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The Prophet Moses for Today

366 Social Biblical Meditations

Jan H. Boer

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The Prophet Moses Today

366 Biblical Social Meditations

By

Dr. Jan H. Boer

Revised Edition

2014

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The Prophet Moses Today: 366 Social Biblical Meditations

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DEDICATION

It's not the first time I dedicate a book to my Famke.

pup pup pup pup pup pup pup pup

Each time it is well deserved,

pup pup pup pup pup pup pup pup

For she labours on without tiring

pup pup pup pup pup pup pup pup

Until the book is absolutely inspiring!

pup pup pup pup pup pup pup pup

The first edition was printed so small

pup pup pup pup pup pup pup pup

That it took weeks of piercing eyes to digitalize it all.

pup pup pup pup pup pup pup pup

She had to squint and gaze and pierce,

pup pup pup pup pup pup pup pup

But her determination was so fierce

pup pup pup pup pup pup pup pup

That she kept puppin' puppin'

puppin' puppin' puppin' puppin' puppin'

Till there was nothing left to pup.

The book was done,

And now into cyberspace it's gone

For all the world to meditate and pray--

The surest way to keep the devil at bay

And for the Lord to have the final say.

[Type text]

A big “*Thank You*” to my

Fanke Fran

(Phew, you are fully worth these two pages!)

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the following Introduction was featured in the pages of the initial monthly installment of these meditations (1992). The main problem addressed in these meditations, namely the separation of our Christian faith from our main daily personal and national concerns, remains an important obstacle to our living out a full-orbed version of the Christian faith.

Though I am grateful for the mountains of meditational literature available to us today in Nigeria, this book of meditations is meant to fill an important vacant spot. The subjects covered in the others are mostly of an individual, private and personal nature. One social subject that is receiving much attention also is the area of marriage and family.

This is a book of social meditations. It is high time for us Nigerian Christians to be serious about our involvement in the different areas of society and culture *as Christians*. The Bible is much more concerned with business, politics and other cultural sectors than you may have thought. So, while I hope that you will not lose your interest in personal spirituality or family matters, these meditations will help you focus on matters you may not have connected with serving God. The purpose of these meditations is to connect your God and all the practical things in your life, including your daily work, occupation or profession.

Though it is fitting for us to thank God that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was brought to us, it must be admitted that sometimes it was not the *full* Word of God that was preached to us. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Northern Zone, some years ago published a booklet, *Leadership in Nigeria*, in which it complains that “missionaries did not impart to us the technique of governance.” The booklet then proceeds to outline the traditional missionary approach as observed by our CAN leaders:

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For anyone to be interested in the governance of a country was “blasphemous.” A Christian should not be interested in politics.... We are often reminded that politics is a dirty game and true Christians should distance themselves from it.

CAN then argues in very strong words that such an approach is not only unbiblical, but it has also pushed Christians to the edge of society, away from the centres where decisions are made, and has left them powerless. In other words, part of the problem of oppression and killings Christians face today are the direct result of an incomplete presentation of the Gospel in earlier years. *The intention of these meditations is to help Christians gain in social power by giving you a reason and motivation to bring Christ into the marketplaces of our nation, to help you bring the wisdom of God’s Word to our national affairs **for the good of all citizens.***

For further explanations of this situation I refer you to my book *Missions: Heralds of Capitalism or Christ?* Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1984; as e-book at www.lulu.com, where you can obtain it free of charge.

This narrowed-down version of the Gospel has also given our Muslim neighbours the wrong impression of Christianity. They see it as a religion that is strictly private and personal that has nothing to contribute to the development of our society. In contrast to this view of the Christian religion, they proudly boast that Islam is a complete way of life that can help solve Nigeria’s problems.

This Muslim view of Christianity is wrong, very wrong, but they have a good reason for this view. They have listened and observed that Christians have a strictly spiritual religion that has little to offer society. *These meditations are therefore also to help our Muslim neighbours understand the Christian religion better.* I hope they will listen. They may find that Christians and Muslims have much in common when it comes to national and social concerns. Perhaps these meditations can help set the stage for co-operation in the development of our country.

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So far the original Introduction. 25 years have elapsed since those earlier pages saw the daylight and many things have changed. In terms of these meditations, many things have changed for the good. Nigerian Christians have become aware of the gap between faith and life and have done much to overcome it. Whereas we used to hear it said that politics is a secular sector that is no longer so popular an idea. Various forces have helped bring about this change, among them, of course, the Bible itself, then the wholistic boast of Islam and, I believe, the conferences, seminars and workshops of the Institute of Church & Society along with the literature it has published have also contributed to this change for the good. I am grateful for the privilege to have been part of that campaign.

I don't wish to be misunderstood. I am in no wise suggesting that the current course of destruction, wanton killing and violence on the part of Boko Haram can ultimately be blamed on missionaries. No way. Although the soft secularism that missionaries unwittingly introduced are definitely part of the entire western secular movement that itself had a missionary dimension. It tried to force itself on the Muslim world in general and it was that *missionary push of secularism* to which the Ayatola reacted with his revolution that set all this Muslim turmoil into motion, including the Boko Haram.

For this history and claim I refer you to my series *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*. (Belleville, ON: Essence Publishing, 2003-2008; see www.lulu.com for the ebook version that is available free of charge.)

I expect that some of you readers are disappointed by this Introduction. You expected spiritual meditations that would draw you closer to God. Instead, you are bombarded with mission history and references to politics and Muslims, all social stuff that are hardly material for a meditational experience. I expect and understand such a reaction, but that expected reaction is precisely the reason for this book. *These meditations are trying to draw you near to God in the middle of life*, not in some little corner of your house. It is there, in the middle of life, that you need spiritual strength. If members of the Roman Catholic organization *Opus Dei* were to read this paragraph, they would affirmatively nod their heads in approval. *That's where it's at!* And that's precisely what these meditations are

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trying to say: *That's where it's at!* Go and read these meditations and then re-read this Introduction. You will most likely end up affirming it.

I also expect that some readers will wonder where I get this wholistic perspective from. If you have read other books or articles of mine, you will perhaps remember Abraham Kuyper, a theologian, philosopher and many more things. I cannot keep introducing him in every one of my books, but read what they say about him. Go to my publications on www.lulu.com and read there just who this Kuyper fellow is or just google him directly and you will find plenty of information. It is that man who has bequeathed me his Christian worldview that spans all of life and that has inspired me throughout all of my working days, including my missionary days.

The marketing ploy I used to prepare the reading public for these meditations was to publish the first two months separately as small booklets that contained the promise of more to come. These preliminary booklets turned out to be very popular so that people began to press for more. So, I was very optimistic that the rest of the book would be popular as well. It was.

I wrote the following comments about this book in our memoirs:

People were asking me how I had come to understand Nigerian culture so deeply. People in NKST were talking about translating it into their Tiv language. Some seven years later, five years after we had left Nigeria, Prof. Ishaya Audu, a former Minister of External Affairs, wrote me a letter in which he told me how much he and his wife enjoyed using these meditations for their morning prayers. I was deeply gratified at their reception at such a high level. This confirmed once again that Kuyperian thought fits Nigeria not only but also validated my entire ministry. That its Kuyperian perspective came through clearly was confirmed by a comment from some Dutch friends who had grown up in the church that baptized them and us and was founded by Kuyper. They said that it sounded so *Gereformeerd*, so Kuyperian. Great; it was meant to.

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Jan H. Boer & Frances A. Boer-Prins. *Every Square Inch—A Missionary Memoir*, vol. 2, p. 401. Self-published on www.lulu.com.

Another paragraph from vol. 3 of the same Memoir:

In September, 1995, my wife wrote that the same Dutch friend had a severe heart attack. He was to be taken to The Netherlands for further treatment. When his wife asked him what book she should bring for him, he said, “Bring Moses!” That was my book on Mosaic meditations. Fran said, “He’s really enjoying those meditations and finds it is the message he heard in his youth” in the church that was established by Abraham Kuyper and that baptized all of us. Once again, I felt pleased like punch. When you write, you never know when you hit the nail on the head or whose nail you hit. When your book speaks to a Nigerian charismatic ex-Minister of External Affairs-professor-clergyman-medical doctor as well as to an inactive member of a Dutch church, then you know you are effectively communicating to a wide community. And then, just to bring it up to date and widen the circle even further, an elderly female in-law of mine read the separately-published first month edition in 2012 and asked me for the rest of the book, for she found it so interesting. I would describe her as a pious, conservative Grand Rapids Reformed Evangelical. So, a wide range of people indeed. A couple of my friends have repeatedly observed that I appeal to a wide range of people in my writings not only, but also in other aspects of ministry. I can only thank God for what seems like one of my gifts (pp. 393-394).

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Day 1

Celebrating God's Creation

Genesis 1:31 God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.

You will be reading from Gen. 1 for several weeks. When you read it, what do you think of first? You may be thinking of the creation-evolution controversy. The chapter has long been central to this dispute.

Our purpose is different today. We want to begin our journey by celebrating the goodness of God's creation. The chapter tells us about the goodness, the beauty, the value of the physical world around us. Five times are we told "God saw that it was good." Then the sixth time in verse 31, we read, "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good."

Please note that these pronouncements concern the physical universe especially. The whole chapter deals with the creation not of spiritual beings or values first of all, but of very physical things like animals and plants, water and land. These are the things described as "very good."

It is good for us to remember that in God's eyes, the things of this world are not evil in themselves. Too many people think that God does not value the world of physical things very much, that He prefers spiritual things and truths. Nothing is farther from the truth. God, the Creator, declares them to be "very good." For us to despise them is, therefore, wrong. It is to despise what He Himself has made and declared good. To put it even stronger, to have some sort of spiritual contempt for His world is to have contempt for Himself. A major emphasis for these meditations will be a positive approach to God's world.

Day 2

Spiritual Service

Genesis 1:31 God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.

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The fact that God created the universe makes Him the owner of it all. This is a strong emphasis throughout the Old Testament. The Psalmist wrote, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for He founded it upon the seas and established it upon the water” (Psalm 24:1-2). We find the same truth expressed time and again: “Let all the earth fear the Lord..., for He spoke, and it came to be...” (Ps. 33:8-9). Ps. 89 tells us, “The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it.” “His kingdom,” we are told in Ps. 103, “rules over all.”

This relationship is confirmed in the New Testament (NT) by the Apostle Paul in Acts 17:24. God is Lord because He made the earth. That is the reason or basis, Paul told the Athenians. The NT says many more things about the Kingdom, but it is all an expansion and a further enrichment of the OT teaching of the Kingdom.

So, today, wherever you go, remember you are in His Kingdom. Today, whatever you touch, be aware you are touching part of His Kingdom and should treat it accordingly.

Day 4

A Wide Kingdom

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created

The creation basis of the Kingdom of God has deep and profound meaning. Among other things, it means that there is no place, no thing, no animal, no person who is not part of the Kingdom, who is outside of it. Yesterday’s verses, Ps. 24:1-2, Ps. 33:8-9, and many other passages show this clearly. Even people who either do not know God or who reject Him are still part of that Kingdom, whether they like it or not, whether they know it or not. “For dominion belongs to the Lord and He rules over the nations,” says Psalm 22:28. It should be understood that this claim does not mean everyone is “saved.” For that, more is required.

The creation basis of the Kingdom, and I want to emphasize this, means also that the Kingdom does not consist exclusively of people. It includes *all* of creation—

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Day 7

You, A Queen, A King!

Genesis 1:26 Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness, and let them rule ... over all the earth

I hope you are not getting tired of reading from Genesis 1. It is such an exciting chapter. It has so much in it to shape your life that it would be foolish to pass over it quickly. Let's think a little more about your position as king or queen of this world. Or about your job to rule this world.

Do you recognize the tremendous liberation this command implies for you? No longer to fear all these things. No longer to be dominated by them. No longer to bring offerings to the spirits living in them. You are free from all of that. Not fear, but power and rule. Not under, but on top of them!

Although the Paganism of those days was different from our African Traditional Religions, they do have things in common. Adherents to Traditional Religion do fear many objects in this world because of spirits they believe live in them. As a result, they too are ruled by these things, whether trees or rocks or whatever. The trees may have good fruit or other products, but some are not touched. There may be useful things in the mountain or rock, but some they dare not use.

God does not want you to be afraid of creation. He wants you to rule it. He wants you to be free from fear and use it. Free to use the things in this world and experiment with them. Here we have the charter for technology and science. No wonder that historically, science was developed by Christians. Did you know that?

What a freedom, what a liberation the Gospel brings! You are not just a poor person. You are a King or Queen!

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Day 8

You : The Image of God

Genesis 1:27 So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

The image of God is prominent in the passage you have been reading so often these days. It is something you are created with. Let's take a closer look at it.

First, note how it is emphasized. In Verse 26 we overhear God planning to "make man in our image, in our likeness." "Image" and "likeness" are two words for the same thing here. Then in verse 27 God carries out His plan and again the word is repeated twice. Obviously, the image is something very important.

It should also be noted that there is no clear definition of this image here. And this is true also for the rest of the Bible; no really clear explicit definition of it.

