



BETHEL  
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## MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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### An Exposé of Idolatry, Part 6

J. I. Packer's book, *Knowing God* published in 1973 is without question is Packer's most popular book. Many have read it and greatly benefited from it. In fact, many say that the [Foreword](#) itself is worth the price of the book! Yet in 1984, Packer published another book which I think ought to have as prominent a place in our library as *Knowing God*; It is called, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*.

*Keep in Step with the Spirit* details three different schools of thought when it comes to sanctification: Keswick, Wesley, and Augustine. After examining and debunking the Keswick and Wesleyan holiness movements, Packer demonstrates the biblicality of the Augustinian school which essentially understands holiness as a cooperate grace in the life of the child of God. As

that is the case, the pursuit of holiness amounts to keeping in step with the work and will of the Spirit of God.

This quite accurately describes the process of sanctification. It is NOT doing what you want, NOR is it “letting go and letting God.” RATHER it is walking with and in reliance upon the Spirit of God *as He leads us by and with the Word*. Accordingly, the process of sanctification is akin to the labor and delivery of a child. The call of the woman is NOT to expel the baby from her womb on her own; that is the role of the labor contractions. RATHER, her job is to work with the labor contractions when they come. As she does this, not only will there be less pain, but the labor and delivery of the child in most cases will be shorter.

What a beautiful picture of what it means to “Keep in Step with the Spirit.” Truly, as fallen individuals our intuition and understanding is flawed. What we might think is a big deal oftentimes is of little significance to the Lord. And what we might think is of little importance to God, can mean all the difference when it comes to the pursuit of holiness. So if we want to grow in our holiness, it is imperative that our focus and effort be confined to God’s focus and effort and NOT that of our own- lest we push when there is no contraction! Or in Paul’s words, lest we “beat the air” in our pursuit of holiness (1 Corinthians 9:26)!

With that, the passage before us is of great significance, for it gives us the “Why?” when it comes to God’s disciplining grace. Understanding this “Why” enables us BOTH to apprehend the focus and purpose of God in all things AND, as a result, to work with the Spirit of God as He leads us by His grace.

One of the divine objectives in addressing idolatry amongst God’s people is to preclude further sin in the child of God.

Ezekiel 14:10-11a, “And they will bear the punishment of their iniquity; as the iniquity of the inquirer is, so the iniquity of the prophet will be, IN ORDER that the house of Israel may no longer stray from Me...”

The Hebrew word for “stray” is תָּעַתַּ (taah) which is variously translated as “deceive,” “go astray,” “lead to ruin,” “misled,” “seduce,” “stagger,” and “wander.” It is used in a physical sense of people getting lost (Genesis 21:14) or the drunkard who “staggers” on account of his inebriated state (Isaiah 28:7). It is a farming word referencing an animal that wanders off the beaten path. Most frequently it is used in reference to mental, moral, or spiritual error (cf., Psalm 95:10) and so of God’s people when they wander off the path of covenant fidelity.

And that is exactly where God’s people were at this time. As a “nation under God,” they formally were committed under Moses to a certain way of living as a covenant community. Yet get this, insofar as they individually compromised their calling to God, this eventually led to national rebellion in which Judah, for all sakes and purposes, became a secular nation (in fact, we know they actually became worse than the Canaanites living in the land, 2 Kings 21:10-12)! Accordingly, and as we have seen, God severely punished them as a nation which is what the

exiles of 605, 597, and 586 BC were all about.

Now in this context, what was God's intent behind His disciplining grace? It was "...in order that the house of Israel may no longer stray from Me" (v. 11a). This raises a very important truth about sin that you and I rarely consider; sin breeds sin! Any and all sin, no matter how innocent it may seem, is a cancer whose cells invade the entire body.

Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, "You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion *did* not *come* from Him who calls you. [The people of God in Asia Minor wholly accepted the truth of God's word. But then they quickly veered into error. And Paul here wanted them to understand how this happened! So he posits the notion that something hindered them from their growth in grace. What was it?] A little leaven leavens the whole lump *of* dough" (Galatians 5:7-9). Clearly Paul is speaking about unchecked sin in the individual lives of many of the Galatians. It was this private error which led to further error which led to their current rebellion. In fact, Paul couldn't have been clearer than when he wrote...

