be against some background of constancy. On the quite valid grounds that absolute truth is beyond our reach, postmodernism tends to replace the quest for truth with a quest for relevance, but I see no reason to believe that absolute relevance is any more accessible than absolute truth. Might it

1. William Sloan Coffin’s compelling way of making this point was to suggest that when we see something as appalling as the Holocaust and ask how God could let that happen, we might well imagine God asking us the same question.

not be that truth is relevant? If so, perhaps our primary focus should not be on one or the other, but simply on mental and emotional honesty.

In a way, then, this book does take the Bible quite literally. That is, it takes the Bible as facing us with an uncompromising mirror in which we can see both the best and the worst in ourselves. It holds forth both the ideals of true human community and the appalling things that we have done (and still do) in the name of those ideals. The book starts from the Christian premise that the heart of the message is the two great commandments of love to the Lord and love to the neighbor, that “on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:40; see also Mark 12:29–31 and Luke 10:27²). If those principles shine through clearly only occasionally, perhaps this is showing us the density of the clouds in our own minds rather than the nature of God’s light.

The Bible is by no means a pessimistic book, not at all. Nor is it an optimistic book, if optimism is understood to mean looking only at the bright side. To put it most simply, it sees God’s light as breaking through more and more clearly, and it claims that this is a truly realistic view, a view that neither shrinks from seeing the worst in us nor wallows in that sight, a

2. It is worth noting that these are not new, exclusively Christian principles. They are drawn from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18), and in the Luke account, it is not Jesus but the lawyer who selects them. They are there to be found, and some did find them.

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view that neither romanticizes the ideal nor underestimates its power.

The First World War dealt a heavy blow to what we now see as a naïve optimism. The very word “progress” became suspect. I cannot help but wonder whether the pessimism that replaced the optimism has not been equally naïve. Are we seeing a real decline in moral values, or are we simply seeing more clearly what has been lying hidden under a dedication to keeping up appearances? If it is this latter, then the world is not getting darker, the light is getting clearer. If we do not like what it shows us, that may be a very good thing indeed.

Lastly, a word about the title. It is stolen from the admirable Dr. Seuss (*My Book about Me*) and is intended to carry two messages. The first is that I believe that the Bible is to be taken very personally. The second is that I am at least dimly aware that the way I see it may say as much about me as it does about the Bible. I hope you find it saying something about you, because I believe that our happiness—and, in fact, our survival—depends at least in part on some consciousness of shared meaning. ❖

Chapter 1 *To Begin With . . .*

If we would listen to the Bible, we would do well to give some attention to the nature of the community in which it was composed. That community traced its origins to the early second millennium BCE; and while the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity is clearly foreshadowed in the New Testament, the sense of continuity with the past is still strong. The very label “Christ” identifies Jesus as the expected Messiah. This was a uniquely durable community, a community with a two-thousand-year life span.

The locus of this community is unique as well—the only place on earth where three continents meet, for the Holy Land stands at the intersection of Africa, Asia, and Europe. It seems destined to be either a bone of contention or a thoroughfare of communication, depending in part on its own policies and in part on

the policies of its much larger neighbors. At different times during the life of the community, it was under the control of Egypt in Africa, Mesopotamia in Asia, and Greece and Rome in Europe. If any place on the face of the globe has a claim to be truly cosmopolitan—cosmopolitan in an intercontinental sense—this is surely it. Christianity may have become a distinctively Western religion, but Christ himself was no European. We may have to relax some of our distinctively Western disciplines if we are to hear this book as it was spoken, in its own distinctive idiom.³

On both temporal and geographical scales, then, the Bible has a remarkable claim to universality. Far from being the carefully framed thesis of some brilliant theologian, it speaks with many voices, voices that are often far from unanimous. That is why it is so easy to lift out of their context the particular statements that say what we want to hear and to ignore or explain away the ones that disturb us. In an effort to avoid doing this, I want to start by looking at the context itself, at the general nature and shape of the book. With this in mind, I will be trying to identify its larger

3. In the present work, this entails some ambivalence toward the discipline of historical criticism. I believe that the narratives are rooted in actual events, but am acutely aware that they do not hold up well under rigorous, detailed academic critique. For devotional purposes, then, I invite the reader to enter into this narrative world open to the possibility that it can tell a kind of truth that tends to be obscured by preoccupation with factual precision. At the same time, it is all too easy to misread the story if it is lifted completely out of its own historical and geographical context.

components and pervasive themes, suggesting at times how this process might be applied in greater detail.

To begin with, as I noted in the preface, I see the Bible as basically *a story*, and a story *about the relationship between Divinity and humanity*. There is material in it that is not story, to be sure. There are laws, poems, and oracles, for example. All such material is, however, embedded in a sweeping narrative framework, and the larger elements of that framework stand firm. There is no way to place the conquest before the exodus, for example, or the exile before the establishment of the monarchy. There is no way to place the coming of the Messiah before the prophecies of the Messiah, or John's vision of the risen Christ before the Crucifixion.

The two major protagonists of the story are God and a particular human community. Other gods and other human communities make their appearances, but the central thread of the story throughout is the relationship and interaction between this God and this community.

In two very significant respects, then, the Bible can be thought to reflect (or, in Swedenborgian terms, “correspond to”⁴) major themes in our own lives. Our own lives are stories, and there can hardly be a more central theme than our relationship to Divinity.

4. Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) wrote voluminously on the presence of continuous and coherent deeper levels of meaning within the literal meaning of Scripture. My indebtedness to that material can hardly be exaggerated.

We are stories. We change as the years pass, and for all the differences we can observe in human nature, there is an invariant pattern of birth, growth, aging, and death that may be frustrated in various ways but whose elements cannot be transposed. Where we happen to be at any particular time cannot be fully understood unless we know where we have come from and where we are headed.

As for our relationship to Divinity, the Bible casts this in terms of covenant. This is the clear intent of the Greek and Latin words behind the traditional titles “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” and the translator in me winces at the literalism—the “*letteralism*,” really—that has rendered the Latin *testamentum*, “covenant,” in a way that so completely obscures its intent.⁵ A covenant involves mutual commitment with some specified balance between promise and obligation; and it is noteworthy that in the course of the narrative this balance shifts, sometimes dramatically. I believe this is “true to life”—true to our individual lives. At different times in our lives we have

5. I am aware of the current tendency to replace the title “Old Testament” with “Hebrew Bible,” but not in sympathy with it. In trying to avoid giving offense in one direction, it commits the sin of assuming that “old” is derogatory. It leaves no ground for the “New” of “New Testament” and it contrasts the “Testament” of “New Testament” with the “Bible” of “Hebrew Bible.” For me, the “Old” speaks to the profound roots of Judaism in the depths of history and is a label that should be borne with honor. Only the arrogant naïveté of youth discounts the wisdom of age, and Christianity should bear its relative youth with humility. Could we replace the familiar terms with “Old Covenant” and “Young Covenant”?

different senses of our relationship to Divinity: sometimes feeling called and challenged, sometimes buoyed and comforted, sometimes abandoned, sometimes burdened with debts and responsibilities.

Under the surface of the divine-human relationship lies a fundamental paradox. How do we fit finite creatures into the same picture as infinite Deity? Can there be a boundary that marks us off as distinct from God without limiting God? If God is omnipotent, what power is left to us? The question takes various forms—the problem of evil, the problem of free will, the role of works, and the role of grace in the matter of salvation, to name a few.⁶

Typically, the Bible does not work through this matter in any decisive or systematic way. We do not have to look very far below the surface, though, to see that it is a pervasive theme, often manifest in a tension between text and subtext and occasionally bursting forth into the daylight. “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). “Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, ‘What are you making?’” (Isaiah 45:9). It may then be more constructive to maintain the tension between law and grace than to resolve it. In *The Evolving Self*, developmental psychologist Robert Kegan speaks of a tension between our need for

6. This paradox is not resolved by eliminating the concept of God. Determinism is highly resistant to logical refutation and utterly impractical as a guide to individual or societal living. It is a philosophical truism that “All reason argues against free will and all experience argues for it.”

autonomy and our need for inclusion in our relationships with each other. “I believe it is a lifelong tension,” he writes. “Our experience of this fundamental ambivalence may be our experience of the unitary, restless, creative motion of life itself.”⁷ On the principle that loving the neighbor is like loving the Lord (Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31), I would suggest that the tension between a sense of inclusion in Divinity and a sense of independence is at least equally creative, and that when our stories show us swinging from one pole to the other, they show us as truly living beings. Tension, like paradox, can be creative, and we may not be designed to achieve stasis. The Bible ends on a note of expectation. If tomorrow holds no promise of something new, life loses its meaning. ❖

7. Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 107.

For Reflection

Get out some pictures of yourself, your family, and your friends from years past—perhaps a high school yearbook. Focus on the face you had then and try to look out through its eyes. What feelings does this evoke?

Who were the people who were most important to you, and why were they important?

What were you wearing, and what kind of statement were you trying to make with your clothes?

Did you think then about eventually being the age you are now, and if so, how does the present reality compare with your expectations then?

In what sense or senses are you still the same person you were then?

In what sense or senses are you a different person now?