However, you should not fail to notice the great honour involved in having the image of God imprinted upon you. Imagine, you, a small and weak man or woman, you carry within yourself the image of the Most High, of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, your Creator! That is no small thing. It is a great honour.

It is possible that you think of yourself as a poor and powerless person. Listen! Get this straight! It is not the fact that you are poor and powerless that is the most important thing about you. It is the image of God in you that determines your status. So, once again you have reason to lift up your head and to stand up tall and straight. You are somebody! You are important! Don't belittle yourself as a useless person. The image in you!

Day 9

The Image and Class

Genesis 1:27 So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

The great honour given you as bearer of God's image is not a privilege for a select group of people. We like to make distinctions between people and groups of people. We like to honour some and despise others. Some are considered great

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people, while others are despised as small. There are the powerless and powerful, the poor and the rich, the subjects and the rulers. We are talking here of class, of lower and higher classes. The higher classes want to use the lower classes for their own purposes and despise them. They want to keep them poor and low.

The powerful, rich rulers, members of the high class, like to think of themselves as great and mighty, while they oppress and show contempt for you as their powerless, poor subjects. The bad thing about this is that you and others like you, the powerless and poor, often agree with that arrangement. You yourself think of yourself as powerless and poor. You despise yourself. You often think you are worthless. And you often honour the very people who despise and oppress you.

If you count yourself among the poor and powerless, wake up! You are created in the image of the Most High God. You deserve to be honoured for bearing that image. Though you may not have much power or wealth or knowledge, you have much more than you think. You will find out more about that as you continue with these meditations. But for now, begin practicing looking at yourself as a powerful person. You will see the difference it will make. You are worthy of the greatest respect. You have a right to it from God Himself.

Day 10

The Image and the Powerful

Genesis 1:27 So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Before going on, I want to emphasize once again that you, who consider yourself poor and powerless, should recognize yourself for who you are, the image bearer of God. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Don't despise yourself and others like you. One of the greatest problems in our country is that too many people agree that they are poor and powerless. And *therefore* they think that way and act that way. Don't accept that status. When you despise yourself, you despise the One whose image you bear.

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You, readers who are among the powerful and rich, you are tempted to despise the powerless and poor. You see them as ignorant. You tend to use them for your own advantage. You expect them to honour you and give you the best seat. Be careful, for you are not simply stepping on poor people; you are stepping on the image of God in them. They bear that image as much as you do. It is your responsibility to honour that image by honouring those who bear it. Proverbs 14:32 says, “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker.” Proverbs 17:5 warns you, “He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker.” And, of course, no one can get away with having contempt for God.

It is time that we respect each other as image bearers. To respect means to serve, to lift up, to help, to encourage. You rich, remember the image of God in the poor today.

Day 11

The Image and Ruling the Earth

Genesis 1:28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Today we want again to take up the subject of ruling. You have learned that the Bible does not define what the image of God means. Yet, the context in which we hear of it first is directly tied up with the first command in the Bible, namely the Cultural Mandate to rule. In Verse 26 the story is again followed immediately by the first command to subdue the earth. Clearly, when we rule or subdue the earth we reflect this image in us. *It is part of our created nature to so rule or subdue.* The image and the task that results from it are thus both very worldly in the positive sense of the word.

Many Christians think our basic task is a spiritual one and we should not be too concerned with the world. The first chapter in the Bible does not support such an attitude. Not only did God create the world and declare it “very good,” but the first assignment He has given is very earthy or worldly. This does not mean that we do not have very important spiritual tasks. However, these spiritual tasks are

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not original; they come later. At creation, God's concern was very much with the good world He created and your rule over it in His name.

The TEKAN churches once advised the government that they should allow all people to have a say in the direction of the country. That is right, for all are image bearers and, therefore, rulers.

Day 12

The Bible and the Greeks

Genesis 1 Please read the entire chapter today.

It is strange that through the years Christians have thought that working in the world, especially in areas like politics, business or science, is not important. In fact, many think of such occupations as almost sub-Christian, as inferior. Perhaps you think so too. Such an attitude is strange when the very first order or command in the first chapter of the Bible is to rule or subdue the earth. Why have we been so blind to this command? The answer would take us far back into church history and philosophy, something not suitable for these meditations.

Let it be enough for now to say that the origin of this world-denying attitude does not come from the Bible but is based on Pagan Greek philosophy of the time before Christ. It is not good to despise the writings of those early Greeks, for they were deep thinkers and we can learn from them. But the fact remains that they did not think according to the Bible and therefore often went wrong.

The negative attitude towards the world slowly crept into the church and eventually spread so widely among Christians that it became difficult for them to understand the Bible's emphasis on the world and the material things in it. This Biblical emphasis became hard to understand and even offensive to many Christians. They would simply not understand what is written so plainly and would emphasize secondary issues. Genesis 1 is a good example of this tendency. People concentrate on evolution vs creation and totally miss this emphasis on working in God's world.

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I am going to extend this meditation beyond its normal length. The first *solo* I have ever sung is not one I could, would or should repeat in the context of these meditations, though you can find it in volume one of our—my wife’s and mine—memoirs, *Every Square Inch*. It was in grade 3 in 1946 and represented nothing worse than an embarrassed children’s prank. I *composed* my first song, both lyric and melody in the Hausa language, many years later, 1995, in Jos, Nigeria. Here are the lyrics:

Allah ke Kaunar Duniya

For God So Loved the World

In the Hausa Language

With English Translation

1

**Kana kaunar duniya
Amma ba ka kaunar Allah**

**You’re in love with the world,
But you don’t love God,**

Kaunarka banza ce (2x)

Your love is worthless (2x)

Banza, banza, banza, banza¹

Worthless (4x)

Kaunarka banza ce.

Your love is worthless.

2

Kana kaunar Allah

You are loving God,

Amma ba ka kaunar duniya

But you don’t love the world,

Kaunarka rabi ce (2x)

Your love is only half (2x)

Rabi, rabi, rabi, rabi

Half (4x)

Kaunarka rabi ce.

Your love is only half.

¹ 4th line of each stanza to be sung in crescendo with robust voice.)

[Type text]

3

Kana kaunar Allah	You're in love with God
Da kuma kaunar duniya	And you love the world,
Kaunarka cikakke ce (2x)	Your love is perfect (2x)
Cikakke, cikakke, cikakke, cikakke	Perfect (4x)
Kaunarka cikakke ce.	Your love is perfect.

4

Wane irin kaunarka? (2x)	What's your kind of love? (2x)
Banza, banza, banza, banza?	Worthless? (4x)
Rabi, rabi, rabi, rabi?	Half? (4x)
Ko kuwa Cikakke ce 2x)?	Or is it perfect? (2x)
Cikakke, cikakke, cikakke, cikakke!	Perfect (4x)!
Kaunata cikakke ce !! (2x)	My love is perfect!! (2x)

Day 13

Filling the Earth

Genesis 1:28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

Quite a number of times now we have talked about ruling the world. Ruling the earth may require different things at different times in history. In Verse 28 we have an example of what was involved at the time this story was written.

Part of the first command to rule was that the human race should multiply itself by having children. If the people are going to rule over all the earth, then more than one or two people are needed. That is a huge task that needed many, many

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people to carry out. And so, one of the first concrete steps necessary for subduing the earth was to multiply.

The command to multiply came in the context of blessing. We read, “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number.’” To be blessed is to receive all that God has to make His creatures flourish. When you live up to the commands of God, when you do the things for which you were created, you will be blessed as individuals and as a society.

God blessed our first parents by making them rulers, thus giving the human race a position of great honour. He also blessed us by enabling us to multiply. You reflect His image when you so rule and so multiply. Our rule reflects His power as King. Our multiplying reflects Him as creator. We thus assist Him in ruling and creating, but on His terms, not just any way we like or what happens to be profitable.

Day 14

Sex is Holy

Genesis 1:28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

Yesterday, we learned that when we multiply ourselves, we reflect God’s image as Creator. We become little creators alongside Him. And since God has created you so that you can have physical children only through having sex, the love through which husband and wife create children is itself holy and beautiful.

Christians have not always thought of having sex as holy; some have considered having children and the sex life associated with it as somehow unspiritual, as worldly. Such people think that if you really want to serve the Lord, you should stay away from sex. The best way to serve God, according to this way of thinking, is in a non-physical spiritual way. Such Christians think that sex, children and families are too worldly and interfere with our service to God.

It is clear that Genesis 1 does not support that kind of attitude. Here engaging in sex life and raising a family is intimately tied up with the image of God and with the first command to rule the earth. There is nothing ungodly or unspiritual about

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such activities. They are normal human affairs, part of God's programme for human life. A healthy sex life is a reflection of God's image in us. It is part of our service to God.

Of course, we are talking about *healthy* sex life. That is, sex life as shown us in the Bible and which experience teaches us as the best. We will learn more about that as we go on.

DAY 15 HAVING SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Genesis 1:28 – God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

Having children, you will now remember, is the arrangement willed by God for most people. For this reason, the Bible writers extol the family and having children. In fact, the more the merrier, as far as the Old Testament is concerned. They are blessings from God. In Psalm 127: 3-5 we read, “Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.”

Here we have an additional reason for which children can be a blessing. They can protect you against the enemy. That enemy does not have to be another person or nation. It can also be poverty. People often want large families to protect themselves against poverty, especially during old age. When you get old, your children surround you with love and care. So, in addition to ruling, multiplying ourselves can also provide protection.

The above verse (Ps. 127:3-5) and others like it emphasize sons and ignore daughters. I do not need to apologize for the Bible to you, if you are a woman, but you should understand that emphasis as a result of the fall, as we will see later. For the moment, please remember that in the beginning male and female are both created in the image of God and both were assigned the work of ruling. It would not do, therefore, for Christian parents to look down on daughters as inferior.

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Day 16

Having Many Children

Genesis 1:28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

Is it necessary today to have many children? Does God desire us to have large families? Many Christians as well as Muslims would say "Yes" to these questions. After all, does not the Bible give the same answer? Yesterday's meditation could lead you to that opinion.

Please remember why God told our first parents to multiply. He wanted the human race to rule the creation and to do that, much manpower was and still is needed. However, today we live under different circumstances. There are enough people now to fulfill that first command to subdue the earth. The world is full of people. We no longer need large families to carry out that task.

Some would go a step further and argue that to fulfill that task today, we should have fewer children than before. Soon the world will be so full that there will be standing room only. If we continue this way, there will be nothing left to rule, for it will all be trampled underfoot. The policies of the Chinese government to restrict each couple to one child is the most radical expression of this line of thought.

Main stream Christianity has always learned about God's will from nature as well as from the Bible, in the spirit of Psalm 19. It is called "natural revelation." It means that we can learn about God's will by studying nature and human development, but conclusions from such studies may never contradict the intention of the Bible. Such study shows that we have enough people to rule and develop the world. We do not need to have many children in order to fulfill the Cultural Mandate today.

The above does not mean that we absolutely should severely restrict the size of our family. Some Christians argue that Christians should have large families in order not to be outnumbered. Then there are some people, especially Western

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Caucasians, argue that they should have larger families to avoid committing racial suicide and, again, not to be outnumbered, this time by other races in their own West. Those are issues worth discussing, but they do not relate to the Cultural Mandate.

Day 17 Our Kind of Religion

Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "Let them rule over ... all the earth...."

Today I invite you to think about the kind of religion Christianity is. Now that you are about to leave Genesis 1 behind you, it is time to consolidate and to repeat the main ideas.

In Nigeria, we often hear Muslims charging that Christianity has nothing to offer this world. It is only a religion for spiritual affairs and for the life hereafter. We have seen that, indeed, Christians have often given reason for such a charge. We have often belittled the things of this world. We have thought that the greatest service we can render to the Lord is of a spiritual nature. He merely tolerates the material reality, including the world itself.

The source for this negative trend in Christian thought, you have read, is not the Bible, but Pagan Greek thought that crept into the thinking of the church at an early stage. It definitely does not reflect the emphasis of the first chapter in the Bible, as you have seen. And as you go on, you will find that the rest of the Bible is also very interested in the world of the material.

In fact, I would describe the Christian religion as very "worldly." That is to say, our religion takes the world very seriously, as much as it does spiritual realities. Working in the world is not some Christian afterthought, not something you do merely because you have to make a living. Working in the world is an important way for us to reflect God's image in us. It is in obedience to the very first commandment in the Bible.

[Type text]

Day 18

Enjoying the World

Genesis 2:3 And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all ... He had done.

This verse can give problems when you think about it. God rest? Why, is He tired? Of course He is not tired. And does He rest at all? Is there any time He does nothing? If that were so, how could the world continue, when it is He who upholds it at all times? If God really ceased doing anything, creation itself would cease to exist. So, that cannot be the meaning.

God is shown as resting after He had finished His important programme of creating the universe, His kingdom. This was not a rest because of tiredness but for enjoyment. He sees it operate under His minute-by-minute care and fully enjoys what He sees. He likes the world.

There are various ways in which we can enjoy this world. Doing a job that gives satisfaction is one way. Helping people is another and resting is still another. God enjoyed Himself by interrupting His work of creating. He rested.