Speaking of a rebellious Christian in Corinth who would not repent, "*I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. [Now to explain why he resorted to such a severe course of action, Paul wrote...] Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump *of* dough?" (1 Corinthians 5:5-6). Truly, sin is no laughing matter. No matter how seemingly insignificant it may appear, it always carries with it the potentiality of death.

Mindful of this, Paul exhorted Timothy, "But avoid worldly *and* empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene..." (2 Timothy 2:16-17a). When it came to bearing another's burden in the body who had fallen into sin, Jude exhorted God's people as they proceeded, "...have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh" (Jude 23b).

Later in the section that we are in, Ezekiel issued this warning to the people of God, "'Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct,' declares the Lord God. 'Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you'" (Ezekiel 18:30).

Truly, sin is the most virulent disease known to mankind which in any form or degree is always fatal unless it is attended to by God. When sin is left unchecked in the lives of God's people, while it will NOT damn their soul (they are saved by grace in Christ), NEVERTHELESS it could and very well will destroy their fellowship as a community, their intimacy with God as individuals, their family, their mission as a body, and so much more.

Remember the cost of the seemingly innocent and clean sin of Proverbs 7? "Suddenly he follows her [the 'her' here could be any sin, whether that of the prostitute or an unchecked temper], as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as *one* in fetters to the discipline of a fool, until an

arrow pierces through his liver; as a bird hastens to the snare, so he does not know that it *will cost him his life*" (Proverbs 7:22-23).

So why is it that God resorted to such a severe course when it came to His people's sin? Was it because He had blown a gasket and so lost control? Was it that He no longer loved them? Was it in fact- as the Jewish leaders of Ezekiel's day surmised- because God was an unfaithful Being when it comes to His covenant promises? NO! We learn that thirdly, in all that God is doing with His people, that which drives Him is preventing further sin in their lives!

A little boy in a city park playing with a toy boat that he just got for his birthday. Because he was young and unskilled, it didn't take long for the boat get out of his reach on the city lake. And so he began to cry. Soon an older boy came by and, with what appeared to be a heartless smile, began throwing large rocks at the boat. This made the little boy cry all the more. However, soon the little boy stopped crying when he saw that his boat had been pushed, by the waves of the rocks, close enough to the shore for the older boy to retrieve the boat and hand it to the younger lad. The older boy wasn't trying to sink the boat, but retrieve it!

This is how we must interpret every inconvenience, every difficulty, and every trial in our lives. It is NOT a heartless god throwing rocks at us for fun. BUT a loving Lord protecting us and so preventing us from further sin! Notice a fourth reason behind God's disciplining grace is that God's aim in addressing sin in His people to preserve their usefulness in the kingdom of God.

Ezekiel 14:11b, "In order that the house of Israel may no longer stray from Me and no longer **DEFILE THEMSELVES** with all their transgressions..."

The language here comes from Israel's worship/liturg. The word is נָטַף (*tame*) and is used primarily in Leviticus and Numbers in reference to that which is clean and unclean. In this regard, the word speaks of being ceremonially acceptable to God which is incredibly significant biblically.

Note, we are NOT simply talking here about moral purity (that most certainly would be included). RATHER we are talking about a person who is wholly acceptable to God and used by Him for His purposes. Something that is clean (or undefiled) is something that God uses when it comes to His Kingdom work! An unclean vessel is that which God passes by when it comes to service in His kingdom. In this regard, it is possible for a Christian to be ceremonially defiled, which doesn't mean they are condemned, but less useful to God. Recall Paul's words in 2 Timothy 2, after discussing the ungodly activities of "worldly and empty chatter," Paul gave this instruction to Timothy regarding the child of God, "Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these *things*, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified [again, morally acceptable as in worship and so clean as opposed to unclean], **USEFUL TO THE MASTER**, prepared for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21).

In this regard, we conclude that the only thing sin will ever give a Christian (besides a very short and shallow taste of pleasure) is grief, torment, and regret as the Lord passes them by when it comes to Kingdom service. Paul put it this way:

2 Timothy 2:4-5, “No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please [notice the language; Paul is talking here about being ceremonially acceptable to God] the one who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.”