Chapter 2 Framing the Story

Readings (please read in order)

Genesis 1, 2 • Revelation 21, 22

Matthew 1:17 • John 14:2–6

N.B. I am assuming throughout a reasonable knowledge of the Bible. The appendix contains very abbreviated selections from the reading assignments, with the thought that they may serve as memory triggers. By themselves, they are by no means adequate substitutes for familiarity with the texts from which they are taken.

In the chapters that follow, we will be dealing with most, but not all, of the books of the Protestant Bible.⁸ In the Old Testament, these are primarily “the Law and the Prophets”—Genesis through Second Kings and the major and minor prophets—and in the New Testament, the Gospels and the Book of Revelation.

There are two reasons for this selectivity, which I suspect are closely related. The first is that this is essentially “the Swedenborgian canon” (as listed, for

8. Any exploration of the history of the canon thorough enough to be useful would take us far afield.

example, in *Secrets of Heaven* §10325), and the way of understanding the Bible presented in this book has been developed in the larger context of a distinctly Swedenborgian theology.

The second reason is that I see the story as one in which the surface text of earthly concerns is gradually displaced by a focus on heavenly concerns, and, when the two foci diverge, several books follow the earthly rather than the heavenly story. The most obvious example is in the New Testament, where the Book of Acts follows the disciples on earth and the Book of Revelation follows the ascended Christ in the spiritual world. This by no means precludes other canons, and I would urge that you not swallow this assumption whole. Rather, see whether the pattern proposed does or does not speak constructively to your own deeper sense of purpose.

To begin with the broadest view, there seems to be an overall tripartite symmetry in which a central narrative with a distinctive structure of its own is framed by a prologue and an epilogue, both of which are “non-historical.” The structure of the central narrative is concisely laid out in Matthew 1:17: “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.” Abraham stands here as the recipient of a promise that his descendants would become a great nation (Genesis

12:1–3); David stands as the king who brought that promise to literal fulfillment (2 Samuel 7); the deportation to Babylon stands as the demolition of that earthly kingdom (2 Kings 25); and the Messiah stands for a restoration that turns out to be of a radically different order—the “good news of the kingdom” of Matthew 4:23. Matthew then points to a basic sequence of promise, fulfillment, disillusion, and transformation.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis, with their mythical—and meaningful—stories of creation, the garden, the Fall, the Flood, and the tower of Babel, form a prologue. The epilogue is the cosmic drama of the Book of Revelation, which carries us immediately into a clearly supernatural world. The symmetry is enhanced by the fact that in the heavenly city at the very close we find the tree of life that was in the garden at the very beginning.

It is not at all difficult to see a very similar pattern in the lives of individuals. Early in our lives we become aware that we are destined to grow up. We do grow to a kind of maximum level of ability, but eventually we find our physical strength inexorably fading and are turned perforce to find some non-physical way of giving meaning to our lives.⁹

9. We obviously do this in very different ways. One common way is reflected in the familiar statement, “If I had my life to live over, I’d spend more time with the people I care about.” A very different way can be seen in efforts to maintain the increasingly unrealistic illusion of youth.

This “core narrative” is preceded by an infancy that is profoundly formative and largely beyond our control, and (in this reading of the Bible) is to be followed by a “life after life” that we can comprehend only in a kind of symbolic way. Let us first look a bit more closely at the prologue and epilogue.

The vision of the Holy City closes the story and in a number of ways harks back to the beginning. Both the garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem are idyllic. Everything in the original creation is “very good” (Genesis 1:31), and nothing that in any way defiles enters into the Holy City (Revelation 21:27). In both we find the tree of life (Genesis 2:9, Revelation 22:2), and in both there is a river (Genesis 2:10, Revelation 22:1). Neither is the product of human hands: It was the Lord God who planted the garden (Genesis 2:8) and the Holy City descends from God out of heaven (Revelation 21:10). The difference, and it is a major one, is the difference between a garden and a city. The first suggests primal innocence and simplicity. The second suggests a high degree of structured complexity. In Swedenborgian terms, the first is an image of the innocence of ignorance, the second an image of the innocence of wisdom.¹⁰ Innocence is innocence, but ignorance is not wisdom.

In this story, then, we do not come full circle and recapture a lost simplicity. We do not “become like

10. See, for example, Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* §341.

children” (Matthew 18:3) by forgetting everything we have learned since the cradle. There is a huge difference between being childlike and being childish. “Childish” suggests the liabilities of immaturity, the inability to see beyond our immediate wants. “Child-like” suggests a peace of mind that rests in a fundamental trust in the Lord’s providence. We might say that infants trust because they don’t know any better—they have no choice. The truly wise trust because they do know better—they have learned.

This, I would suggest, is one of those “fundamental principles that give coherent meaning to the bewildering twists, turns, and inconsistencies in the biblical narrative” that may help us find “coherent meaning in the bewildering twists, turns, and inconsistencies of our own lives.” A central assumption is that we are designed and created to live in a “holy city,” a heavenly community, which is a profoundly social gospel. One of the most beloved of Swedenborgian axioms, though, is that “. . . we are all born for heaven—accepted if we accept heaven into ourselves in the world and shut out if we do not.”¹¹ By this token, the transformation of human society and the transformation of individual human beings are interactive and, in fact, inseparable.

If this is the case, there is a definite logic to the proposition that the story of the chosen community

11. *Heaven and Hell* §420.

over the centuries can be read as a parable of the story of the individual over a lifetime. In each reading of the story, too, events will have certain meanings that can be perceived only when they are seen in relation to the goal. Literally, what does this battle or this success or this failure contribute to the Holy City? Analogically, what can I gather from today's events that will help "heavenize" me? What can enter the city and what must be left outside? What should I accept and internalize, and what should I reject?

All along the way there are choices, some fairly obvious and some dismayingly difficult. We make mistakes, and not all of our mistakes are innocent. Little by little, we decide what matters more and what matters less to us, establishing our own personal priorities. We do this in part by what we choose to do and in part by how we evaluate what we have done. I suspect that, if we were asked what experiences we learned the most from, we would come up with a list comprising mostly mistakes. They are what make us stop and think, and when we stop and think, there is a chance of learning something. Mistakes can show us what cannot enter the city, if we are willing to be told—but only if we acknowledge them.

This may turn our attention to the city limits, and here we immediately encounter a paradox. The city has a great, high wall (Revelation 21:12), yes, but there are three gates on every side that are never shut (Revelation 21:25). If nothing unclean enters through

those gates, though (Revelation 21:27), the most obvious reason is that the city is filled with light from the glory of God (Revelation 21:23). All we need to do is put this together with a thought from the Gospel of John: “And this is the judgment, that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed” (John 3:19–20).

We will not be ready for heaven until we are willing to come out of the dark into a light so full that we are transparent. As long as we feel the need of some kind of façade, there is a barrier between us and those around us. We cannot let them into our hearts, and if they cannot see who we are, they cannot let us into theirs. Paul had it right: “Then I will know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The open gates at the end of the story stand in a kind of inverse parallelism to a way that was closed at the beginning. “. . . and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24). There is a way to the tree of life, but it is a long and devious one. There is no turning back.

This image takes on heightened force when we add an element from the beginning of the Book of Revelation. The radiant Christ there describes himself as having “the keys of death and hell” (Revelation 1:18). In commenting on this, Swedenborg writes,

“‘Keys’ means the power to open and close, here the power to open hell so that we can be brought out and the power to close it so that we do not go back in once we have been brought out.”¹² The gate into heaven is the gate out of hell.

Where do we stand in relation to that gate? How close are we to accepting the kind of transparency that results from walking into the full light of the glory of God? Does the thought of it seem appealing or threatening? The more honestly we admit to ourselves that keeping up pretenses is hard, unproductive work and face the lurking suspicion that other people are not really fooled, the less threatened we feel by the thought of transparency. We know quite well that we cannot simply blurt out all our confessions, that there are some people we trust more than others. We need to move with some caution; but this reading of the Bible assures us that there is a way we can move toward the city, a way we can keep letting in more and more of that heavenly light.

We surely cannot be honest with each other if we cannot be honest with ourselves. This is just one of the ways in which the individual and the social are intertwined. During the first flush of enthusiasm over *perestroika*, one prescient Russian cautioned his audience,

12. *Apocalypse Revealed* §82. This quote was taken from the forthcoming New Century Edition of the text, which will be released under the title *Revelation Unveiled*.

“Don’t set your hopes too high. It seems as though every time we come up with a better system, the bad guys are first in line again.” I doubt that we will ever be smart enough to outsmart ourselves by designing a social system that is proof against injustice. We cannot afford to stop trying, but given the relationship between the heaven outside us and the heaven inside us, the transformation of society and the transformation of individuals must go hand in hand.¹³

The entire biblical narrative, then, is framed by the image of the garden at the beginning and the image of the city at the close. Our individual lives are similarly framed by the innocence of infancy and, we profoundly hope, the blessedness of a community that we can trust at the close and beyond. In the course of our lives, both the beginning and the ending can seem inaccessibly remote, as remote as the garden and the city seem when we are caught up in the turmoil of the biblical narrative. It is a narrative that seems to separate them, but we can equally well say that it joins them. It only seems as though “You can’t get there from here.” ♦

13. Spirituality and concern for social justice are incompatible, then, only if social justice is construed in exclusively materialistic terms (and it might be worth remembering that Marxism is classified as “dialectical *materialism*”) or if spirituality is construed as solely a private, inner process. If we take seriously the principle of “on earth as it is in heaven,” then individual spirituality is essential for the formation of heavenly community, and heavenly community is essential for the formation of individual spirituality—a very different kind of “dialectic” from that of Marxism.