Enjoying the world is no sin. God *wants* us to enjoy it with Him, to admire the way He made it. That's why He put Adam and Even into the beautiful garden. Not only to work, but also to enjoy His handiwork. Do so today. Enjoy His work, His world.

Day 19 The Gold is Good

Genesis 2:12 The gold of that land is good....

Have you ever thought that deep down God is not really interested in material things or in the world as a whole? Most of us have a similar suspicion about sex. But as we slowly wander through the riches of the creation story, we see that all these things are precious in God's eyes.

Similarly, it is often said that "money is the root of all evil." This is a popular perversion of I Timothy 6:10, where we read, "For the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil." So it is. You know stories how love of money makes people do evil things. It is a basic fact in human history. It is even a basic fact in your own life against which you have to struggle constantly. Be honest and look at yourself.

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In some parts of the world, farmers are looked upon as respected businessmen and their farms are run along highly technical lines. However, in Nigeria, most farmers are poor. They are among the despised peasants. The illiteracy rate is very high among them. They are exploited by many parties, including government, business and professionals. Sometimes, it must be admitted, by the church. As a result, it is a despised occupation and most people try to avoid it, unless they are rich enough to afford huge machinery.

Farmers should take heart. Theirs, according to Genesis, is the original occupation appointed by God Himself. They should raise their heads and become proud of their occupation. As some car stickers put it, "I am proud to be a farmer." Farming is a deeply religious occupation by which we subdue the earth, by which we make the earth yield food for ourselves and others. By producing more than we need for ourselves and selling to others, we free others to pursue other worthwhile occupations. Farming is a primary way in which people express the image of God, for they are creatively busy with the earth.

But there is a difference. The average farmer in Nigeria gets cheated out of his income, while in Genesis 2, he is allowed to eat from every tree, except one. And he did not even plant the first ones himself! Unlike the elite in Nigeria, God set up a just economy where the farmer got his due. Those who cheat the farmer oppose not only the farmer, but God Himself.

Day 22

Caring for a Beautiful Earth

Genesis 2:9 And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground---trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.

Not only did God create a garden in which those who took care of it would be adequately fed and, thus, paid well for their efforts, it was also a very beautiful garden that was pleasant to look at and live in. Verse 9 tells us about the many kinds of trees "that were pleasing to the eye and good for food." In fact, it was such a good place that out of it flowed rivers that watered the rest of the area around it. In other words, it brought life to its surroundings.

In Genesis 1 we learned that God gave the human race the task of subduing the earth, of ruling it. But here we learn that the earth was not to be subdued any way people could think of. The impact of Genesis 2 is that this was to be done carefully. When God creates something beautiful, He expects that we will also have respect for that beauty in our handling it. When He sets up a fruitful place, He does not expect us to exploit it for our short-range ends, only to end up with tired and exhausted land. Ruling or subduing this earth includes our responsibility to treat it tenderly, to retain its beauty and fertility.

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In the past, people have not always understood their ruling task in this way. They have tended to exploit the earth ruthlessly by following bad farming methods, leaving the land exhausted and ugly. Industries have poured forth poisons in huge quantities, spoiling sky, land, rivers and even seas. Some of this is done because of ignorance; some, because of greed that demands an immediate profit.

Day 23

How to Care for the Garden

Genesis 2:15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

At one time I lived in a part of Taraba State that used to be covered by dense and luscious forests. Now, only a few years later, the forests are largely gone. Almost every year the people destroy large sections. Efforts to teach them to be more careful have been in vain. All the products the people used to derive from the forest have disappeared along with the trees. Erosion is now so general that the rivers in the area have all become muddy as they carry the soil to the sea. A few more years and a most beautiful garden will have been destroyed and hunger will set in.

I now live in Jos and I have seen a Jos factory spew out its waste through ditches that go right through the farms and gardens of the people behind the factory. Of course, all the chemicals will enter the soil, then into the crop and, eventually, into those who eat the food.

Cities are part of God's world or garden. However, it seems as if few people care for their cleanliness or beauty. The government often does what it can to beautify the section frequented by important visitors, like the road to the airport or to the Governor's mansion. They will put in good roads, bright lights and effective sewage—all where there are few people, but where the visitors can see it. Such a city is beautiful only on the surface. A city is truly beautiful only when people and government work hand in hand to take out the dirt and filth. Ask yourself, are you tending God's garden responsibly, helping to keep it beautiful and fertile, whether farm or city?

Day 24

A Lavish Economy

Genesis 2:16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden...."

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Have you ever blamed God for your troubles? A major point of these first chapters is to make it unreasonable for you to do so. These chapters emphasize the goodness of God and of creation. Nothing more was needed by our first ancestors.

Today's text emphasizes that God had provided Adam with a lavish economy. Verse 9 says that "God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food." We have also read about the good watering system over the earth as well as the abundance of good gold and other precious objects. These were not just there to look at or to make Adam jealous. It was not like a market, where sellers display their wares so as to create a desire in you, but when you actually want to buy, you find you do not have the money. They only manage to make you jealous. Adam was told explicitly that all those trees were for his use, for his enjoyment.

Adam had it good and that is the way the Lord wanted it. He is not interested in having people suffer from a bad economy. He is not interested in seeing people hungry. What we are experiencing today is not what the Lord set out to create. He rejoices in seeing His people enjoy abundance.

This situation also means that Adam had no reason to disobey God. Marxism says that human actions are determined by their economic conditions. If that were the case, Adam and Eve would have never fallen into sin. The reason for their disobedience must be found elsewhere.

Day 25

The Law of God

Genesis 2:17 But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die.

The laws of God are reasonable. They are embedded in creation. Under normal circumstances, all things in nature follow the laws God embedded in them. Flowers, trees, animals, stars—they all behave according to so-called "natural laws." These are God's laws. God operates them from moment to moment. They do not exist independently from God. This is true also for the laws of our human bodies. Your heart and your lungs function according to these laws. From our point of view, they seem to work automatically. You do not have to do anything to keep your heart pumping or your lungs breathing. You do not need to understand them to have them continue. But they do not work automatically. God operates them.

But there are also laws that do not work automatically but that need to be understood and obeyed consciously. God had created Adam with certain limits. There is a certain kind of knowledge that was beyond him to bear or understand. That knowledge is symbolized by the

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“tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” And so God graciously warned Adam to leave that one single tree alone.

There are things that human beings cannot handle. Certain kinds of knowledge and research can lead us into areas that are beyond us. If we dabble in them, we will get into trouble. Today this may be represented by genetic research and certain aspects of psychology that now present us with deep problems. We must stop eating from the forbidden fruit and know our limits.

Day 26 You Must Not Eat ...

Genesis 2:17 But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die.

God wanted to see Adam prosper. He gave him all the food he wanted or needed. He was free to help himself to all the trees, including the “tree of life.” Yes, life. That’s what God wanted for Adam. Life in abundance, physically and spiritually, economically, and in every other way.

For this reason, God forbid Adam from eating from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” That tree symbolized knowledge that the human race cannot handle and will land it in trouble. Man was created in such a way that he was not to have that kind of knowledge. There is a limit to what he is to know.

God also warned Adam that going beyond his creaturely limits would lead to death. What was this death penalty? John Calvin, a famous theologian, explains that it included physical death as we know it, but more than that. It would include estrangement from God. That is spiritual death. It would mean the very opposite of the abundant life with God. That is spiritual death. It would mean the very opposite of the abundant life with which God had blessed him. Once Adam and Eve did eat, we know how everything changed for them. Calvin wrote that death meant all those miseries that befell Adam. He became despondent and fearful. He lost his position of dominion over nature. All those things together meant death, a dying process that eventually led to physical death.

God had provided Adam with all he needed and more. Then He graciously warned him of his limits. God cannot be blamed.

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Day 27

Naming the Animals

Genesis 2:20 The man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

We are back to the matter of ruling, of Adam having authority over nature. You have already read about his work in the garden. Now he turns to the world of animals. With the authority of the Cultural Mandate, Adam had the perfect mandate. Naming is an exercise of authority and power.

The animals came to Adam, two of each, male and female. This is strange for us, for even the birds and beasts of the field submitted to him. Adam had a dominion over them that we, living in the era of sin, can hardly imagine. But the relationship that existed between them and Adam was the natural one, the one God intended. What seems normal to us today is highly abnormal, for we have largely lost that kind of authority over animals. The conditions of sin under which we live today are abnormal and we should never accept them as normal or get used to them. The death of sin includes loss of dominion over nature.

Adam had no education in the modern sense of the word. He had no certificates or degrees. Yet he had an intuitive knowledge or wisdom that enabled him to understand the nature of each animal. Each name was expressive of the character of the animal. From where did he get such understanding? Living close to God and obeying His commands produce wisdom that no education can provide. The abundant life of God includes such wisdom.

Abundance. Authority and power. Wisdom and knowledge. How God had provided for him! The wages of *obedience* is *life*.

Day 28 – Image: Male and Female

Genesis 1:27 – So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Today's verse is a powerful one in terms of men-women relationships. It is important to note that the differences in power and status that men see today between themselves and women are not found in this passage.

Women as well as men were made in God's image. That means it is wrong for men to look down on women as they often do. If you are a man, be honest and

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ask whether you tend to look down and think you are more important than them. Come on, be honest. You think that you are the master and the woman should merely obey you. Ruling them is your right.

If you are a woman, deep down in your heart and in your bones you know how men tend to despise you. It is even possible that you think that's the way things ought to be. You are merely to obey the man in your life. You are merely to obey the male leaders in your church. You are merely to obey the male rulers of your village, state or country.

The situation as we know it is very different from the original relationships. Women have the image of God in them as much as men. In fact, it would seem that this image finds a central expression in the male-female relationship. God made them in His image as female and male creatures.

All the things we have said about the image in people holds for women as well as men. The image is related to our dominion and women have that authority and power as well as men.

Day 29 – Woman: A Helper

Genesis 2:18 – The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Gen. 2 tells about the same developments we find in Gen. 1, but from a different perspective. While all the animals existed male-female, the man Adam was alone. That was not a good situation, according to God Himself. The creation of the human race was still incomplete. And so God staged a situation in which Adam became aware of his incompleteness by having him meet all the animals as males and females. God could have just imposed woman on Adam, but He chose to instill a desire in him and a sense of incompleteness, so that when Eve appeared, Adam would welcome her and be glad. You see, right from the beginning, God treated people as people, not as mere things with whom He could do as He

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pleased. He prepared Adam to make Eve's appearance a positive experience for both of them.

And so it happened. When Adam first saw Eve, he was overjoyed. He of course noticed the physical differences, but his overwhelming experience was that of unity. "Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." No sense of competition. No desire to manipulate. No eagerness to dominate. It was love and unity at first sight.

Woman is twice described as a suitable helper (:18, 20). To some women that is considered an insult. However, in that context of love and unity, the position of being a helper was not threatening. The threat to that for the modern woman has come out of the sinful situation where women are often considered inferior and suitable only for having babies and cooking food.

Day 30 One Flesh

Genesis 2:24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

There are many different cultural forms for marriage in this world. All of them have good and bad aspects at the same time. In Western culture, people get married with or without the involvement of their families. And after they are married, they form a nuclear family over which the parents have little influence. Even when they run into trouble with each other, they will hardly go to their own families for help. These are individualistic families and divorce comes frequently. It is not recommended.

In Nigeria, the opposite is often true. Our families are deeply involved from the beginning and few marriages take place without the blessing of the families. This situation provides stability in our marriages and is recommended.

However, there is also a negative aspect. The main loyalty of both partners often goes to their parents, not to each other. This means that when conflict enters, one or both of the partners soon run to their families for support and may feel

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greater loyalty to them. As a pastor, I have often seen that this attitude can weaken the ties between husband and wife too much. Instead of working out a problem together, one of the partners will just run home.

In our text, we read that originally the emphasis was more on the unity between the partners than between them and their families. The families were not rejected, but the primary tie is between husband and wife. That is the Genesis perspective.

Day 31 The Original Situation

Genesis 1:31 God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.

In this closing meditation for the first month, I want us to reflect a bit on the original situation of the world, of the situation before sin entered the picture. We have here a picture of the world as it was meant to be, though not a complete or fully developed one.

There are two important points to be remembered from this month's meditations. First, there is that very positive interest in the physical world on the part of God. Of course, God is equally interested in spiritual things. We, Christians, have always known that. It is His interest in the physical world that we sometimes forget and which I therefore emphasize in these meditations. Christians are deeply aware of the Great Commission, but hardly of the Cultural Mandate. Because of our one-sided spiritual emphasis, Christians know a great deal about how to do evangelism, seen as a spiritual task, but it is only recently that we in Nigeria are developing an interest in politics, in the affairs of this world. Due to the influence of Pagan Greeks, we have largely left the affairs of government to others. This month's meditations and those to follow are designed to increase your interest in the world for the sake of God and of Nigeria.