Do you see it? The only thing sin will do when it comes to our service in the Kingdom of God is *limit* how and the degree God will use us! Recall the truth Christ conveyed in the Parable of the Talents. What happened to the five-talent servant who proved faithful with the little he got?

Matthew 25:21, 28-29, “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master’... [In contrast, what happened to the slave who in his laziness buried his talent?] Therefore, take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.”

Family of God, it only makes sense. Sin in the life of a Christian will not damn him, but disqualify him from further/greater service! Borrowing from the field of athletics, Paul wrote of himself,

1 Corinthians 9:26-27, “Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.”

Is Paul here speaking about his salvation? Was he concerned that if he didn’t serve God in the right way, God might, in the end, reject him and Paul would lose his soul? No! He is NOT talking here about his salvation, BUT the privilege of service in the Kingdom of God. If Paul got mixed up in sin, he knew that that would limit his usefulness in the hands of the Master to the point where he might in fact be disqualified from formal service as a preacher/teacher of God’s word!!

We see it in the qualifications of the elder, “An overseer, then, must be above reproach...”(1 Timothy 3:2a). “Above reproach” is NOT one of many qualifications for an elder, BUT THE qualification (everything following in the list explains what an “above reproach” life looks like. Accordingly, if a man on account of his sin is NOT “above reproach,” it is NOT that he somehow will be banished from the people of God. RATHER, it means that he is ineligible to be used by God as a shepherd of His people!

Do you see it? Sin can and oft-times does disqualify the believer from greater use and service in the Kingdom of God. And so while we might really like a time or two where we can come out of the game, indulge in sin, and then go back in. Yet such living will only disqualify you and me from service in God’s Kingdom. Robert Murray McCheyne wrote:

How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword, His instrument- I trust, a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. (Bonar, 1866, p. 211)

Accordingly, a large emphasis in Scripture when it comes to Christian service is being undefiled (ceremonially acceptable to God) and therefore useful to the Master. This is why God acted so severely with His people in 586 BC. It was NOT out of rashness or an uncontrolled temper. RATHER it was to protect His people from themselves lest they in their sinning be disqualified from the privilege of service in God's Kingdom!

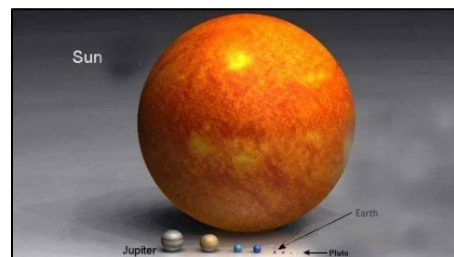
Notice lastly, that God's aim in addressing sin in His people is to enjoy a deep, abiding love relationship with them.

Ezekiel 14: 11c, "Thus they will be My people, and I shall be their God,' declares the Lord God."

This we have seen is a fundamental part of the relationship God has initiated with us. When God approached Abraham and established more fully the Covenant of Grace, the Lord introduced this incredible concept, that Abraham and his heirs would be the Lord's identified people, and they would possess Him as their God! The language speaks of an intimacy. Yet it goes way beyond this. It speaks of ownership (on both sides) AND SO commitment, devotion, deference, allegiance, love... again on *BOTH SIDES!*

Quite frankly, this goes beyond amazing! Through His condescending grace, the God of creation has deigned to enter into a relationship with man; a relationship of mutual ownership, love, devotion, and intimacy. Behind every providence of the Lord is the goal of preserving this relationship lest we become "estranged from God on account of our idols" (Ezekiel 14:5)!

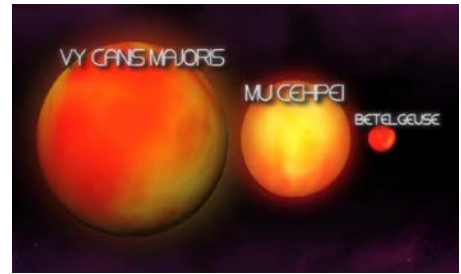
Now step back from this a moment and consider this truth in the context of reality (consider with me how Big God is and how Small we are). Our galaxy which has more than a trillion planets/stars is but one of 100 billion galaxies. And in these galaxies there are stars and planets which dwarf not just the earth, but also the sun! For example, the Pistol Star found in the Milky Way is 186 million miles in diameter; if it were in our solar system, it would fill everything within the orbit of Earth!