For Reflection

What is your ideal of the perfect community?

What is the personal ideal that you are trying to live up to?

Are these two ideals “talking” to each other?

To what extent do you feel as though you are shaped by circumstances beyond your control?

Do the readings give you a personal or social sense of direction?

How do you react to the thought that the Lord has a place prepared for you in heaven that only you can fill?

Chapter 3 *Policy Questions*

Readings

Genesis 8:20–22, 12:1–3 • Exodus 20:1–21, 24:3–8

Joshua 24:1–28 • 2 Samuel 7:1–17

Jeremiah 31:31–34 • Matthew 26:17–30

If the central theme of the story is the relationship between Divinity and humanity, one of the first facts to face is that the Bible offers a multitude of different descriptions of God and of different ways in which Deity seems to approach us. In the twenty-third Psalm, the Lord is the shepherd; in the twenty-fourth, the Lord is the king of glory, the leader of the army. There is a huge difference between a shepherd and a field general, between a field where sheep may safely graze and a battlefield. At Bethel, God comes to Jacob in the silence of a dream (Genesis 28), while at Sinai a terrifying divine voice thunders out of the midst of volcanic violence (Exodus 19). God is portrayed at different times as jealous, loving, tender, angry, infinitely patient, ruthless, motherly, constant, and changing. It would be an understatement to say that the Bible does not meet Western standards of systematic theology.

Instead, it offers an extraordinarily candid view of the wildly different ways in which human beings have experienced and understood Divinity. By comparison, the systematic theologian dwells on levels of abstraction that may be quite remote from the inconsistencies of everyday living. The systematic theologian is a little like someone who knows a great deal about the regularities of chemistry, physics, and metallurgy that are basic to the internal combustion engine, but who may not know one end of a screwdriver from the other. The Bible is written by mechanics who deal day after day with the vagaries of actual engines, and many of the pages have greasy thumbprints on them. Some of them are almost impossible to read. The two kinds of truth are complementary. They have much to offer each other, and it is to the detriment of both when they ignore or demean each other.

Let me pause at this point, though, because God-language is often problematic. “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in. Chances are I don’t believe in that God, either.” James Fowler, citing Richard Niebuhr, describes faith as a “search for an overarching, integrating, and grounding trust in a center of value and power sufficiently worthy to give our lives unity and meaning.”¹⁴ Einstein is said to have remarked that the most important question was, “Is

14. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 5.

the universe a friendly place or not?” What is “the way things really are,” and how do we then best relate to that reality? “There is no God” is at least a deistic statement, a statement of faith. It claims that there is “a way things really are,” whether we like it or not. The only true atheists, I would argue, are people who manage to believe that reality is whatever they themselves say it is—people who have absolute faith in their own propaganda.¹⁵ Could a true atheist be someone who says, “God exists because I say so”?

My God, then, has to do with my sense of the way things really are. *The* God has to do with the way things really, *really* are. If the universe is a friendly place—or, for that matter, if the universe is an unfriendly place—then there is something personal about God. If the universe is simply a vast machine, then God is utterly impersonal.¹⁶ An utterly impersonal God may be a center of power, but it is hard for

15. This seems to me to be the direction and ultimate destination of post-modernism, to the extent that it “drops the notion of truth as correspondence with reality altogether” (Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* [Hassock, Sussex: Harvester, 1982], xvii). Danna Fewell’s comment that “ideological . . . criticism makes no pretense to objectivity; it challenges the notion of universals; it is more interested in relevance than in so-called universal truth” (McKenzie and Haynes, eds. *To Each Its Own Meaning* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999], 269) could well serve as the motto of every spin doctor on the political scene.

16. It may be of interest that in one of the first of his recorded dreams Swedenborg wrote, “I was standing by a machine which was moved by a wheel; its spokes entangled me more and more and carried me up so that I could not escape” (Lars Bergquist, *Swedenborg’s Dream Diary* [West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2001], 94).

me to see how such a God could be or become a center of value sufficiently worthy to give my life unity and meaning.

In fact, it seems that whatever we may conclude in the abstract, we do tend to deal with our personal lives in qualitative terms, in terms of values. We are pressed to do so by our constant need to make choices, to regard some courses of action preferable to others, to spend time with some particular individuals rather than others. The issue of any thorough acceptance of rigid determinism would be the pathology of the obsessive-compulsive. For the sake of our sanity, we operate with notions (which often amount to convictions) about what is better and what is worse, and this essentially involves assumptions about good and evil. We may believe that “life is good” or that “life sucks,” but we do tend to believe. The alternative is meaninglessness.

For “life” in these colloquial statements, read “God.” We are talking about what is beyond our control.¹⁷ With this in mind, then, let us look at some of the ways in which the Bible portrays God as coming to us. For this purpose, I would select six turning points in the biblical story, six points at which God establishes a

17. I am indebted to Huston Smith for the observation that by basing its conclusions on “the controlled experiment,” hard science debars itself from studying anything beyond its control. It would seem to follow that, in so doing, hard science disqualifies itself from making any pronouncements about the nature or existence of anything beyond its control.

covenant relationship with us. The first of these is the promise to Abram in the twelfth chapter of Genesis; the second is the covenant at Sinai in the nineteenth and twentieth chapters of Exodus; the third is the covenant ceremony at Shechem in the twenty-fourth chapter of Joshua; the fourth is the covenant with David in the seventh chapter of Second Samuel; the fifth is the new covenant proclaimed in the thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah; and the sixth is the Last Supper in the closing chapters of each of the Gospels. These vary significantly in a number of respects, and we may here look at the matter of the balance between promise and obligation. My underlying assumption, based on personal experience and observation, is that sometimes Divinity seems predominantly promising, while at other times Divinity seems predominantly demanding.

There is a kind of preview in the mythical prologue, a “covenant” with Noah that is all promise. “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Genesis 8:21–22). Not only does this demand nothing of us, it seems that there is nothing we can do about it. Our inadequacy is stated very bluntly, and, in quite remarkable fashion, seems to be the reason for God’s constancy. It is *because* the human heart is evil that God will never

again curse the ground. We can rely on God because we cannot rely on ourselves.

Further, the constancy is not a “steady state” or a linear constancy, but a cyclical one, a constant, reliable fluctuation. No matter how cold it gets, there will never be a winter that does not give way to spring. No matter how dark it gets, there will always be a dawn. Conversely, no matter how warm it gets, winter will come, and no matter how brilliant the sun is at noon, it will set at nightfall. Today is the only day that has never ended, and it, too, most assuredly will.

It is not at all hard to see this as a metaphor for our souls, and if we are looking for some “background of constancy” that will help us make sense of our changing lives, this is a promising place to start. We will have our bad days and we will have our good days. Neither will last forever “as long as the earth endures”—as long, that is, as we live on this earth.

The promise to Abram in the twelfth chapter of Genesis adds a new and very significant element.

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great. And be a blessing,¹⁸

18. Though rarely translated as such, the verb is clearly an imperative. It should also be noted that punctuation marks developed only much later than biblical times. In fact, the practice of leaving space between words seems to have developed only gradually and irregularly.

and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:1–3)

This changes the picture from one of endless, cyclical repetition to one of progress in a single direction. The circle becomes a spiral, to use one of Swedenborg's favorite images. It will turn out that we are called to a definite destination, the Holy City.

The tone of this covenant is affirmative. According to usual translations, all that is required of Abram is that he move to some "place to be named later," and everything else is promise. Taking the imperative as an imperative, though, there is also the requirement to "be a blessing," which is surely important. All in all, though, both promise and obligation are couched in the broadest of terms. If this is a contract, there is a singular lack of fine print, and there is no hint of how long and difficult the path may be to the fulfillment of the promise. We could hardly ask for a clearer image of the first glimpse we have of new possibilities.

In many respects, the covenant at Sinai stands in sharp contrast. Here (in Exodus 19–20 and Deuteronomy 5) God thunders commandments and obligations, and the pervasive theme is negative—"**Thou shalt not!**" The only suggestion of promise is in the note that father and mother are to be respected "so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12, see also Deuteronomy

5:16); and the initial commandments are followed by page after page of far more detailed laws. Perhaps these are the fine print that was missing from the first edition. Discipleship entails discipline. While there is a ceremony in which Israel accepts the covenant (Exodus 24:1–8), she seems to have little choice but to do so. Any significant new venture will require the acceptance of a new discipline; and in the early stages most of the learning comes from our mistakes.