The second emphasis of this month is that we cannot blame God for the evil we experience in this world. These first two chapters of Genesis not only give us a hint as to how things were before the fall, but they also provide us a glimpse as to

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how God intended and intends it to be. God created a good environment and an economy of abundance. There was nothing in the world to encourage Adam and Eve to disobey. His creation was good. Praise be to Him.

Day 32 The Fall

Genesis 3 *The Whole Chapter*

What a fall this was! What terrible changes took place in their lives. All the beautiful things with which God had surrounded Adam and Eve slipped from their grasp.

What really happened? Here we must be very careful not to fall into a useless guessing game. What was the first sin? And what was so bad about it that God had to react so strongly? The first sin was not of hand and mouth, the plucking and eating, but of the heart.

God had warned Adam not to take from that one tree, for it would lead to death. Eating from it would give them a knowledge that was beyond our human race to bear. It would take us into an area of knowledge to which we were not meant to have access. It would destroy us, not as a special punishment from God, but naturally. Going beyond your human limits naturally brings destruction in its wake.

But the fruit looked so good. Do you know anyone who has ever turned down wisdom and knowledge? Why do we all try to get education and degrees? Because we all want “wisdom.” We see it as the key to our success.

And so the first sin was to reach beyond our limits as creatures. To grasp what was forbidden and unbearable. An important law of nature, embedded in creation by God Himself, was broken. It had to lead to death, naturally. That’s the way God made us—unless He would save us.

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Day 33 Eyes Opened to Darkness

Genesis 3:7 – Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked.

It happened exactly as both God and the serpent, the representative of Satan, had said. After both Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened. But what they saw with their open eyes was nothing beautiful or wise. In fact, it was negative, unpleasant and fearful. God's gracious warning had been disobeyed and disbelieved. Now it turned out He was right. They now experienced something that was too heavy for them to bear. And, in spite of Satan's promise, they did not become like God. Instead they became miserable creatures.

Their nakedness is an important theme in this story. Chapter 2, the chapter in which all is peaceful and blessing, ends with the statement that Adam and Eve were naked without embarrassment. This speaks of intimacy and close relations between them. But as soon as they disobey and their eyes open, the first thing they notice is their nakedness and they become embarrassed. Immediately they cover themselves with leaves.

Disobedience to God led and always leads to breaks in human relations as well. Their loss of intimacy is a symbol for a negative distortion in all human relationships. Estrangement has set in, even in the closest of all human relationships, namely marriage.

Sexual relationships between marriage partners are holy, you will remember, and good. However, from this point on they are distorted because of sin and often no longer holy or good.

Day 34 Taking Responsibility

Genesis 3:12 The woman You put here with me, she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.

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With the fall into sin, all sorts of troubles entered human life. Yesterday we noticed it in the marriage relationship, a symbol in this story of all human relations. In today's text, we see another sort of distortion—the refusal to take responsibility for one's action by blaming others.

When God charged Adam with his sin, Adam blamed both God and Eve. The woman did it, he replied. And *You* are the one who gave me that woman. So, you are both to blame. I am not at fault. You cannot hold me responsible. Then God turned to Eve. She blamed the serpent.

Ever since that time, most of us try to blame others for our own wrongdoings. It is my wife's fault that I sleep around. I steal because I am poor. My boss will not promote me if I do not bribe and give him a percentage. Our most favourite scapegoat is Satan. We blame him for everything wrong in our lives. It is never our fault.

God does not deny that Adam was tempted by Eve or that Eve was tempted by the serpent. But God *does* deny us the right to refuse taking responsibility. Yes, you were tempted or tricked or forced to do wrong, but that does not take away your responsibility. The serpent was punished, but so were Adam and Eve.

Day 35 Pain in Childbearing

Genesis 3:16 – I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing.

From the beginning, having children was part of God's plan. The Cultural Mandate of Gen. 1:28 included the command to "be fruitful and increase in number." God created us so that having children would be a natural thing for the human race even before the fall.

But sin has distorted everything. We continue to do the things we are created to do, but what should have been easy and come naturally, now comes with pain and difficulty. In the depths of our hearts, our souls, our minds, distortions have crept in so that everything we do is distorted. Our estrangement from God and each other has complicated everything, including nature. Childbearing, which is

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supposed to be natural and a pleasure, now comes with great discomfort and agony, as if it were an alien thing for a woman to have children. Throughout history, it often brings death to either mother or child and always pain.

This suffering in childbearing was not original and not meant to be. It is the result of disobedience. Today, with the Gospel having made its inroads, we have facilities to reduce that suffering. We have clinics for antenatal and postnatal care. These clinics and the technology that is used there are the result of the gospel, even when run by non-Christians. Use these facilities with thanksgiving to your Saviour.

Day 36 The Battle of the Sexes

Genesis 3:16 – Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.

Human relations became deeply distorted as the result of the alienation sin brought between God and people as well as between people themselves. We saw it in the matter of nakedness. We saw it in blaming others. And now we see more of it, again between husband and wife.

In Gen. 1 we are told that both husband and wife are made in the image of God and both were given the authority to rule. There was no sign of superiority of the one over the other. But here we see that part of the punishment for sin and a result of the distorted relationship is that wives become subject to their husbands' authority in a way that is burdensome. That is a drastic change from the original created situation and not part of God's original design.

Christians are supposed to have overcome the results of the fall at least partially, something that will become more clear as we go on. However, it is very strange that many Christian husbands, especially the more pious ones, seem to enjoy punishing their wives by ruling over them in a distorted way and by denying them their own original dignity and authority. If men are saved, they should also be saved from their exercise of power over their wives and accord them their

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legitimate created place. Wives, take heart in Christ and claim your God-given authority.

Day 37 By the Sweat of Your Brow

Genesis 3:17 ...through painful toil you will eat....

Work is a curse. That's how many people feel about it. If your work were to push carts with heavy loads or carrying heavy sacks of cement, you would probably feel that way also. The work of many people is backbreaking and often they end up with very little pay. God told Adam that's the way it would be.

But work itself is no curse or punishment. Working in the world, remember, is the primary way in which we serve God. That basic assignment has not been withdrawn. It is the same situation as with having children. It continues under the era of sin, but it is now associated with suffering. Similarly, work now goes along with hardship and suffering, so much so that many people can see no relationship between their work and God. For many people, real service to God begins *after* you have finished your daily work and you go to church or do evangelism. In view of the suffering associated with work, it is no wonder people have come to feel this way.

To understand this situation, you must remember that originally work was a blessing and pleasant. That's how God designed it. But once man fell into sin, everything became distorted. The pleasant garden gave way to the rocky farm. Weeds made farming difficult. Difficult, yes, but work was still to be service rendered to God. *That* did not change. Serve Him on the job today.

Day 38 Promise of Victory

Genesis 3:15 ...he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

Death! That's what God threatened would happen if Adam should eat of the forbidden tree. And sure enough, as soon as they ate, death set in everywhere.

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Not that Adam and Eve fell down dead. No, but the seed of death entered the world. God punished heavily by letting events take their natural course. The degeneration that set in was built into creation, it was natural. Things that were to be pleasant became difficult and associated with suffering. Instead of ruling the world and everything in it, fear took over. Instead of good fellowship, mistrust set in. They hid from God and blamed each other for their disobedience. All that represents the seed of death. Eventually, Adam and Eve would actually physically die and return to dust.

But God loved His world, including people. He enjoyed them and was not prepared to forsake all His handiwork at this first provocation. So, though He let the punishment run its course, He also made provision for rescue, for salvation. Satan, represented by the serpent, would strike the heel of the human race. That is, he would seriously attack and make trouble. However, as serious as Satan's attack was to be, his fate would be worse, for the woman's seed would crush Satan's head. That is more than wounding. That is destruction. The church interprets the woman's seed to be Christ. He will crush Satan. God's promise to us.

Day 39 An Unacceptable Offering

Genesis 4:5 ...but on Cain and his offering He did not look with favour.

In Genesis 4 we immediately see a major result of evil. It divides people into two groups. One group is obedient to God and thus acceptable to Him; the other is disobedient and thus rejected. That division has direct consequences for everything members of both groups do.

Cain and Abel both did the same thing. They sacrificed to God from the product of their labour. Abel offered up some firstborn of his animals, while Cain brought of his crops. It *looked* like they were doing the same thing, but in fact there was a great difference in what they were doing.

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Abel brought his offering with love for God in his heart and God was pleased. Abel had a sense of gratitude to God and inwardly experienced acceptance. Cain's heart was not towards God. He thought that by making sacrifices he could convince God to do what Cain wanted from Him. He was trying to manipulate God instead of serving Him or to express his thanks.

Cain is like adherents of African Traditional Religion, who try to manipulate God by their ceremonies to do what they want Him to do. He is also like "Christians" who bring gifts to church, often large gifts, while their heart and their way of life are away from God. By bringing their gifts, they hope to appease God or to make Him do their will. Unfortunately, the church often accepts such gifts, but God does not. The giver is not blessed by such sacrifices and certainly God will not be influenced by them. They are useless gifts.

Day 40 Rejected! Why?

Genesis 4:7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?

Cain was angry, disgusted and sad. His face was downcast (:5), because he knew God had rejected his offering. How did he know? We are not told, but it is likely that his conscience accused him or that God spoke to him in a dream. Cain's heart was turned away from God. The dynamic of sin had begun to take its course in human life. We now begin to see the horror unleashed by what looked like a rather minor issue in Genesis 3. Immediately people turned away from God, the source of all life and goodness.

Even though Cain's heart was turned from God, he was still close enough to the original situation that being turned down by God upset him terribly. He was not as bad off as some people today who have hardly heard of God and who are not even disturbed at living without Him. That's how far away from God they are.

God did not beat around the bush. You know why you are rejected? It is because you are not doing right. That's why. God does not reject someone for arbitrary reasons. It is usually because you have turned away from God. That situation

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brings a host of difficulties into the lives of individuals as well as in society. Problems are inevitable when you turn your back upon God. But when they come, blame yourself, not God. Seek to do right and avoid such problems.

Day 41 The Deepening Shadow of Sin

Genesis 4:8 ...Cain attacked his brother and killed him.

Cain was a religious man. He made sacrifices to God. But yesterday we saw that, though religious, his heart was turned away from God. That's how it is with many religious people, perhaps even with *you*. Such people participate in religious rites, but their real loyalty, their real religion lies elsewhere. Such a situation brings a dualism in their lives that, in turn, brings confusion in their hearts.

Such a condition also brings problems in human relationships. That is why you sometimes wonder at the horrible things some religious people can do. Prominent church leaders, clergy or laymen, can engage in the most cruel business practices and in the most barbaric actions. Cheating, oppression and depriving people of their rights are commonly found among the religious.

When you see this, you know where their real loyalties lie. Such people may be religious, but their hearts are turned from God. Not only will God turn from them, but they themselves inevitably turn from people and become cruel. Killing is simply at the extreme end of that spectrum. Cain represents many religious people. Does he represent *you*?

Of course, it does not *have* to be that way. Everything in the Christian religion is against Cain's situation. If you have given yourself fully to the Lord, you will live a wholesome life and your sacrifices will be accepted by the Lord.

Day 42 Warped Development

Genesis 4:21 ...he was the father of all who play the harp and flute.

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Remember the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1:26? It was the command to develop culture and rule the world, to make something of it. That was not a strange command imposed upon a people for whom it did not fit. No, God not only gave this command, but He also created us in such a way that developing culture and ruling the world is natural for us. So, the commandment fit the human race perfectly.

In these meditations we are now in the post-fall situation. Things changed very drastically. Men turned away from God and against each other. Nevertheless, the created urge to develop culture was still in man's heart. So, though the descendants of Cain were very poor in spirit, they continued to develop and invent things.

In our verse, we read of new musical instruments, the harp and the flute, two very popular instruments in those days. The development of such musical instruments was positive progress and an expression of cultural development. The human race did not lose its created nature because of sin. However, if you see how music is often used, then you also see how a sinful race can twist and distort things so that the good in them is often overshadowed by its evil distortions.

We should not condemn music, but use these same instruments in the service of God through developing music that glorifies His name.

Day 43 Development of Technology

Genesis 4:22 ...who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron.

Music was not the only area in which development took place. Important technology also developed in other areas. Nigeria is constantly struggling to develop the iron industry, because it is so basic to other industries. Well, Cain's descendants invented and forged all sorts of tools from bronze and iron. As with musical instruments, so was this a further development of the Cultural Mandate.

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You should notice how God loves the world. He had warned Adam that disobedience would lead to death. And it did. Disintegration of all kinds set in immediately after the fall. But God could not bear to give up His creatures. Already in Genesis 3:15 there was a vague hint of rescue or salvation. The fact that people continued to lead a human existence at all, was a sign of God's grace and love. Cultural development was part of that.

Yesterday we emphasized that good developments in music are often hijacked by evil. This is also true for these technological developments. They have often been used to create tools of destruction and oppression. Modern weapons are only one example. However, we should also notice the positive aspects of these developments. Modern medicine and related technology are great blessings. Though there are some problems related to them, modern means of communication and transportation can be used to liberate people. So, we end today's meditation with thanksgiving to God for enabling us to do such marvelous things.