The first picture compares the planets of our solar system to the sun. Now notice: the sun is a million times the size of earth. That means if the earth was the size of a golf-ball, the sun would be 15 feet in diameter! Another way of putting it

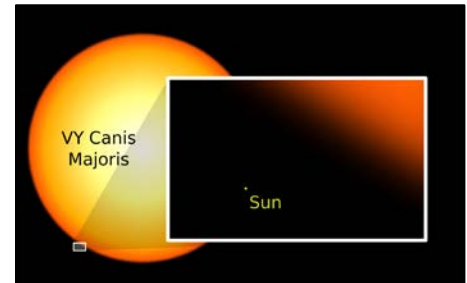
is that 960,000 earths could fit inside the sun!

The second picture is of some of the largest stars that we know of in the universe. Notice the first one Betelgeuse. This star is twice the size of the earth's orbit around the sun! In fact, 262 trillion earths would fit inside Betelgeuse.



Then there is Mu Cephei. This star is massive. 2.7 quadrillion earths would fit inside it. Put in perspective, a billion is a thousand million, a trillion is a thousand billion, and quadrillion is a thousand trillion. A million seconds is 12 days. A billion seconds is 32 years. A trillion seconds is 31,709 years. But a quadrillion seconds is 30,800,000 years! With that in mind, again consider: 2.7 quadrillion earths would fit inside Mu Cephei! It is massive!

Finally, the largest star pictured is that of Canis Majoris. Its size is incomprehensible. Seven quadrillion earths would fit inside of it! And yet — and this is the point — these stars and planets (everything you know, everything you see) are in the immediate presence of God this very moment! Think about that; that is how awesome God is!



Furthermore, speaking of size, notice the sun as it is pictured next to Canis Majoris! Canis Majoris is so large that if the sun were placed beside it, you could not see the sun! Now in this regard, consider again the first picture and the size of the earth in relation to the sun. Our planet really is miniscule in the context of the universe! And yet one more size comparison... consider the size of an individual next to the earth, next to the sun, next to Canis Majoris... we truly are as nothing when you take into consideration the entirety of the universe! And yet, get this, of all of this creation, that which holds a special place in the heart of God is you, me, God's people! We aren't the first to consider this truth and then to be floored by it! David wrote,

Psalm 8:3-6, "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; what is man, that Thou dost take thought of him? And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him? Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God, and dost crown him with glory and majesty! Thou dost make him to rule over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet."

When God created the universe, of all things He set His love upon a people. And then at a moment in Redemptive History, God approached this beloved people and entered into a special relationship with them. In this relationship, He committed Himself to their special protection and gave Himself to them as their God!

Ezekiel 14:11c: "Thus they will be My people, and I shall be their God!"

Now if you are in Christ Jesus, you are a member of this people whom God loves! It is this that

fifthly serves as the focus of God when it comes to His disciplining grace: it is the preservation, protections, and furtherance of this relationship!

From all of this I want you to see once and for all that God is never against His people for their sin; He is and will always be for His people against their sin! Accordingly, let us NOT doubt the goodness NOR the kindness of God. His plans — even in discipline — is for our welfare, never our calamity! And so when in your sin you feel wounded or alienated from God, know that that is just a feeling. God is and will remain our “ever present help in time of need” (Psalm 46;1)!

Yet sadly, when our way is rough on account of our sin AND we smart on account of what we perceive as the absence of God, it doesn't take much to doubt God, His purpose and intent! Accordingly, Ezekiel's message to the exiles of God was very simple: Do No Doubt the Love of God or His Faithfulness!

Christian, before us is a fivefold list of what God is doing when He disciplines us. This constitutes God's plan for you in Christ. Accordingly, do NOT live ignorant of this plan. BUT knowing it, let us keep in step with the Spirit of God that with every contraction; as painful as it may seem, we might work together with our Lord! In this way the trials of Christ will NOT keep us from the Lord, BUT open up the way to deeper, more abiding fellowship! In the words of James Smith: “Believer! Your sin, guilt, and temptation should lead you to Jesus, not keep you from Him!” (Smith, 2002)