The close of the book of Joshua (chapter 24) tells of a gathering of all the tribes at Shechem at the close of what we might call “the conquest phase.”¹⁹ Joshua summarizes what has happened since the call to Abram and presents the people with a choice, either to serve the Lord or to go back to the gods of their pre-Abraham ancestors. If they are faithful, they will be rewarded, but if they are unfaithful, they will be destroyed. When the tribes promise to be faithful in spite of Joshua’s warnings about the Lord’s “jealous” nature, their promise is duly recorded and witnessed. The impression is of a very careful balance between promise and obligation, and the legal overtones are striking. The lawyers have been at work. The people are duly warned of what is at stake and are given a

19. The “conquest” was far from complete, an issue that will be dealt with directly in a subsequent chapter.

chance to refuse. They acknowledge that they are witnesses against themselves (verse 22), the whole thing is put in writing (verse 26), and a stone is set up as a witness (verse 27). There is no way they can evade the fact that they have accepted the obligations, which are assumed to be the laws promulgated at Sinai. We can see ourselves in this image as asserting our autonomy, free to follow or not, sure of our ability to succeed, and as very consciously accepting the consequences of whatever choice we make. This is a deal, signed, sealed, and delivered, a contract with no loopholes.

There is another new development when the promise to Abram is apparently fulfilled, that is, when David has secured the throne and has subjugated all the neighboring kingdoms (2 Samuel 7). In response to his proposal to build a temple, David is given a message through Nathan the prophet to the effect that it is not for him to build a house for the Lord. Rather, the Lord will build a house (that is, a dynasty) for David. The promise is unconditional. There will be punishments for transgression, but “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). The future is full of promise, thanks to a Lord who will never give up on us. This sounds suspiciously like “the honeymoon period,” a phrase whose application has been extended from its marital context to include the first flush of enthusiasm for any new undertaking.

The prophet Jeremiah lived through the traumatic years in which the Davidic dynasty came to a close.²⁰ We might think of him as facing the task of explaining how the Lord was being faithful to his side of the covenant at a time when the nation was suffering the consequences of its infidelity. His message included the proclamation of a “new covenant,” a shift of focus to a whole new level.

“The days are surely coming,” says the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . . I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts . . . No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” says the Lord. (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

It would seem that when the law is written on the heart, when obedience to the law becomes wholly natural, the line between promise and obligation has virtually disappeared. Living in accord with the law does

20. We are never told of the death of the last king. This phase of the biblical narrative ends with Jerusalem razed, temple destroyed, and King Jehoiachin captive in Babylon. There is surely something poignant about the closing note that the king of Babylon eventually “released King Jehoiachin from prison; he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon” (2 Kings 25:27–28). His land may lie in ruins and he may be captive in a foreign land, but he is the best king in captivity.

not bring blessing as a reward; living in accord with the law is a blessing. It feels right. The impression that a righteous life is one of constant self-discipline and sacrifice is challenged by a glimpse of the fact that what this Lord wants for us is good. I am reminded of the intimate connection between being a blessing and being blessed in the covenant with Abram.

We turn finally to the Last Supper, where the wine is identified as “the blood of a new covenant” (Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20). The reference to the covenant ceremony at Sinai is unmistakable (see Exodus 24:8, “See the blood of the covenant . . .”). The connection between promise and obligation is now an organic one. The commands are to eat and drink, and the implicit promise is to be fed and refreshed, or, more basically, to be kept alive. Heavenly community is simply a matter of the free giving and accepting of love and understanding.

In his *Stages of Faith*, James Fowler proposes that there is “a series of cognitive stages that are logically and empirically sequential and invariant.”²¹ Here we tread a fine line between a “one size fits all” strait-jacket and the loss of any shared meaning to the term “human.” Let me briefly sketch the pattern of human life that I see reflected in the biblical narrative, then, and leave it to be tried on for size.

21. Fowler, 49.

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In both Genesis and early childhood, there is a vague sense of promise—"when I'm big"—and a distinctly episodic quality. At first, the patriarchal stories seem only very loosely connected, but by the end of Genesis, the story of Joseph and his brothers is virtually a novelette. As children grow, their attention span lengthens, and with that development comes the ability to sustain efforts in a chosen direction.

The book of Genesis is also a kind of case study of tension between text and subtext. The apparent structure is patriarchal, but the fact is that leadership is passed on to Sarah's firstborn, not Abraham's; to Rebekah's favorite, not Isaac's; and to Rachel's firstborn, not Jacob's. The surface message is that the promised land is a land "flowing with milk and honey," but the fact is that the land seems to suffer repeated famines and that the patriarchs regularly leave it, prosper outside it, and bring their wealth back to it. The way parents see their relationship to their children can be very different from the way the children see it, and much that is new in a child's life is found outside the home.

The stories of the Exodus provide a suggestive parallel to the "declaration of independence" that occurs with puberty, both with the sense that the family has become too controlling and with the discovery that the world out there is formidable. Suddenly, clothes and language and behavior become desperately important, and the early adolescent is faced with a barrage of

social rules that must be obeyed in order to avoid the social death of expulsion from the community.

The way out of this wilderness is the conquest of the promised land, which can be seen as an image of starting to get one's inner house in order. It takes a certain amount of courage to face one's own limitations, and the "conquest" is far from complete, but by mid-high school years, the teen has typically achieved a measure of stability and is no longer completely at the mercy of the opinions of her or his peers.

One of the most obvious equations is between the establishment of the monarchy and arrival at adulthood. Israel, small as she is, takes her place as a nation among nations, knowing her boundaries and in control of her immediate relationships. The so-called "united kingdom" period is an apt image of the optimism of early maturity, when everything—the ideal marriage, the successful career—seems possible.

The biblical historian of the divided kingdom works overtime to show that the nations' security and prosperity depend directly on their devotion to the temple in Jerusalem. An explanation must always be found for the successes of a "bad" king or the failures of a "good" one, because there is an urgent need for a comprehensible system of rewards and punishments. In the individual life, there is commonly a growing split between the ideal (and, to an unrecognized extent, idealized) self and the self that has to deal with a very imperfect world. By midlife, the evidence

becomes overwhelming that the dreams of childhood are simply not going to come true. The whole elaborate structure collapses.

What is called for is a shift of consciousness to a quite different level. To put it bluntly, “things” are lifeless, and the only power they have to make us happy is the power that we grant them. The death of our relatively materialistic dreams can clear the way for a realization that essentially, human fulfillment is a matter of mutually rewarding relationships. Human life, fully human life, is about loving and learning, grounded in giving and receiving.

This I would see as the message of the shift of emphasis from the “kingdom of Israel” of the Old Testament to the “kingdom of heaven” of the New; and the most radical image of this is in the Last Supper, the notion that we accept others into our own being and allow ourselves to be accepted into others’.

This very sketchy overview is burdened with my own belief that these are “stages that are logically and empirically sequential and invariant.” Certainly we cannot rearrange the basic sequence of birth, growth, aging, and death, and, equally certainly, no two of us follow this sequence at exactly the same rate or in exactly the same way. Perhaps the best use of this model is to give substance and form to our questions about the meaning and direction of our own individual lives. ♦

For Reflection

Can you recall times when you had a vague sense that you were destined for something wonderful?

Can you recall times when it seemed as though everything you wanted to do was forbidden?

Can you think of protracted spans of time when God (or “life”) seemed primarily demanding?

Can you think of protracted spans of time when God (or “life”) seemed primarily promising?

Can you recall times when you felt defeated but began to suspect that the defeat was a doorway to a new depth of faith?

Can you recall times when self-forgetful care for someone else was delightful?

Do you find any of these covenant images particularly descriptive of where you are now?

Chapter 4 *Questions of Power*

Readings

Exodus 14 • Numbers 9:15–23
Joshua 24 (again) • Judges 2:11–23
Isaiah 9, 13

Overall, the picture we see in the Bible is of a God who is directly concerned with human affairs. This is not always obvious. There are stories of very direct divine intervention in human affairs, and there are stories in which there seems to be none. During the years of the patriarchs, there are fairly frequent stories of divine messages, but there is little direct divine action (Genesis 12–50). Throughout the story of the Exodus and the forty years in the wilderness, God is both active and vocal. The plagues (Exodus 7–12) are portrayed as straightforward acts of God, as is the parting of the waters (Exodus 14). It is God's voice that gives the laws at Sinai (Exodus 20–23), God's hands that carve the tablets, and God's finger that writes on them (Exodus 32:16).²² The

22. This lends significance to the statement that after Moses had broken the tablets (Exodus 32:19) it was he who was to carve out their replacements for God to write on (Exodus 34:1).

detailed specifications for the construction of the tabernacle and the consecration of the priesthood are given by direct divine discourse (Exodus 25–30) and carried out in corresponding detail (Exodus 36–39). Numbers 9:15–21 drives home the point that throughout the forty years in the wilderness, the travels of the tribes were controlled by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night over the tabernacle.