Day 44 A Song of Pride

Genesis 4:23-24 I have killed a man for wounding me.... If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.

The developments that took place after the fall were impressive by any standard. Unfortunately, instead of leading to a greater love for and appreciation of God, they led to human pride. Listen to Lamech's song.

He called his two wives. Note that polygamy here is met in the context of spiritual deterioration. Not an accident! He sang to his wives that he had killed a man who merely wounded him. Injustice had become the order of the day. Justice calls for punishment that fits the crime. Wounding a man should not lead to capital punishment. But there was more.

Lamech even considered himself greater than God. In Verse 15, God declared that whoever would kill Cain would be avenged seven times. Now Lamech scorns God.

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Only seven times? What's that? Listen, my wives, my revenge will be much greater than God's: seventy-seven times! The number seven is a symbol of perfection or completion in the Bible. God's avenging of Cain would be perfect, but Lamech's would be more than perfect, according to him. He placed himself above God Himself.

Lamech's spirit of pride and boasting should not surprise you. Man had achieved some great things. Since he had turned his heart away from God, he thought of himself as the master brain behind these developments. He failed to recognize the hand of God in them. That spirit always leads to disaster.

Day 45 The Destruction of the Heart

Genesis 6:5 ...every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.

Things had really gone from bad to worse. People had become so evil that *every* inclination of the human heart was *only* evil *all* the time. Note the italicized words. Not only *some* inclinations of the heart were evil, but *all* of them. The entire human heart had spoiled. It was inclined *only* to evil. Not merely *some* of the time, but *all* of the time.

This judgement sounds harsh. Many people do not accept this harsh judgement of the human race. They see so many good things around them. They see development. They see technology. They use the various electronic media to connect all over the world. They fly airplanes to get to distant places quickly. They think all these things show how good our race is.

The Bible is very realistic about human nature. God does not stare Himself blind on human achievements or on the glitter of modern technology. Underneath, deep down is the human heart and *that* is where God's main concern is focused. And for most of humanity that heart is turned away from God.

The glitter is there. The planes and telephones are there, but how much do they help the ordinary villager? Or the poor city dweller? Ah, so much development is

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in the service of the rich and powerful. So much of it is used to suppress the poor. God's is the right view. That's how most of us are.

Day 46 Evil and the Inevitable

Genesis 6:7 I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence.

The Bible is not basically a negative book and the Christian religion is at heart a religion of joy and deliverance. But that does not mean the Bible and its adherents are unrealistic or have blinders before their eyes so they see everything in rosy colours. Yesterday we overheard God saying that people are basically corrupt and evil deep down in their hearts, not merely on the surface of things.

Evil has its consequences. Things had gone so far that God grieved He had created the human race. But He did not stop there. As things progressed to greater and greater evil, God also went beyond mere complaining and warning. He pronounced judgement, very harsh judgement: He was going to put an end to all people. You know the form this judgement took. The flood that destroyed everyone and everything.

It was inevitable. There is no way that God can tolerate unending increase of evil. He has made the world, including the human race. That entire creation depends on obedience to His creation laws. When these laws are ignored and increasingly trodden upon, things will grind to a halt. Chaos will result and unending suffering.

You should not be surprised if everything gets stuck in our country. This judgement simply has to come. And it will not go away – unless.... Please fill in the blank yourself.

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Day 47 The Other Side of the Coin

Genesis 7:18 But I will establish my covenant with you

Destroy this whole creation? This creation that God said was so very good? It did look like that was about to happen. What a dismal picture that has been painted so far. Sin, sin and more sin. Evil and more evil. Murder. Pride. Boasting. Cruelty. Had Satan won the mother of battles he began in Genesis 3? Had the Creator lost control? It sure looked like it. The entire world about to be destroyed! What a mess!

Thank God. Things were bleak and dark indeed, but not all was lost. Remember the vague promise of victory in Genesis 3:15? The one about the head of the serpent being crushed? It was a vague promise, to be sure, but a real one. God could not stand the thought of having to destroy the creation He loved.

And so, here comes this singling out of Noah and his family. Sin and evil were about to take their inevitable toll, but so were God's love for His world *and* the righteousness of Noah. God saw his righteousness and made a promise of life to him and his family. Noah's righteousness also had its effect.

In other words, the emphasis on evil and destruction of the past few days in these meditations must be balanced by an emphasis on righteousness and its fruit. Destruction and misery are *not* the last word. The choice for righteousness is a choice for life. Choose it!

Day 48 The First Miracle

Genesis 6:19 You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures

Have you ever tried to control wild animals? Did you really expect them to obey you? I don't know anyone who expects to have that kind of control. But God not only *expected* Noah to have such control, He actually *commanded* Noah to bring these creatures into the ark. How can that be?

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Remember the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1? Adam was given control over all living creatures. In Genesis 2 Adam had the authority to name them and he had the wisdom to give them names that suited the nature of each one. For us today that seems like a strange power that many theologians can explain only as a myth. However that command and that kind of power over nature was, you may remember, never withdrawn.

Yet, it has become so unusual that no one expects to exercise that kind of power anymore. As the effects of the fall put an increasing distance between God and mankind, many of these powers waned, though even today we still find people who have all sorts of strange powers that science cannot account for. However, these powers are not generally used in the service of God and mankind.

Noah was close to God. His faith was not corrupted by modern philosophy that ridicules such powers. So, these original powers were still available to him. When God commanded, he did it. It was natural.

Day 49 A Reliable God

Genesis 8:22 ... seedtime and harvest ... will never cease.

Things did not change much with the flood. Genesis 8:22 repeats 6:5 – “every inclination of his (man’s) heart is evil.” Not just after he grows up, but from his childhood. The flood had not erased that basic evil from his heart.

God had every reason to send more judgement and destroy the world forever. Instead, He made a new covenant or promise with His creation, including man. “I will never bring such destruction again,” He vowed. From here on, “seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.” That was love and mercy at work, the only force that keeps this world going under God.

This is an important promise of regularity and faithfulness. There are those who believe that God does what He wants when He wants it. They think that God is

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limited by nothing and does as He pleases so that no one can predict what He will do next.

The Biblical view is that God has tied Himself voluntarily to a promise of regularity in creation so that we can count on Him. Though local droughts may occur, if you take a global look, there is a basic regularity in nature. This is important to know, for it makes it possible to plan. If God were totally arbitrary, no one could plan or count on anything. Even science would be impossible. Thank God for His faithfulness and steadfastness in nature. He is predictable.

Day 50 Mixing of Religions

Genesis 9:4 But you must not eat meat that has the lifeblood in it.

After the Flood, the Cultural Mandate remained in effect (Genesis 9:1-3). But an addition has been made. Now people are allowed to eat the flesh of animals, something not mentioned in Genesis 1.

However, the people are not allowed to eat animals anyhow. They may not eat the lifeblood. To understand this restriction, you must remember that, though the story is about early beginnings, the story was recorded much later. At the time the story was written, there were many nations. Many of these nations had traditional religions similar to those we know in Africa. To these people, blood had a special meaning: It represented the force of life. Drinking blood of an animal or of a human being was thought to give some special powers. It was used especially in sorcery and divination, both of which are forbidden in the OT. Please look at Leviticus 19:26. That such drinking of blood was a real temptation to the Israelites is clear from I Samuel 14:32-33.

Thus the reason drinking of animal blood was forbidden is that it was too closely associated with Traditional Religion. It became a temptation that would lead people away from the truth of God Himself.

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In our culture, where many people mix the Christian faith with Traditional Religion, this command is still important. Let us keep away from anything that may tempt us in the direction of sorcery and divination. Our God is sufficient.

Day 51 The Image and Life

Genesis 9:6 Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.

A basic law of creation is that *life is sacred*. Why? Because man was created in God's image. When you attack a person, you attack God's image, you attack God Himself. For such a heinous attack, God made strong provision. The murderer himself is to be killed. Perhaps because he has lost the right to the image.

The text does not tell us how the punishment is to be meted out or who is to do it. That is found in later books. However, it is clear from those later instructions that such punishment was to be done carefully according to procedures that would protect the accused from false charges as in Numbers 35:30.

However, anyone proven a murderer was to be put to death. This punishment was not to be reduced by accepting a ransom of money instead of the murderer's life. An attack on the image of God cannot be passed by for mere money or any other form of ransom. It is too serious for such a reduced sentence (Numbers 35:31).

Conservatives insist that this provision still holds today, while liberals tend to soften it. I am neither conservative nor liberal as these terms are used today, but here I side with conservatives. An attack on God's image is as serious today as it was in the past. No amount of psychologizing a murderous act or contextualizing it in a person's difficult circumstances reduces the seriousness of such killing, a tendency common in an age where people are all too eager to explain away a heinous act—and responsibility for it. God's image remains a "no go" area.

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Day 52 **Spoiled Human Relations**

Genesis 9:21 ***[Noah] became drunk and lay uncovered***

When you first heard the story of the Flood, you probably expected things to improve afterwards. It is a disappointment to see that right after the Flood, after Noah had made a special sacrifice to the Lord, after the Lord had made His covenant, Noah immediately got drunk. In the same story we see that disrespect of son for father set in.

Actually, we should not be surprised, in view of Genesis 8:21. The Flood wiped out many sinful people, but not sin itself. That had lodged so deeply in the human heart that no flood could ever erase it—and God knew that.

A single incidence of drunkenness may not be as destructive as stealing a billion naira by a single stroke of the pen by a civil servant, but taken as a whole, drunkenness has brought untold grief to families and society. In this case, it leads to a son making fun of his father and a collapse of respect. That, in turn, leads to the son being cursed. Sin has a spiraling effect. It leads from one bad thing to another, from bad to worse.

Fortunately, the three sons did not all react in the same way. Shem and Japheth retained their respect and sought to treat their erring father with dignity. There is no *must* in sin. You *can* choose. But the dynamic of the sin of Genesis 3 is clear, a dynamic still in effect today.

Day 53 **Curse Power**

Genesis 9:25 ***Cursed be ...!***

This is the fourth curse in the Bible. The first two are found in Genesis 3, where God cursed the serpent (:14) and the ground (:17). The serpent's curse included crawling and being crushed. The curse of the ground led to weed production. In Genesis 4:11, God placed Cain under a curse, the first in the Bible imposed on a

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human being. Food would be difficult for him to obtain and he would be a restless wanderer.

These curses of God had real power. They were effective. When God curses something or someone, so it will be. But note that every one of these curses is imposed in the context of grave sin. Curses are not to be taken lightly.

In our verse we find the first curse uttered by a human being, Noah. Not only God has the power to curse, but so do human beings, even though modern education and science make light of the power of the curse. Again, this curse was imposed in the context of sin. Here an entire clan that later expanded into many nations was condemned to slavery because of a serious sin. Though the text does not explicitly state it, the thrust of the story makes it plain that it was to be seen as approved by God.

The power of the curse is real. Both godly and ungodly persons have access to it. Let us not play around by uttering curses lightly. Do you think a Christian may curse someone? If so, under what circumstances? And what might be the content of such a curse?

Day 54 Blessing Power

Genesis 9:26 Blessed be the ... God of Shem!

Blessing and curse. Yesterday it was a curse. The curse is neither the first nor the last word of our Father/Mother. Blessing is Her first interaction with animals (Genesis 1:22) and with the human race (Genesis 1:28 and 5:2). The third blessing in the Bible is on the Sabbath (Genesis 2:3) No further word of blessing till Chapter 9 in Verses 1 and 26.

It is significant that God's first interaction with His creatures is one of blessing. *That* is His real Self. *That* shows His real intention towards us and the rest of creation. He curses only when forced by sin, but He is not happy when He does so.

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Noah also had the power of blessing. It is a power given by God to His people that in principle was never lost. Unfortunately, like the power of the curse, modern education and science have blinded us to this power. These forces also prevent many of our churches from helping us understand and tap this power.

Note that a blessing can be revoked. In Verse 1 God blessed Noah's sons, but Ham's descendants are cursed in Verse 26. Once blessed, you cannot simply depend on its automatic effect. It requires righteousness for continued effect. If your heart turns away from God after a blessing, the blessing can be revoked and replaced by a curse. Thank God, after repentance a curse can also be replaced by a blessing.

Many feel Nigeria is under a curse today. Why should that be? And how could we be released from it?

Day 55 Role Reversals

Genesis 10:8 Nimrod grew to be a mighty warrior

Genesis 10 gives a long-range picture of political and other developments far beyond the days of Noah. It is called "Table of Nations." It summarizes the main descendants of the children of Noah.

The surprising thing is that more is said about the achievements of Hamites than of the others. Nimrod is introduced as a mighty warrior and hunter known throughout the world. Then there is mention of some of the great nations and cities of the Near East, such as Babylon and Nineveh. These were advanced urban cultures. These people were powerful and often subdued Israel, the Shemites. Yet, the Hamites were supposed to be cursed as slaves. How explain that?

This reversal of roles shows that life is very complicated and cannot be understood by easy formulas. Things are often different from what you expect. Remember, I said that blessings and curses can be reversed. A blessing can be revoked when sin sets in. A curse can be replaced by a blessing where repentance

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has occurred. God can use the slave to upset His people when they turn away from Him. That happened often in OT times.