Messages from God and divine intervention are fairly frequent in the story of the conquest (Joshua), but it is noteworthy that God is utterly silent during the covenant ceremony at Shechem (Joshua 24): Joshua is the speaker. Most of the stories in the next book, the Book of Judges, follow a formula: The Israelites “forget the Lord” and worship other gods, whereupon they are beset by enemies and repent, in response to which the Lord raises up a “judge”²³ who leads them to defeat their enemies (the full pattern is described in Judges 2:11–23). There is a picture of constant divine concern and guidance, but there are

23. The root meaning of the title centers in “judgment,” but the stories make it clear that the functions of these individuals were more military than legal. In *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), Thorkild Jacobsen sees in the process of urbanization a progression remarkably like that described in the biblical narrative from Judges through Second Samuel. “The evidence suggests that kingship originally was a temporary office: a king was chosen as leader when war threatened and ceased to exercise authority once the emergency was over. Now, the emergency had become chronic, and the office of the king had become permanent because of it . . .” (p. 78).

relatively few “acts of God.”²⁴ For the most part, God acts through human agents, using both guidance and inspiration.

This “policy” of working through human agents and messages rather than through miracles continues through the story of Samuel. It is noteworthy that the story of Samuel’s call begins with the note that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there were not many visions” (1 Samuel 3:1). God intervenes primarily by commissioning Samuel himself (1 Samuel 3:21–4:1) and guiding him to anoint first Saul (1 Samuel 8–10) and then David (1 Samuel 16) as king. The momentous covenant promising an eternal dynasty seems to have come very quietly—“the word of the Lord” came in some unspecified way to the prophet Nathan during the night.²⁵ In striking contrast to the building of the tabernacle, the building of the temple is described as Solomon’s enterprise (1 Kings 5:5, 5:13–17, 6:14). In fact, the Lord virtually disavows any part in the enterprise with the words “About this house that you are building . . .” (1 Kings 6:12), a phrase quite in keeping with his earlier message to

24. Judges 5:20, in “The Song of Deborah,” is particularly intriguing in this connection: “The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera.”

25. We may see a kind of specialization in this. Samuel acted as both leader and prophet. With the establishment of the monarchy, though, it seems that God communicated with the kings primarily through prophets. See, for example, 1 Kings 22:5ff.

David that he was perfectly content with the tabernacle (2 Samuel 7:6–7).

The rather convoluted story of the divided kingdom (1 Kings 12 through 2 Kings 25) is singularly lacking in acts of God except those connected with the prophets Elijah (1 Kings 17–21) and Elisha (2 Kings 2–9). The recurrent theme is that of centralization of sacrificial worship in the Jerusalem temple. The kings of both northern and southern kingdoms are rated according to the zeal with which they put an end not only to the worship of other gods—this could surely be taken for granted—but to the offering of sacrifices to the Lord anywhere but in Jerusalem (see, for example, 1 Kings 14:22–24 and 15:11–15).²⁶ There is a consistent effort to tie the rising and falling fortunes of both kingdoms to this standard of fidelity, but even a moderately close reading discloses that “good” kings may suffer for the sins of their predecessors (see, for example, 2 Kings 23:24–26), while “bad” kings may prosper because the Lord takes pity on his suffering people (see, for example, 2 Kings 13:4–5). There is no question of the assumption that the Lord is managing all this, but he seems to be doing so very much behind the scenes and in ways that need more than a little explanation.

26. This centralization is mandated in Deuteronomy 12, where it is recognized as a change from previous practice (Deuteronomy 12:8). In fact, the second commandment given after the Ten Commandments was to “Make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being; . . . in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you” (Exodus 20:24).

Throughout the books of the prophets the principal voice is that of God, and the predominant tone is one of condemnation—the nation has not kept its promises—and of call to repentance. As the doom of the nation comes closer and closer, the prophets see beyond it to a restoration; and in their visions there is a clear echo of the tension between direct divine intervention and intervention through human agency. The former is pictured as “the day of the Lord,” a day of cosmic disaster.

The stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light . . . I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts, in the day of his fierce anger. (Isaiah 13:10, 13)

Elsewhere, though, the focus is on a human descendant of David, a messiah or anointed king who will restore the nation to its Davidic glory.

His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. (Isaiah 9:7)

The prophets do not seem to be troubled by the incompatibility of these two images of the restoration, and the Gospel narratives suggest that one of the preoccupations of the study of Scripture involved trying to read the signs of the times. When Herod wanted to know where the Messiah was to be born, the “chief priests and scribes” could come up with the one passage in the prophets that mentioned a place of birth (Matthew 2:1–6). When the delegation came from Jerusalem to question John the Baptist, they had some specific and very pointed questions to ask (John 1:19–23).

The expectations raised by the prophets provided the fire, so to speak, that impassions the Gospels, but they seem to have generated more heat than light. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was clearly a charismatic figure, but what was the nature and depth of his charisma? In those days, everyone knew better than to take oracular utterances literally, and the range of prophecy, from human reform to cosmic purging, defied simplistic interpretation. God was somehow present in Jesus, but how?

The Gospels record ongoing uncertainty concerning the nature of Jesus, an uncertainty that Jesus himself does little, if anything, to resolve. He is unquestionably a powerful individual, but he does not wield the kind of power the prophecies would lead one to expect. He said, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be

first among you must be your slave” (Matthew 20:26), and he lived by a principle of self-giving most tellingly pictured in the covenant of the Last Supper. By the close of the Gospel of John, the line between divinity and humanity seems almost to have vanished. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He is both the shepherd and the lamb. We might in fact say that Jesus’ humanity is demonstrated beyond contradiction by his death, and that his divinity is just as compellingly demonstrated by his resurrection. What is *this* telling us about the central theme of the story, the relationship between Divinity and humanity?

If we follow the story of Jesus rather than the story of the Christian church, we move directly from the ascension to John’s vision of the risen Christ at the opening of the Book of Revelation. This is followed by stories of unearthly, cosmic conflict that culminate in the vision of the Holy City descending from heaven to earth.

Underlying this irregularity we can see the tension between grace and the law, between the extremes of God doing everything for us and us doing everything for ourselves. It is a paradox that I find reflected in the “Twelve Steps” of Alcoholics Anonymous, which begin with an admission of powerlessness and proceed to list a number of commitments to action. This seems logically questionable but pragmatically effective.

This, for me, is one of many signposts pointing toward the need to embrace paradoxes. Niels Bohr said

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it very clearly: “The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth;” and it is worth noting that it was not a theologian speaking, but a physicist. It may be a great mistake in both physics and theology to try to shrink reality down to the compass of our own minds. ❖

For Reflection

Can you think of protracted spans of time when, if things went wrong, you thought you could identify the particular “sin” you were being punished for?

Can you think of protracted spans of time when God did not seem to be much in evidence?

Can you recall times when you felt that your fate was entirely in your own hands?

Can you recall times when you felt that you knew where you were going and that nothing would stop you?

Has there been a time when you felt particularly besieged by a sense of not having lived up to your early expectations of yourself?

Do any of the images of divine presence and activity awaken particularly strong affirmative or negative feelings for you?

Does any one of them seem particularly descriptive of your situation at present?

Chapter 5 *The Shape of the Story*

Readings

Matthew 1:1–17 • Genesis 12:1–3

Isaiah 1:10–17 • Micah 6:1–8

Jeremiah 5:1–19 • 2 Kings 24:8–25:30

2 Samuel 7:11–16 • Luke 1:67–80

In a way, the shape of the central narrative of the Bible is encapsulated in the very first verse of Matthew: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Abraham is the promise of greatness; David is the achievement of greatness; and Jesus, the Messiah, is the transformation of greatness. The missing quarter is supplied in the genealogy itself: Fourteen generations were counted from Abraham to David, but the next fourteen led not to Jesus, but to the exile in Babylon.

With this milestone in place, the basic shape is clear. There has been a call to greatness. Through many vicissitudes, that promise has eventually been fulfilled. 2 Samuel 7 finds David secure on the throne, king over both Judah and Israel, with all surrounding enemies subdued. Israel did not, however, live happily ever after. The unthinkable happened.

By the close of the second book of Kings, Jerusalem lies in ruins. The temple has been razed, and its furnishings of bronze, gold, and silver have become the spoils of war.²⁷ Everybody who is anybody is deported to Babylon, and, while no mention is made of the fact, we can be quite sure that they were replaced by deportees from other conquered lands.²⁸ The fall from greatness is catastrophic.

That is not the whole story, though. If one Hollywood version would have ended with the achievement of glory, the tragedian would end it with everything in ruins, with Judah clinging to the pathetic image of Jehoiachin as the best king in captivity (2 Kings 25:27–30). In the biblical story, the totality of the disaster is matched by the beauty and power of the promises of restoration, whether by direct divine intervention or by God working through human agents (see Isaiah 9 and 13, as noted in chapter 2 above).

27. It is striking that nothing is said about the fate of the ark of the covenant. I am not aware that any credence, scholarly or otherwise, has been given to the statement in 2 Maccabees 2:4–5 that Jeremiah hid the ark, the tent, and the altar of incense in a cave on “the mountain where Moses had gone up and seen the inheritance of God.”

28. The Judeans had seen this happen in Israel after it fell to Assyria (see 2 Kings 17:24), but there were no “historians” left in Judah to see it happen in their own land. The annals of Tiglath-Pileser III indicate that it was standard practice in the case of particularly recalcitrant subject nations. See Pritchard, James B., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), 282–284.