Furthermore, the created urge to fulfill the Cultural Mandate continued to push the Pagan peoples. God's people are supposed to be wiser than others, but when they become unfaithful, they often become downright foolish, more foolish than unbelievers. Hence the unbeliever may end up with greater cultural achievements. Are *you* wise or foolish?

Day 56 – Ethnocentrism

Genesis 10:22-25 Arphaxad, Shelah, Eber, Peleg.

In some languages, the name of an ethnic group means something like “Man,” while the name for other people may be something like “Barbarian.” Perhaps this is so in your language? Behind such names lies the human tendency to put yourself or your people at the centre of the stage, to think of them as the most important in all the world, as the greatest. This tendency encourages tribalism, nationalism and racism. It is an ugly and dangerous thing that causes terrible troubles in our country year after year.

In some ways, the Table of Nations is like another one produced by the ancient Babylonians. But there is an important difference between these two versions. That one makes the Babylonians the greatest, while this Table does not even mention Israel. Israel is represented only by the ancestors listed above. There is no attempt to elevate her to a special position.

The Bible is not an ethnocentric account of a nation. It is the story of God's interaction with the world, including Israel. *God* is at its centre, not any nation, not even Israel. If there is anything special about Israel, it is that God chose a special role for her. That role was not to lead to pride or tribalism, for that role was not their own achievement but a gift of God. And that gift of God was for the benefit of all the world. Is your ethnic group a blessing to others? How?

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Day 57 Two Histories?

Genesis 10:1 This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth

This chapter is called “The Table of Nations.” It contains a rundown of the descendants of the sons of Noah with one section of the chapter devoted to each group.

Scholars argue with each other whether the names in this table all represent nations that can be identified. Some insist that they can and should be. Others are more easygoing. The famous Reformer John Calvin calls it a “frivolous curiosity” to try to make such identification.

What then is the meaning of this table? You have already read about the strange wisdom of the unbelievers represented by Nimrod. You have also heard how this chapter fights against tribalism. There is another important issue underlying this Table. The history of the people of God in the Bible is *real* history. The story of Noah merges into international history, into the community of peoples and nations, each with their own language. In Genesis 11, we will see how the clan of Abraham, the father of all believers, emerged out of this family of nations.

Some people think there are two kinds of history, an ordinary history that is found in history textbooks and is often thought of as “secular” and a sacred history that is found in the Bible. God’s actions are thought to take place in this sacred history. In fact, God’s acts of salvation in this world are part of ordinary history. Noah and Abraham are ordinary people living in ordinary nations.

Day 58 - Pride Before the Fall

Genesis 11:8 So the Lord scattered them ...over all the earth.

People became proud of their achievements. Cultural development had continued to the point where men planned to build a large city with a huge tower that could be seen from afar. They had several motives. For one, they needed a

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safe place. They felt a city would provide that. They also sought to make a name for themselves. Surely a huge tower would achieve that!

Again, a case of sinful cultural development. The human race had come a long way from the simple life of the Garden of Eden. They had indeed worked out the Cultural Mandate—except for one thing. Cultural development was meant to take place in the fear of God and for His honour. But these people did it for their own honour. That kind of development always ends up in disunity, distortion and oppression. The Lord knows that.

So they were confused and scattered. That was a natural effect that was bound to come. When a group is very large and bent on its own honour, you will find that soon sub-groups form that begin to fight each other. Before long, they don't understand each other anymore, even if they all speak English. Is that not true for Yoruba, Hausa, Ibo, Tiv, Jukun and the rest of us? That's Nigeria's trouble. It would not happen with our hearts attuned to God. With clean hearts we could make Nigeria one and great instead of breaking it down.

Day 59 Blessing: A Positive Boomerang

Genesis 12:2 I will make you into a great nation ... and you will be a blessing.

We have here the opposite of both the Babel story and the curse. The people of Babel wanted to become great through their own efforts and in their own way. Though they did achieve a temporary greatness during OT days, today hardly anyone knows them. They have disappeared. In the meantime, the seed of Abram has become the most widespread religion.

But the promise of greatness has been fulfilled in a more important way. Wherever the seed of Abram has been true to its role assigned by God, they have been a blessing to the people around them. Even in Nigeria, when people need real medical care, they will go to the nearest Christian hospital. Many non-

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Christians in Nigeria have been educated in Christian schools. Where Abram's seed has been faithful, it has spread blessing to all around them.

Today, many people call for religion to be left out of politics, because they do not see any blessing in the Christian faith. Unfortunately, those who are Christian only in name have created many problems, as many as non-Christians. There are reasons we have problems in Nigeria today. One of them is that many Christians have not been serious. However, faithful Christians cannot leave their religion out of politics or anywhere else. When they come in, they will surely constitute a blessing to the nation. Are *you* a blessing?

Day 60 The Curse Boomerang

Genesis 12:3 ... whoever curses you, I will curse.

People of some religions easily curse others. This is true of adherents of Traditional Religion as well as of Muslims. It is hard to imagine that a Christian would curse someone. After all, Christians are to be a blessing to others. But Christians can do strange things when their heart is not fully turned to God. They may seek revenge on someone who has done them some perceived wrong. That revenge can take the form of a curse. It is hard to believe, but it happens.

It is dangerous to curse someone. If you curse a true child of God, a follower of Jesus Christ, part of the seed of Abram, that curse can boomerang. It can backfire so that you, the one who imposed the curse, will be cursed instead. I know of an alhaji who cursed someone who became Christian. Nothing happened to the new Christian, but the nephew of the alhaji became deathly sick and narrowly escaped death. Shortly afterwards,, the alhaji himself died very unexpectedly!

So, be warned. If *you* curse a believer, that curse can backfire on you, even if you are a Christian.

Except in the above case, God protects His children. If anyone curses you, God will curse him in turn and erase the curse on you. I know an evangelist who almost died from fear because of a curse placed on him. There was no need for him to fear. God is our protection.

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Day 61 A Fatal Choice

Genesis 13:11 Lot chose ... the whole plain of the Jordan.

Abram and Lot had no choice but to separate. They were simply too crowded. By all rights, Abram, the elder, the uncle (Genesis 11:27), should have taken first choice, but he allowed Lot to choose instead. And when Lot saw the fertile plains near the Jordan River, he chose to go there.

Note the selfishness of Lot. He should have insisted that Abram make the first choice, but when he thought of the Jordan Valley, selfishness took over and he chose. The only thing that motivated him apparently was the economic angle. The place was fertile. He did not give any thought to other aspects of the move. What kind of people lived there? Would it be spiritually safe for him to live there? What would the environment be like for his children? No, the only thought that crossed his mind was money.

It was a bad choice from the spiritual angle. The place was wicked (:13). Eventually, Lot lost his wife. She turned into a pillar of salt. His daughters lost their husbands. The widower and his two daughters, the widows, ended up living in a cave, where the daughters tempted their father to become drunk and had sex with him (Genesis 19:30ff). What a pitiful story. What a shameful end to a very rich family.

And the cause of it all? Greed, unthinking, plain greed. That's what happens when you make important choices based only on economic considerations.

Day 62 "Helping" God

Genesis 16:5 You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering.

God had promised Abram a son and numerous descendants in Genesis 15. By Genesis 16, Sarai, Abram's wife, becomes restless and begins to doubt the promise of God. So she persuades Abram that they should "help" the Lord along by trying to raise a family through her slave Hagar. Hagar becomes pregnant and the trouble starts.

First, Hagar despises her mistress for being barren. That, in turn, leads Sarai to accuse her husband that he is responsible for this new development. Then she so mistreats her slave that Hagar flees into the desert.

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Look where unbelief led them. The “help” they rendered God was an expression of unbelief. They did not think God would fulfill His promise about a son. And so they thought of a way to facilitate God’s promise.

God’s basic intention for the human race was to live in peace and prosperity. We can see that from the Garden of Eden account. But when we no longer abide by His promises and “help” Him along by devious means, then His blessing will be withheld.

God’s original intentions for Nigeria are like those in the Garden of Eden. Why do you think our country is almost the opposite of that Garden? Because we don’t believe His promises and “help” Him along by bribery and many other forms of corruption to achieve our aims. It has turned us against each other as in the case of Abram and Sarai.

Day 63 The Covenant

Genesis 17:7 I will establish my covenant

In the ancient Near East, kings used to make agreements with each other that were called “covenants.” In Genesis 17 we see God making a covenant or agreement with Abraham that would be the deep foundation on which all the relationships between God on the one hand and Abraham and his descendants on the other hand would depend.

Read the entire chapter and see what this covenant included. It was to be everlasting. God would be the God of Abraham and his descendants in a very special way. They were to receive the land of Canaan as their own. There was also the element of obedience that at first concentrated on the command to circumcise. If they failed to circumcise, the covenant would have no further effect. *All* men in the household, including those bought as slaves, had to be circumcised. Women are not mentioned. In ancient fashion, they were represented by the males.

This covenant from here on forms the basis for the relationship between God and Abraham and his offspring. It is repeated many times. To Isaac in Genesis 26:3-6. To Jacob in Genesis 28:13-15. And then it is referred to repeatedly throughout the OT. It will form the heart and basis of the future nation of Israel.

Over the next few days we will attend to some aspects of this covenant. Take time to read Genesis 12 -50 to see how often this covenant is mentioned and how basic it is.

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Day 64 An Everlasting Covenant

Genesis 17:7 I will establish ... an everlasting covenant

An everlasting covenant. Can you imagine anything that is everlasting, that has no end? In our lives, everything has an end. Imagining something without an end is very difficult for us, if not downright impossible.

The basic content of this covenant was that God was to be their God in a special way. That is a beautiful promise. What more could you want, having the God of heaven and earth on your side. Wow! That's really something.

As beautiful as this was, it could easily turn into something bad. Remember God made this promise with people who have earlier been described as having basically wicked hearts. Such people could easily twist this arrangement to make it ugly, to have it become a source of pride and tribalism.

If you read the OT further, you will see that is exactly what happened. The people of Israel began to take God for granted. They thought He would be with them no matter what they did. They found out how mistaken they were when they were punished in many ways, even dragged to foreign countries.

God wants to be our God and His covenant is meant to be everlasting, but that is *not automatic*. It requires obedience to Him, faithfulness and love. "You must keep my covenant," God said in Genesis 17:9. We have a part to play, a serious part. Go for it. Obey Him. Nigeria will be a different country.

Day 65 Bound Voluntarily

Genesis 17:7 I will establish ... an everlasting covenant

God is free. Do you agree? Is He totally free to do what, when, where and how He pleases? Yes and no.

Yes, He *is* free. He was free to create or not to create. He is free to keep up the world and nature by His mighty Providence. But He is *not* free to destroy the world or interrupt the annual cycles in such a way that everything becomes chaos. Why is He not free to do so? Because of His *promise* to Noah in Genesis 8:21-22 and 9:11. God was not forced to enter into that covenant. He did so voluntarily. But it means that He is obligated to keep this covenant.

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Here in Genesis 17 God enters into another covenant. He makes another promise. And that means He obligates Himself even further. He is no longer free to do with His people whatever His power allows. He has bound Himself and in His faithfulness He will not free Himself from that promise.

Here we have a significant difference with Islam. In Islam, God is absolutely free. Thus believers can never be sure of what He will do or even of their salvation. No promise. No guarantee.

According to the Bible, God's promise means you can remind Him of his obligation to guide, to support, to protect you. It means you can go into enemy territory and claim His protection. Try Him in your business or office and see

Day 66 The Scope of the Covenant

Genesis 17:12 ... every male including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner

With Abraham, God begins to pay special attention to one clan and one nation. Others are for the time being marginalized. It all seems rather exclusive and appears to turn the God of gods into a tribal deity. But remember: From the beginning God promised that Abraham and his seed would become a great blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:2-3). This was a temporary concentration on one people for the sake of all. The basic universal concern of God was not lost.

There is even a sign of that in that foreigners brought into the household were also covered by these covenant promises. This broke through the cycle of blood relations, tribe and race. This was *more* than a blood or tribal arrangement. Potentially anyone could enter into it.

It is striking that women are not mentioned here. In this respect, the arrangement follows ancient custom where women were simply assumed. Of course, it would have been worse if they were also to be circumcised, for female circumcision, where practiced, leads to serious complications.

So, on the one hand, silence about women is positive: It freed them from a cruel practice. On the other hand, this silence can be understood as an example of how bad the position of women had become since the fall. They are not even mentioned!

Sisters, remember some earlier posts in which your equality is emphasized. Above all, be glad for Christ's deliverance.

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Day 67 A Realistic Covenant

Genesis 20:2 Abraham said of his wife, “She is my sister.”

It was not a total lie. Sarah *was* Abraham’s half sister (:12). Still, when Abraham claimed her as a sister, he acted out of unbelief. He had done this before in Genesis 12. At another time, Abraham and Sarah both laughed in unbelief that they would have a son. They also arranged in unbelief to “help” God through Hagar (Genesis 16).