The human agent of this restoration is to be a “messiah,” that is, “one anointed” as king. He will be a descendant of David in keeping with the original dynastic promise (2 Samuel 7:12–16). We are so steeped in the transcendental nature of Jesus as the Messiah that we tend to forget that in Israelite terms, a messiah was a thoroughly human being called to supreme political/military leadership. Saul was the first such messiah (1 Samuel 10:1), and in Isaiah we find the Persian king Cyrus referred to as the Lord’s messiah (Isaiah 45:1).²⁹

When the Gospel of Matthew opens by identifying Jesus as a messiah,³⁰ the son of David, the son of Abraham, it clearly signals his pivotal place in the story. “The son of Abraham” identifies him as a true Israelite, and “the son of David” accords him royal lineage. Then, when the following genealogy places him at the close of a third set of fourteen generations, it implies that this is a turning point in the story of Israel of equal importance to the call that began it, the triumph that marked its zenith, and the catastrophe that marked its nadir. This emphasis is underscored in

29. Twice in the story of Saul’s pursuit of David, David refuses to harm “the Lord’s Messiah” (1 Samuel 24:6; 26:9, 11, 16). The usual translation, “the Lord’s anointed” effectively obscures the continuity of a central theme of the story and is, in my opinion, regrettable.

30. The Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Messiah” is *Christos*, “Christ.” Sometimes, but not always, this occurs with the definite article: “the Christ” = “the Messiah” (as, for example, in Matthew 1:17, 2:4, and 16:16). When appended to the name “Jesus,” as here, it lacks the article.

Luke's story of the two on the way to Emmaus, who "had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21).

Something radical has happened to the messianic expectations, though. Taking Matthew's gospel as an example, there are no references whatever to the "kingdom of Israel," but there are thirty references to "the kingdom of heaven" and four to "the kingdom of God." Luke has no references to the kingdom of heaven but thirty-three to the kingdom of God, and in John 18:36 we have the explicit statement that "my kingdom is not from this world."

In a way, this is not a new development. If we read Genesis 12 as saying that Abram was promised greatness and commanded to be a blessing, we can read the subsequent story as one in which the promise is construed in economic and military terms and the command is all too often forgotten. We can read the establishment of the monarchy under David as the achievement of economic and military success, and the disintegration of the nation thereafter as a revelation of the fundamental inadequacy of that kind of materialistic and militaristic achievement.

The disaster of the exile then clears the way for the emergence of the command to "be a blessing," which has been a constant and often annoying subtext throughout Israel's struggles for greatness.³¹ On this

31. In Gospel times, the hope of military/political restoration was still alive, and why not? This little nation had outlived the immensely greater

reading, the biblical story is telling us that radical materialism simply does not work. Again, impersonal, lifeless things have no power to give our lives meaning. It is we who invest them with meaning and not the reverse, and we seem to keep on doing so until something happens to disillusion us.

This is something that can happen time and again in small ways—reaching for some “thing” that promises happiness, gaining it, and discovering that we have only the shadow and not the substance. We longed for independence, and got a car; we longed for intimacy, and got sex; we longed for a sense of security, and got money. Sooner or later, the promise fails.

It tends to fail in a major way when we are faced with signs of our mortality. Until that happens, we can manage to believe that success, however we define it, is still within reach, that the time will come when we will be content. When the calendar tells us that we are running out of time, that things are starting to go downhill, the sense of failure will be proportional to the loftiness of our goals. We may have the house in the suburbs, the two healthy children, the secure jobs, and all the other elements of the American Dream, but they do not give us a sense of inner, personal worth. They can, in fact, begin to look like a façade behind which we hide our sense of emptiness.

empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and Greece. Why should it not outlive Rome?

Deliverance comes when we let go of our obsession with the material “kingdom of Israel” and glimpse the reality and beauty of the spiritual “kingdom of heaven”—not as some vague, ethereal “pie in the sky bye and bye,” but as soul treasuring soul here and now. As our bodies inevitably decline, our understanding and appreciation of each other can grow. What would you do if you had your life to live over again? Two women in Betty Friedan’s *The Fountain of Age* offer a clue. Each says, roughly, “The second time, I married someone I wouldn’t have looked at twice when I was younger.”

The years of labor for the earthly kingdom have not necessarily been wasted. The shadows we have been chasing do resemble the substance that we need. Our efforts to prove our worth reflect the fact that we are “of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:31, Luke 12:7). Our mistake is in thinking that this is something we must claim for ourselves when, in fact, it is something we must discover and accept. If we do not matter to anyone but ourselves, our lives are pathetic. This is the clearest possible sign that we do matter to each other, immensely. ❖

For Reflection

For the next week, pay particularly close attention to the ads you see on television. What do they actually promise? What do they imply? How closely do you actually resemble any of the people in the ads?

What are the possessions that mean the most to you? What do they mean?

Think of the times in the past week when you have felt most alive. What were you doing, and what was it doing for you?

Has someone recently said or done something that gave you particular pleasure or pain?

If so, what was it, and what nerves did it touch?

If you look now at your childhood dreams of adult achievement, can you see ways in which they have laid the foundations of the person you have become?

Chapter 6 *Liberation*

Readings

Exodus 1–20, 25:1–9 • Numbers 9, 13–14

Deuteronomy 12:1–14

How free are we? “Out of the house of bondage,” as the King James Version has it, is a central theme in the story of Israel. The central festival of the Jewish liturgical year was Passover. The nation felt that it owed its existence to the deliverance from Egyptian slavery,³² and “Let my people go” has taken on new meaning to generation after generation of the oppressed, whether it was the Puritans escaping from religious suppression in Europe or the Africans enslaved in “the land of the free.” The biblical story is worth a closer look.

The book of Genesis ends with the descendants of the patriarchs settled in fertile country in Egypt, apparently growing exponentially in both numbers

32. It is worth noting that this immense turning point in Israel’s history is not one of Matthew’s “markers.”

and wealth. The book of Exodus opens with what seems to be a sudden change of fortune, with a new pharaoh on the throne who wants to exploit this resource to his own advantage. God at this point intervenes, both directly and through human agency, sending plagues on the one hand and raising Moses to leadership on the other, and the Israelites escape and head for the promised land.

Between them and the promised land, though, lies not only a wilderness, but Sinai, and it seems that the sudden access of freedom is met almost immediately by the terrifying and rigorous demands of Divinity and the daunting rigors of the wilderness.

The basic principle I see reflected here is that while freedom may look like a privilege when seen from the outside, it needs to be regarded as primarily a responsibility. Otherwise, nothing lies ahead but anarchy—until someone succeeds in being the strongest and another tyranny is established.

In the course of individual lives, both the nature of the events and the location in the larger sweep of the narrative suggest the difficult transition of puberty. The Genesis stories are family stories: Exodus brings Israel out onto the international political stage. Children are designed to leave the nest and become adults. One of the clearest early signs of this destiny is the adolescent's felt need for independence, which all too readily casts parents in the role of tyrants. Choosing children's clothing for them is supportive

and nurturing only up to a point, and then it becomes unbearable.

The world of the early adolescent, however, is not carefree, not at all. It tends to be radically insecure, with all kinds of rules for dress, behavior, and language, and with social disgrace and isolation lurking at every turn. From the outside, it is painfully obvious that the freedom to choose one's own clothes results in a virtually slavish conformity.

In the biblical story, this is a formative period. Two major things happen. First, there is the development of a legal structure that is shared by all, a kind of social contract whose acceptance is prerequisite to being a member in good standing. Violation of this contract can mean expulsion regardless of family standing. Second, the essentials of this legal structure, the Ten Commandments, are enshrined in an ark and a tabernacle is built to house them. This tabernacle is the center of the community when it is at rest and the leader of the community when it is in motion. For all the grumblings and rebellions of the wilderness period, the ninth chapter of Numbers insists that the basic leadership of the tabernacle held fast.

In what can be seen as a closely analogous way, adolescents "take shape" in this crucible of peer pressures, growth spurts, and hormone surges. Their bodies begin to take adult shapes, which means that they are differently perceived and differently treated by adults. They learn what they can tolerate and what they cannot,

and one way or another find styles of dealing with themselves and each other that they can live with.

In chapter 1, I mentioned Robert Kegan and his focus on the tension between our need for autonomy and our need for inclusion in our relationships with each other, seeing this as a kind of psychological echo of the theological tension between law and grace. It also clearly touches on the perennial nature-nurture debate, which emerges, not as an either/or argument that needs to be resolved, but as an ongoing dialectic with shifting fortunes. In early adolescence, “nurture” seems clearly to have the upper hand in the sense that the young are painfully aware of, and sensitive to, outside pressures. Not only is it hard to go against the current behaviorally, it is hard to maintain a sense of personal worth unless it is fed by the approval of those who matter. Difficult as it is for those involved to believe, this is just as true of the social leaders as it is of their followers. “Uneasy lies the head that wears crown” might have been written not about Henry IV but about someone in junior high.

The book of Exodus closes with an intriguing sequence. In chapter 24, the covenant is formally accepted with sacrifices and with promises sealed by “the blood of the covenant.” In the succeeding chapters, detailed instructions are given for the construction of the tabernacle. In the thirty-second chapter, the Israelites lapse into idolatry, and the original tablets of the law, entirely the handiwork of God, are

shattered. Then a second set is made, this time with Moses' cooperation, and the story shortly proceeds to describe the building of the tabernacle in terms virtually identical to those of the instructions.

This reads most obviously as a picture of rigorous demands being imposed by what is perceived as reality, rebellion against those demands, and ultimate acceptance of what is perceived as inevitable. Like it or not, this is who I seem to be. These are my core values; this is my spine.

My late colleague Bob Kirven quoted a Dr. Coleman Benda as identifying four stages of learning: unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, and unconscious competence. The years of early adolescence strike me as centering particularly in the second stage and laying the foundation for the third. The beginnings of independence mark the emergence of a very small person into a much bigger world with an accompanying sense of inadequacy. To some extent, this is characteristic of any significant venture into uncharted territory. It is virtually inevitable that the first stage will be learning some rules that are counterintuitive, a period of self-discipline that lasts until one either abandons it or finds that the discipline has been internalized. ❖

For Reflection

What are some of the disciplines that now seem natural to you that you had to learn “the hard way”?

It seems that the social climate today is much more permissive than it was a generation ago, but it is as necessary as ever for parents to let go of their children sooner or later. What principles can you suggest for dealing with this dilemma?

Recall to the best of your ability the social role you found for yourself in early adolescence. How does that role relate to the way you deal with relationships now?

Given the volatility of the early teens, what would you say is fair compensation for an eighth-grade teacher?

How would you like to be seen by an eighth-grader?
How do you think you are seen?

Chapter 7 *Independence*

Readings

Joshua 6 • 2 Samuel 2:1–4, 3:1–6, 5:1–5
1 Kings 11:43–12:16 • 2 Kings 17:5–11, 2 Kings 24–25

It is customary to refer to the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon as the “united kingdom” and to the centuries that followed as the “divided kingdom,” but things are not quite that simple. For one thing, the story presents Saul simply as a military leader, and not as an administrative head of state. It was David who centralized government after the death of Saul, and he first did so, not in Jerusalem, but in Hebron (2 Samuel 2:4) and only over the southern part of the country, while Saul’s son Ishbaal ruled in the north. In fact, there is explicit mention of war between the north and the south (2 Samuel 3:6). It was only after Ishbaal was assassinated that the northern tribes came to David in Hebron and invited him to be their king (2 Samuel 5:3); and once David accepted this invitation, he moved his capitol from Hebron in the central mountains to Jerusalem, on the border between the north and the south.

Geographically, the north (Israel) and the south (Judah) were quite different.³³ The south was mountainous and off the beaten track. The north was more open and fertile, and was right on the beaten track. The main road between Egypt and Mesopotamia—between Africa and Asia, that is—passed through its center. One result of this was that the northerners tended to be much more cosmopolitan than the southerners—in modern terms, more pluralistic. They would see the southerners as rigid and provincial, while the southerners would see them as compromising and permissive. They were uneasy partners at best; and when a “hard line” king came to the throne in Jerusalem, the division surfaced decisively.

The essence of the matter is conveyed in two adjoining verses (Shechem is a principal city of the northern region).

Solomon slept with his ancestors and was buried in the city of his father David; and his son Rehoboam was king in his stead. (1 Kings 11:43)

33. Note that the genealogy of the patriarchs gives Israel clear precedence. Jacob/Israel (see Genesis 32:28) is the father of all twelve tribes, of which Judah is one. It is rarely noted that in the Gospels “the Jews” are technically “the Judeans,” and that the more inclusive labels are “Israel” and “Israelite” (See, for example, “Israel” in Matthew 2:6, 8:10, 10:6, 15:24, 27:9 & 42, Luke 1:80, 2:25 & 32, 24:21, and John 1:31, and “Israelite” in John 1:47). The descendants of the “Israel” of the divided kingdom, though, are the Samaritans, the true “ten lost tribes.”

Independence

Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. (1 Kings 12:1)

Judah, that is, accepted Rehoboam as the heir to his father's throne, but Israel—"all Israel"—retained the right to make its own choice. When negotiations broke down, Israel simply rejected Rehoboam, and, however reluctantly, Rehoboam went back to Jerusalem empty-handed. From the northern point of view, this was not a rebellion or even a secession, not at all. It was simply a decision not to continue an alliance.

Once we read the story with this in mind, it becomes a rich image of a way in which we tend to be divided against ourselves. It is an old story, in a way, the story of idealism versus pragmatism. It is the story of a younger generation seeing the mistakes that their elders are making, setting out with an unquestioning faith that they will not make the same mistakes, and then, over the years, becoming the elders whose mistakes are so obvious to another young generation. We can think of Judah as representing those lofty ideals, tucked away in the mountains and out of touch with what we sometimes refer to as "the real world." Israel, on the other hand, is out there in the thick of things, dealing on a day-to-day basis, not with the ideal world, but with the actual one, discovering that politics is the art of the possible.

For a while, we may be able to maintain a kind of unity between our longing for perfection and our

actual dealings with the world and the people around us. Inevitably, though, we find ourselves in situations where the best we can do is to choose what we see as the lesser of two evils. We find that, even in the most favorable of circumstances, we do not always live up to our own expectations. We are not the perfect parents we started out to be. Our beautifully simple answers to life's problems do not fit with the complexity of the problems themselves. The demands of idealism are more than we can sustain. "Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us and we will serve you" (1 Kings 12:4).

As the story progresses, king follows king in north and south, with rising and falling fortunes. Eventually Israel falls to Assyria (2 Kings 17), and then Judah falls to Babylon (2 Kings 24). The midlife crisis hits full force. The whole carefully constructed house of cards collapses. ♦

For Reflection

How would you define the difference between being faithful to principles and being intolerant?

How would you define the difference between being tolerant and being weak?

In your present circumstances, which of these attitudes do you see as most needed? That is, if you had to err in one direction or the other, which would make the most sense?

Do you have a vision of heavenly community, and if so, do you feel that there is a place in it for you?

Do you identify particularly with any of the “characters” in this chapter?

Chapter 8 *Transformation*

To me, it has become a major asset rather than a liability that the Gospel accounts do not agree in many details. I have no inclination to try to discover which wording of the Lord's Prayer is "the original," because I regard it as entirely possible that Jesus repeated himself on any number of occasions, and that, in so doing, he did not always use exactly the same words. The differences themselves, then, may prompt us to look behind how something is said in an effort to understand what was being said.

On a wider screen, the Gospels do not offer an unequivocal picture of the person of Jesus. On the subject of his humanity and his divinity, they seem to wrestle with a question rather than to argue for some particular resolution of a clearly felt tension; and this, in my view, is admirable. *Of course* the experience of the Resurrection changed the way the disciples viewed

him. If this happened to someone you knew, what would go through your mind? If the Crucifixion had convinced them of his human mortality, the Resurrection would have taken them back to square zero. Nothing they had assumed in the past could be trusted. Everything had to be rethought, and it is to the credit of the Gospels that this rethinking was not read back into the accounts of his life and ministry.

I find this focus on the Resurrection reflected in the account of choosing a replacement for Judas.

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection. (Acts 1:21–22)

Two things may be noted here. First, nothing is said about testifying that Jesus had died for our sins. The heart of the message is not the Crucifixion, but the Resurrection. Second, the assumption is that testimony to the Resurrection could be given only by people who had experienced the events leading up to it. It was mortality that gave meaning to immortality. Perhaps the same could be said of humanity and divinity. If so, then true humanity was immensely more than had been thought, and true divinity was immensely more accessible. Nothing was the same as before.

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If I set the Gospels in the narrative framework already outlined, they reflect something that goes on in our consciousness after we have come face to face with our mortality. We are indeed going to die. We have tried so hard to be the people we believed we should be, to achieve the goals that would prove our worth, and we are faced with the feeling that it hasn't happened, and that we are running out of time. Even if we have "succeeded," our presumed success does not have the meaning it promised.

The awareness dawns that something has been going on under the surface all these years. It may be noted that while the books of the prophets follow those of the kings, the figures and events were actually contemporary. The biblical sequence strikes me as being far more apposite spiritually than it is historically. The midlife passage presses us to review our lives, in a sense to relive our strivings and see them in a new and alarmingly candid light.

This re-viewing of our past has an inevitable effect on our view of the present. We can no longer take ourselves at face value, so to speak. We are not sure exactly what is going on in our relationships. Nothing means exactly what we thought it did. Life is "speaking in parables." We are groping for meaning that seems near enough to be felt but not near enough to be grasped.

At the same time, the very fact that we feel as though we have missed the point carries the message that we still believe that there *is* a point to be found.

The fundamental values that we have taken as normative are deeply ingrained. If we are condemning ourselves, our very self-condemnation bears witness to our acceptance of the standards we have not met.

We may eventually realize that the years of “missing the point” have not been wasted at all. In Jungian terms, we have formed the identity we need if we are to lay it aside. There is something solid enough about us to weather the chaos. In very pragmatic terms, we have formed habits of responsible conduct that are hard to break even when we can see no point in maintaining them. We still set the alarm when we go to bed, still get up and go through the routine. It struck me, not too many years ago, that the time comes when we read the Ten Commandments as promises rather than as prohibitions. Don’t worry—the day will come when thou shalt not kill or bear false witness.