Actually, Abraham and Sarah’s offences were mild compared to those of their descendants. Jacob was a schemer and liar. His sons acted treacherously (Genesis 34). His household served idols (Genesis 35:2). Son Reuben slept with his father’s wife. (Genesis 35:22). His sons sold their younger brother into slavery (Genesis 37:28). Son Judah lay with an pretend prostitute (Genesis 38). Few signs of piety. Would God have anything to do with such people? Would He keep His covenant with that kind? Had He made a mistake?

No mistake had been made. The evil these people did was evil. Such evil really did not fit in their covenant relationship with God. They were to obey Him – that had been God’s condition. But God also knows our weaknesses. When He entered into this covenant, He demanded faithfulness and obedience, but He also realized that there would be lapses. That’s the reason He later sent Christ, whose work had a retroactive effect on these OT people.

Do not despair. Even if you have participated in evil, you can be forgiven and start afresh in faith. You *can*.

Day 68 What’s Impossible?

Genesis 17:17 Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?

Sometimes we think that people in those days were ignorant and ready to believe anything. That was not the case. When Abraham was promised a son, he was very skeptical. After all, he was 100 and she was 90. Sarah also doubted it (Genesis 18:2). These people knew the ordinary rules of life and nature. They did not expect those rules to change. So far, they had no children and that’s the way they expected it would be. That was normal at that age.

Not so. God had something else in mind and so He worked in an unusual way. For reasons of His own, He delayed their having children. Possibly, He wanted to emphasize that this whole covenant promise was His own initiative, not Abraham and Sarah’s.

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People who have no children after a few years of marriage should not despair so quickly. My wife and I were married seven years before we had our first child. Friends of ours were married 14 years before they had theirs! And some never have any. But if God wants you to have children, you *will* get them – but in His own time. Don't get tricky like Sarah. Leave it up to Him.

In fact, don't be too quick to judge anything impossible for God. Though He usually goes by the normal rules He has placed in creation, He *can* and sometimes *does* the unusual. It's called "miracle." Don't think you are too educated for a miracle.

Day 69 Good Intentions

Genesis 50:20 God intended it for good.

Do you ever despair? Nothing is going right. Nothing works out. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. You have reached the limit. That's how many people feel during the week I am writing this. It is a week of riots in Lagos and Kaduna.

Joseph must often have felt the same way. Look at all the bad things that happened to him. Hated by his brothers and sold into slavery. Accused by his master's wife of rape and thrown into prison, where he was forgotten. And all this took years. Years of separation from his family. Years of loneliness. Every reason for despair and hopelessness.

But look at the end of the story. Joseph became the second most powerful ruler in Egypt. He became God's tool to save his own people from starvation. Who could have guessed that such would be the outcome of all that suffering? It was not until the end that Joseph recognized God's intentions in all this.

Individually and nationally, most of us have reasons for despair. What is the point of my own suffering? Why should our entire nation go through such a deep valley? Why do people resort to destructive rampages?

Of course, partly because of our own collective foolishness. However, you can be sure God has a good purpose in mind. Keep a hopeful eye towards God's future. Such an attitude will help you think of positive contributions *you* can make, however small. Even now.

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Day 70 Rebellious Women

Exodus 1:17 The midwives ... feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt told them to do

The basic teaching of the church has always been that Christians honour the government of the day. That government is usually seen as the servant of God. To disobey the government is to disobey God Himself. That basic teaching will continue to serve as an important guiding principle.

But Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives, disobeyed the king's order not only, but they lied about it. At the end of the story you will find that God blessed them (:20-21) for their disobedience. The reason for their disobedience was their fear of God.

Pharaoh was forcing them to choose between obedience to God or king. He wanted them to commit murder. In such situations, the Bible teaches clearly that we must choose for God and disobey the king or government. There is a limit to our obedience. We may not support murder or oppression, not even if our own government or chief demands it.

Civil servants and police are often expected to take part in oppressing the poor. A friend of mine hosted a census taker in 1992, who reportedly said he was inflating the figures because he was ordered to do so. The Bible would have encouraged him to disobey.

Though Christians should basically be prepared to obey, when authorities force you to choose between them and God, the Bible is clear what is expected. Women, be proud of these midwives! Follow their example. And you men, too!

Day 71 Approved "Lies"

Exodus 1:19 ... they give birth before the midwives arrive.

Can a lie ever be true? The Ten Commandments forbid lying and rightly so. The Bible and the church encourage the truth and discourage falsehood. But it seems

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we have an example of a good “lie” today. We read that the midwives lied *because* they feared God. And God blessed them for it. Usually, of course, people lie because they do *not* fear God.

Have you ever experienced war? During war, it is possible that the enemy will come to your compound and demand to see your husband or son or brother. You know why. They want to carry him away and perhaps kill him. So you “lie” and say he is out. Is that a sin?

No, for the enemy had no right to him to begin with. He was making a false demand from you that would lead to death. If soldiers or police come to your door looking for a political opponent, you are not expected to hand over the wanted victim, for the demand itself is illegitimate.

Some call this a “white lie.” That means it is a “lie” motivated by the fear of God and based on love and justice. In fact, it is not a lie. Words spoken in love to protect life are true, even if they deny a fact.

Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the truth.” The truth is not first of all a statement. It is an act and life in harmony with Christ.

Day 72 The Unexpected Saviour

Exodus 3:10 I am sending you ... to bring ... the Israelites out of Egypt.

What? Me? Me rescue my people from oppression? Heh, Lord, You got the wrong man. I am no politician. I am no leader. I have no special talents or experience. Why do you pick on me? That was Moses’ reaction when God called him so unexpectedly. That had been the last thing on his mind. And *bang*, there it was.

It was not really as sudden as that, though. Look at Moses’ history. As an Israeli baby boy, he should have been thrown into the Nile River. Instead, through an apparent co-incidence, he ended up a prince in Pharaoh’s household and received the best education for leadership available anywhere. But growing up in luxurious surroundings did not make him suitable for the harsh conditions under which he

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was to lead his people. So God arranged to have him spend 40 years in the desert as a shepherd. When you read all these individual stories, that's all they seem to be. Until you see where they led to: Moses was appointed to liberate his people. No one had expected him to be that leader. He himself was surprised. Pharaoh was surprised. The people of Israel were surprised. But while they were crying to the Lord, apparently to no avail, Moses was quietly being groomed for this difficult position.

And, suddenly, there appeared a challenger to oppression. Pray without ceasing that God will bring us *such a challenger to our oppression*.

Day 73 Hearing God's Call

Exodus 4:10 I am slow of speech

The Lord had a hard time with Moses. Moses just did not believe the Lord had made the right choice when He called him. So, Moses brought up all the excuses he could think of. Strange, for if Moses had reviewed his life, he should have recognized that his qualifications were just right for the job.

It is possible that your village needs someone capable of freeing them from an oppressive chief or your local government from a cheating chairman and councilors or your state from corrupt politicians. Or perhaps you suspect some national politicians of treating our entire nation as a private enterprise. But you don't think it is *your* job to begin the liberation or to lead it. It is always someone else, isn't it? Never *you yourself*, not even at your village level.

That's the way it was with Moses, too. Not me, Lord, not me. Pick someone else. I can't speak very well. I don't even know Your name. Pharaoh will not believe me. Etc. etc. Bunk, Moses, all bunk! And the Lord let him know it. He undercut all Moses' excuses and left him with no way out.

It is time we get beyond complaining. It is also time *you* move beyond your excuses and seriously, before the Lord and His people, check yourself out. *Why*

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not you? Give an answer, an honest answer. Tell it to the Lord. And then see what happens!

Day 74 God's Underground Preparation

Exodus 3:4 God called him, "Moses! Moses!"

Today I give you my personal testimony about *my* calling. My ministry is to help people apply the Bible in society and God prepared me for this over many years. In primary school, I became a good writer. As a boy, I helped my father in his village barbershop in The Netherlands. A certain theologian had interested the people in applying the Bible to society. Customers would discuss these things, while I, a young teenager, listened. At university and seminary, I belonged to a club that was concerned with the same thing. Though I intended to work in Canada as a pastor, the Lord unexpectedly placed me in Nigeria. I learned much about the life of the poor while working in the villages of Taraba. Then the Lord enabled me to go for postgraduate studies. He provided me with scholarships in surprising ways. Eventually I began working with the Institute of Church and Society (ICS), helping people apply the Bible to life.

I never knew that all the while the Lord was preparing me for this type of ministry. You need to write. You need to know how to apply the Bible. You need to know theology. You need to know the suffering of Nigeria's poor. You need a broad education. All of these I received as I went along and suddenly it all fell into place at the ICS. This was God preparing me all along.

Check *your* preparation.

Day 75 Moses' Preparation

Exodus 2:3 Then she placed the child among the reeds ... of the Nile.

Moses' preparation was much like mine as I told you yesterday. His parents were by law to have thrown the baby boy into the Nile River. They refused. Instead,

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they placed him in a basket in the river. From there he was picked up by Pharaoh's daughter and became a prince to receive a fitting education for leadership. Then he became shepherd for 40 years, thus learning to live in the wilderness. It was only after 80 years of all this training that God called him to become liberator. No one could have guessed where all these things were leading up to, except God, who was secretly training him.

And Moses' response to God's call? All sorts of excuses. He did not want it. And you can't blame him, for being a liberator is not easy. You will make all sorts of enemies. You will have no rest.

Today, we seem to be waiting for a liberator. We all complain loudly, but no one comes forth. Oh, yes, of course, the politicians will pose as liberators, but just wait till you give them their chance. Not much will come of it.

The question for you today is: what can *you* do to liberate your people? Even if it is only at the village level? How has God led you through the years? Have you listened to His call or have you closed your ears and heart? Over to you.

Day 76 Thanks but No Thanks

Exodus 5:23 ... and you have not rescued your people at all.

Moses may have been wrong, but he was also right! He was wrong in wanting to refuse God's calling to save his people. But he was right in that it would be a difficult and thankless task. His people would say, "Thanks but no thanks."

Moses' first efforts at liberation looked like total failure. The initial result was only more work and more oppression. In addition to making bricks, they now had to provide their own raw materials as well. Before, their masters provided the straw.

No wonder Israel's leaders jump on Moses. They complain bitterly that he has made things worse for them. Some liberator!

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Even Moses himself objects. Look what you've gotten me into, Lord, he complains bitterly. You think it is a small thing for me to come to the Head of State only to make things worse for my people?

Ah, how little patience. How little faith. How shortsighted Moses and all his people are. Give up so easily when God Himself has promised to free them? His promises are worth more than that! Of course, hindsight is easy for us. But we should learn from this story that when we have started something difficult and we meet serious obstacles, we do not fall into despair right away. If the first step is not successful, pray your way to another solution or tactic. The God who called you will not let you down.

Day 77 Because of My Mighty Hand

Exodus 6:1 Because of My mighty hand, he will drive them out

Yesterday, we saw Moses and his people fall into despair. They had met their first obstacle and caved in right away. They were staring themselves blind on the power of the rulers and figured they would have no chance. They had failed. Instead of freedom, they now saw themselves in a deeper hole of misery than ever before.

Today God comes to Moses with a strong word of encouragement. Moses, open your eyes and see what I am going to do to Pharaoh. Moses will see what *God* is going to do. Moses is to take his eyes off from Pharaoh and his power. As long as he stares at the strength of the oppressor, he will be paralyzed and become powerless.

That's what people do all the time. We complain but we do nothing. We fix our eyes on the power of the oppressors and we become paralyzed. *Thus we make ourselves powerless.* Do you realize that? No one makes us powerless except we ourselves.

In today's text we are given the recipe for power: *Fix your eyes on God.* Watch what He is doing or will do. That's where our strength lies. Not with our

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oppressors. Not with ourselves. With God. Only He is strong and He is able to force even the strongest Pharaoh to actually drive his slaves away.

Day 78 Representing God

Exodus 7:1 I have made you like God to Pharaoh

Imagine! God appointing Moses to be like God to Pharaoh! Not to be God Himself of course, but to be *like* God, to represent God. The messages Moses gave to Pharaoh were not his own; they were God's and were to be taken as such. Now *that's* a pretty high appointment!

As soon as Muslims hear this kind of language, they will get up in arms. Be like God?! Extreme blasphemy. If you were to say this in Pakistan, your whole neighbourhood would gather and club you to death. Be like God? Imagine! That, of course, would be total misunderstanding. But I will admit that it is dangerous language that lends itself easily to misinterpretation and feed into Muslim distaste for Christians.

Many Christians may think of a preacher, especially a fiery revival preacher, as a representative of God. But a politician? Moses was to represent God not as a pastor but as a politician – he was to free his people from oppression, from slavery. He was to become a radical!

Oh, horrors. Most of us don't like radicals, though I immediately distance myself from that attitude. A true radical goes to the *radix*, the source of a problem. He does not stay with and treat mere symptoms. Christians *need* to be radical, for you cannot solve a problem unless you go to its root.

We do not normally think of politicians as God's representatives. We tend to think of them as liars, as thieves, as manipulators of the masses, as people out for themselves. Of course, that is correct in the case of many of them, but not all. Moses was one of the exceptions.