This is the state of mind I see imaged in the disciples. Sometimes they seem pretty dense. They do and say some fairly dumb things. I mean, really, here they are face to face with God incarnate, and they don’t seem to realize it. One of the old favorite children’s hymns has the theme of wishing we were back there with the disciples. “I wish that his hand had been laid on my head, that his arm had been thrown around me, and that I might have seen his kind look when he said, ‘Let the little ones come unto me.’” It is a sweet thought in a childish way, but not a very realistic one. Surely the biggest obstacle to believing in the presence

Transformation

of divinity would be the undeniable, palpable, finite, *physical* humanity.

There is a statement in Swedenborg's *Secrets of Heaven* §5121 about the nature of revelation that is very much to the point.

Real perception comes through heaven from the Lord and has a spiritual effect on our intellect, leading it to think sensitively and in accord with reality. There is an inner affirmation from some source that we do not know. We think that it is one of our own attributes and that it flows naturally from the connectedness of things; but in fact it is a message from the Lord through heaven flowing into the depths of our thought, a message about matters that transcend what is earthy and sensory.

The “psychology of choice” of my late colleague Cal Turley was Roberto Assagioli's psychosynthesis, which worked with the idea of “subpersonalities.” Assagioli's work entailed a therapeutic discipline designed to get these subpersonalities out into the open and in conversation with each other. Cal found it to fit exceptionally well with the Swedenborgian belief that all the biblical characters represent aspects of our own being. I would suggest that as we struggle with the issues raised by our awareness of our mortality, there is a “Jesus subpersonality” at work in our lives who seems, in many respects, to be “just one of us.”

What is that subpersonality trying to tell us? As far as I am concerned, it would be hard to find a clearer and more precise description than the one offered by a man named John Titus. He was talking about his response to the death of his beloved daughter Alicia, who was a flight attendant on United Airlines Flight 175 on that fateful September 11: “I yearned for justice; not more destruction and not more innocent lives destroyed. Clarity of mind and a deep feeling of interconnectedness ensued. . . .”³⁴

John doesn’t say so, but both my mind and my heart say that “clarity of mind and a deep feeling of interconnectedness” are the essence of heaven. Material resources are limited, and what one of us has, others do not have. Our material bodies are limited, especially in duration. If these two factors are given free rein, then, they tend to make us competitors racing down a dead-end street. Maybe the point of the whole thing is to see who can make the biggest splotch when we hit the brick wall at the end.

I find the Bible telling me that the way out of midlife bewilderment is to find “clarity of mind and a deep feeling of interconnectedness,” and it is idle to speculate about which comes first. The clarity of mind shows us the interconnectedness that is the source of the clarity that shows us the interconnectedness. The

34. *The Messenger*: Published by the Swedenborgian Church of North America, September 2005, 77.

two together constitute the perspective from which we can see “the way, the truth, and the life.”

This entails the distinct shift of level that I find tellingly imaged in the shift from the Old Testament’s focus on the kingdom of Israel to the Gospel focus on the kingdom of heaven. It may be hard for us to realize how difficult a transition this was for the disciples. I was in England for the better part of two years in the mid-fifties, and I could not help but be aware that this had been the heart of the world’s greatest empire, one that, rightly or wrongly, believed herself to be bringing the values of civilization and enlightened government to its colonies. Now she was struggling to rebuild after the devastation of the war, and, in terms of both economic and military power, she was frankly second-rate. It never really registered with me that my Oxford classmates and teammates had grown up under the shadow of German bombers—they never talked about it—but when the conquest of Everest, the splendor of Elizabeth’s coronation, and Roger Bannister’s breaking of the four-minute mile barrier all happened within the space of a year, there was a sense that “This is the true England, the true British Empire.”

Israel’s memories of glory were not that great geographically, but their roots were far deeper, at least a thousand years deep. All the elements were in place for an incurable case of “manifest destiny,” and the cure for chronic manifest destiny is painful. Our own country became a world power only within the past

hundred years, and I think that already, for most Americans, the thought of becoming anything less than we are on the world scene is virtually inconceivable.

This brings us to God by the back door, so to speak, because we do not start with the image of an immense, bearded figure glaring down on us from on high, but with the dawning experience of what is true and good in our relationships with each other and with ourselves. Life starts speaking to us in parables. We start, not with revelation as something thundered from Mount Sinai, but with questions and with “an inner affirmation from some source that we do not know.” Our understanding of what is going on is just as confused as the disciples’ understanding of the nature of Jesus, and what is enlisting our allegiance is not the power or authority of this subpersonality but its human beauty. We are hearing the voice of someone intimately bound up with our lives, even with our being, and that someone has no interest in defeating us and every interest in winning us.

Could this be what it is like to be “not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34)? ♦

Closing Reflections

What would be your definition of a beautiful person?

What would be your definition of a beautiful relationship?

Have you had moments when you felt that heaven was close at hand?

Have you had times when you felt understood and treasured?

Have you had times when you felt that you understood and treasured someone else?

How do you respond to the phrase, “clarity of mind and a deep sense of interconnectedness”?

Appendix *Bible Readings*

Chapter 2

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude; and on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Genesis 1:31, 2:1–3)

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. . . . Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Revelation 21:23, 25–27)

“In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. . . . If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” (John 14:2–6)

APPENDIX

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. . . . So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations. (Matthew 1:1, 17)

Chapter 3

. . . the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind . . . As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Genesis 8:21-22)

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation; and I will bless you and make your name great. And be a blessing, and I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Then God spoke all these words: "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. . . . for I, the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing grace to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments." . . . Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." (Exodus 20:1-2, 5-6; 24:8)

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“Choose this day whom you will serve” . . . Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods” . . . Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” (Joshua 24:15–16, 22)

“I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7:11, 16)

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” says the Lord: “I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts . . . for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” says the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:33–34)

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:27–28)

Chapter 4

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (Exodus 14:21–22)

APPENDIX

On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant; and from evening to morning it was over the tabernacle, having the appearance of fire. . . . Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp. At the command of the Lord the Israelites would set out, and at the command of the Lord they would camp. (Numbers 9:15–18)

Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge, because the Lord would be moved to pity . . . But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods and bowing down to them. (Judges 2:18–19)

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us . . . and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. (Isaiah 9:6–7)

See, the day of the Lord comes . . . For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light . . . I will make the heavens tremble and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. (Isaiah 13:9–10, 13)

Chapter 5

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. . . . So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations. (Matthew 1:1, 17)

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation; and I will bless you, and make your name great. And be a blessing, and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1–3)

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?” says the Lord; “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts . . . Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. . . . Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (Isaiah 1:11–13, 16–17)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

“I am going to bring upon you a nation from far away, O house of Israel,” says the Lord, “It is an enduring nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know . . . they shall destroy with the sword your fortified

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cities in which you trust. But even in those days," says the Lord, "I will not make a full end of you. And when your people say, 'Why has the Lord our God done all these things to us?' you shall say to them, 'As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so shall you serve strangers in a land that is not yours.'" (Jeremiah 5:15, 17–19)

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon . . . carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king's house . . . He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land. He carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon; the king's mother, the king's wives, his officials, and the elite of the land, he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. . . . [Later] he burned the house of the Lord, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem . . . In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah . . . King Evil-merodach of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released King Jehoiachin of Judah from prison. He spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. (2 Kings 24:11, 13–15; 25:9, 27–28)

"I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." (2 Samuel 7:11, 16)

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he looked favorably upon his people and redeemed

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them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham. . .” (Luke 1:67–73)

Chapter 6

Now a new king rose over Egypt, one who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and powerful than we . . .” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. (Exodus 1:8, 11)

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (Exodus 14:21–22)

Then God spoke all these words: “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.” (Exodus 20:1–2)

The Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me. . . . And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and all its furnishings, so shall you make it.” (Exodus 25:1–2, 8–9)

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Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp. (Numbers 9:17)

At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. . . . they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." (Numbers 13:25, 32–33)

"As I live," says the Lord, ". . . your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number . . . from twenty years old and upward, who have complained against me, not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you . . . (Numbers 14:28–30)

When you cross over the Jordan and live in the land that the Lord your God is allotting to you . . . then you shall bring everything that I command you to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, and all your choice votive gifts that you vow to the Lord. (Deuteronomy 12:10–11)

Chapter 7

So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the peo-

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ple charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. (Joshua 6:20–21)

After this, David inquired of the Lord, “Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?” The Lord said to him, “Go up.” David said, “To which shall I go up?” He said, “To Hebron.” So David went up there, along with his two wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel. David brought up the men who were with him, every one with his household; and they settled in the towns of Hebron. Then the people of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. (2 Samuel 2:1–4)

There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David; David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker. (2 Samuel 3:1)

[After the assassination of Saul’s son] Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, “Look, we are your bone and flesh. For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you, ‘It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.’ So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel.” (2 Samuel 5:1–3)

Solomon slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of his father David; and Rehoboam his son became king in his stead. Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. (1 Kings 11:43–12:1)

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Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria. For three years he besieged it. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria. He carried the Israelites away to Assyria, settling them in Halah on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. (2 Kings 17:5–6)

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