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We get here a good picture of what a real politician is, a representative not first of all of his party, not first of all of his state or district or even religion. He is supposed to be and act like a true representative of God, to reflect Him, to be His image! That means, showing the same concerns God has in politics, namely justice. If you are a politician, do people see you as a true representative of God? If you are an ordinary citizen, you have the right to challenge your representatives to become like God, to reflect Him. That means promoting justice for everyone.

Day 79 Sticking to It

Exodus 7:4 With mighty acts ... I will bring out My people the Israelites.

God explained His programme to Moses. Moses and senior brother Aaron had to demand freedom for their people from Pharaoh. But Pharaoh would not let them go that easily, for God would harden his heart. God would then come with many miracles, but Pharaoh would still not listen. Then God would arrange for some climactic ending to Pharaoh's stubbornness, some sort of explosion and Israel would finally be free to go.

We have here a typical model of God's way with people. Sometimes we Christians want to do something for God and for His people. Perhaps you want to help your village get a clinic. Perhaps you want to struggle towards a new national legislation that would ensure that politicians or civil servants who have stolen public funds will have to give account. You have prayed about it. You have discussed it with others. You see that the Bible would approve it. So, you feel good about it.

You try it once and you fail. That's it. You give up. You conclude that it is hopeless.

Our story for today is unusual in that it tells us ahead of time how God is going to reach His goal. It will look as if Moses failed. Remember this story. Don't give up too quickly. Remember that God will give victory in His own time. Just be sure you are doing His will and then try again.

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Day 80

Doing Miracles

Exodus 7:9 Take your staff and it will become a snake.

How many Christians do you know who could do such a miracle in the name of God? Or any other kind of miracle? Have you ever seen one? Have you ever done one? Why is it that most of us have never seen such miracles, let alone done one, just one?

The reason is that most of us don't really believe it possible. And why is that? Because missionaries who have brought us the Gospel were so much influenced by modern science that they lost belief in miracles. We are heirs to a scientific Christianity without miracles.

Modern science and its methods, you should realize, were started by Christians. There is nothing un-Christian about science. Only some scientists are non-Christians. People became so impressed with science that they slowly lost confidence in miracles. In reaction to this development, some other Christians turned against science and called it ungodly, worldly or secular, the opposite of faith. And when people turn against science, including medical science, in the name of Christ, they become downright silly. You probably know some such Christians in Nigeria. Because of all this, the churches that sent us their missionaries turned away from miracles.

The Bible nowhere suggests that the day of miracles is over. To the contrary, see John 14:12. I urge you to accept both science *and* miracles. They may be more closely related to each other than you think.

Day 81

Doing Magic

Exodus 7:11 The Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts.

It is dangerous for an educated person to admit he believes that miracles are possible under the power of God. It can ruin his reputation. It is even more

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dangerous for an educated person to accept that the Egyptian pagan magicians could perform some of the same miracles that Moses and Aaron did. See also Exodus 7:22 and 8:7. They did the same things by their secret arts.

Though many have sought to explain what these magicians did in a way that is somewhat acceptable to the modern scientific mind, such explanations do not satisfy. Open your mind to the many testimonies about people, non-Christians in various continents, especially Africa and Asia, who can perform acts that are impossible to explain by scientific or other accepted rational rules – but they do them anyhow. There appear to be “secret arts” that are largely lost to the modern mind, but that are very real.

Abraham Kuyper, in his book *You Can Do Greater Things Than Christ*, explains that these secret arts are leftovers of the original power the human race was given at creation (Genesis 1:26, 28). Traces of those powers have been preserved, but they are now often used in the power of Satan against those of God as in the present story.

Though these powers can be threatening, note how Aaron’s snake swallowed those of the Egyptians. Note also how these magicians were defeated in 8:18 and 9:11. That should encourage us in our own battles.

Day 82

Inside Information

Exodus 7:3 I will harden Pharaoh’s heart.

The main difference between Moses’ story and our own is that Moses had inside information that is not usually available to us in our struggles. We are told that the real reason the struggle took so long was that God constantly hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Besides our verse, we find the same inside information many times in the story. See 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34; 10:20, 27 – ten times in all. And then an eleventh time (14:5), but that was one too many. It led to Pharaoh’s destruction in the Red Sea.

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Moses had inside or privileged information we do not usually have in our struggles against oppression. But we learn many encouraging things from this inside information. We learn that though the oppressor looks invincible, God is present and in His own time will bring victory. Though God will not always harden the hearts of the oppressor so that the oppressor's reason for resisting you may be different, assurance of God being in ultimate control should encourage you in your fight.

Let this story be a source of strength, therefore, to you, if you are struggling for freedom from those who oppress you or your people. In one way or another, He will be there. Moses had ten setbacks, each of which looked like a defeat. If it were not for the privileged information, he might have given up.

You, too, have privileged information, though not as detailed as that of Moses. You know that God is there. And you have these stories that exemplify God's presence and power. Let that give you the strength to push on – even if you have *ten setbacks!*

Day 83 Better Red Than Dead?

Exodus 14:12 It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!

The Cold War is over and almost forgotten. Thank God. The world could now pay attention to some more positive issues. But while it was going on, occasionally the question was raised what would be better in case the war became hot: Fight to the end and die or give up and become part of the red Communist empire. Red (Communist) or dead? Which is better?

That was the issue at stake with Israel. Things looked hopeless for them. Before them was the Red Sea without bridge or ferry. Behind them was Pharaoh. Is it better to be red or dead? Is it better to die in the fight or be slaves once again? Death or slavery. These were the only possibilities Israel saw and they chose slavery; they chose to be red.

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Many of us make the same choice daily. We choose slavery every time we run up against a situation of bribery, oppression, corruption. We give in rather than fight it. The obstacles seem too great. The Red Sea before us and the Egyptian army behind us. Between the devil and the deep blue sea. Apparently no way out.

The struggle of Nigerian Christians against Muslim domination is a similar question: Which is better—become Muslim or die?

Well, yes, as long as they saw only these two, it looked bad. But what about the God who had done all these great miracles of liberation? Had they forgotten Him so soon? Could that be *(y)our* trouble? Let us remember this story in our struggle with Muslims. God is out there and directing things His way for our liberation. In due time..., *as long as we remain faithful to Him!* It is not automatic, guaranteed.

Day 84 God's Battle

Exodus 14:14 The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.

Between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea without a ferry. Yes, there *were* reasons for panic. A return to the old slavery seemed the only way out. That's how we often "solve" our battles against our oppressors. We choose the easier way out, but not the one we really want. Back to slavery.

God does not encourage His people to passively sit and watch Him. Throughout the Bible we are urged to take action in His name and when we do, He is working in and through us (Galatians 2:8, 20; Ephesians 3:20). God so working in and through us is the source of our strength and guarantee of our final victory.

But there are times when we really have no way out. No battle experience; no ferry. What could they possibly do? Things did indeed look hopeless. But even then it is not a matter of better red than dead. Then we can leave the fight to the Lord and be still. Of course, we still pray. We still stand firm and watch.

You know what He did. He created a path for the people to cross. When the army entered the same path, the path disappeared and the army drowned.

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So, Moses' advice to "stand firm" was not so foolish after all. Even when no human solutions are in sight, God can provide an unexpected one. How foolish of us to give up so easily.

Day 85 God's Weapons

Exodus 14:25 Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them.

Today we take a look at how God fought this battle. He mustered a number of remarkable resources. First there was the pillar of cloud (14:21-22) that came between the Egyptians and the Israelis, bringing darkness to the one side and light to the other. Then the Lord brought a wind to create a dry path through the sea for Israel to pass through. That same path later became a weapon against the Egyptians. They drowned. God also threw the Egyptians into confusion and had the wheels of their chariots come off. This was the strangest collection of weapons ever seen and the most unorthodox strategy. But it worked, didn't it?

So why do we so easily give up in our struggles for justice and fairness? Why do we so easily forget the great range of weapons the Lord has available? Why do we always think that if we can't think of a better strategy, then the game is over. The oppressor has won once again.

Come on. Get with it. God's range of weapons is larger than you think. If *you* have run out of options, there is still the full range of *His*. The Egyptians recognized them and feared. They said, "Let's get away from these Israelites. The Lord is fighting for them." That's how our oppressors will feel when they see God is on *our* side. But you'll have to *show* them by living and fighting faithfully.

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Day 86 Miracle and Nature

Exodus 14:21 The Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind.

I hope you have been reading the whole story of Israel's liberation, including the miracles the Lord did, especially those at the Red Sea. You should have noticed one thing about these miracles. They are often directly dependent on and related to natural things or processes. The Lord prepared a path through the sea, but He did it by using a strong wind. There are some who claim that this was a "natural" event, for it happens more frequently.

It is very important to some people that a miracle is independent from nature and it is best of all if a miracle goes *against* nature. Ah, that is God doing His thing. That is power. That is divinity. That's what they like to see or hear. These are often the same people who refuse to take medicine or go to a doctor. No, God has to do His healing directly, without the use of natural things or people.

It really does not matter whether there may be a "natural" explanation for the path in the sea or whether it happens more often. God is still behind it. He is in the storm that knocks down a tree. The natural explanation that the wind pushed the tree down is correct, but it does not mean God was not there using His wind.

All His works are miracles. Creation or nature itself is a miracle of God. The Bible often refers to natural things and processes as "wonders."

Day 87 God Leading His People

Exodus 15:13 In Your unfailing love You will lead the people

Please read the whole song of Moses and Miriam. It is a song of great strength and joy on the part of God's people for their liberation from slavery. Read it over a few times. *Feel* your way through its joy, its jubilation, its sense of victory. Several choruses are built around this song. *If there is none in your language, find a Christian songwriter to compose one.*

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The first part of the song recalls the great things God did for them. He hurled the horse and its rider into the sea. The deep waters covered the oppressors. They sank like a stone. He threw down those who opposed Him and consumed them like stubble. By the blast of His nostrils the waters piled up like a wall. Ah, who is like You – majestic, awesome, working wonders!

And then the song turns to the future. *Because* God did all these things, *therefore* Israel is sure that His unfailing love will lead the people He has redeemed into the future. Their enemies will be gripped with anguish. They will be terrified. They will tremble. They will melt away.

And the people of God? What is their future? God “will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of Your (God’s) inheritance.” That promise holds for you today. When is God *through you*, His people, going to undo the oppressor in your community? The enemy will tremble and melt away. And *you* will sing a new song. Say “Yes” to God and your future!

Day 88 Remember! Remember!

Exodus 15:22, 24 For three days they traveled So the people grumbled

I tend to be forgetful and that can have its advantages. You can tell me the same joke several times and each time I will enjoy it afresh. But forgetfulness can also lead to embarrassment and even hurt. Someone has done you a good deed, but next time you meet him, you forget. Recently, a prominent citizen intervened on my behalf when a foreign visitor could not get a visa to enter Nigeria. Next time I met the man, I forgot to thank him. I feel terrible about this.

But sometimes forgetfulness can be fatal. When you forget what God has done in your life in the past or what He did for the Israelites, you can lose heart. Then any bit of difficulty can upset you and fill you with fear and worry. That’s what happened in the story of today. Only three days after Israel left the scene of that marvelous victory, they started grumbling about water! They forgot what God had done for them in such a marvelous way and everything looked hopeless.

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“What are we going to drink?” they cried in desperation, a desperation resulting from forgetfulness. This kind of forgetfulness is serious, for it brings fear and powerlessness.

Brother, Sister, do not forget the great works of God. Remember them at all times. If you forget, you will fear your enemy and cower before your oppressor. But if you remember, you will fear no one. Remember and believe

Day 89 The Lord Who Heals

Exodus 15:26 For I am the Lord, who heals you.

Some people think of God as a harsh taskmaster who loves to mete out punishment left and right. As a God who places impossible and unreasonable demands on people and when they cannot meet His standards, He delights in punishing them.

Today we are told that the Lord is one who heals. *That* is His main interest, His real love. He is described that way often in the Bible. He “takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11; 18:23). “I take no pleasure in the death of anyone” (Ezekiel 18:32).

And what is the condition for healing? It is no different from what any medical doctor will tell you. Live according to the laws of nature, of creation. Live as the Lord intended to begin with. Live righteously with your neighbours. Deal righteously with creation and environment. Legislate righteously. This is something that should come naturally to anyone who loves God.

This is not an individualistic recipe for healing. This one is for the health of the entire community, the nation. *Together* they are urged to do the right, to listen to Him. A nation that so listens and obeys is guaranteed healing and life. God will delight in seeing that nation prosper.

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If this sounds like a version of the “prosperity gospel” to you, you should realize the difference. That “gospel” is individualistic. It teaches that If you as an individual live right, you will become prosperous, even if the entire nation is wicked. That is not the case. A single righteous person in a sea of wickedness will more likely be persecuted, have a hard time, suffer. It is when the people as a whole live by God’s standard that they are promised prosperity and peace.

Nigeria, why will you die? Here is your invitation to life and health.

Day 90 Grumbling vs Prayer

Exodus 16:2 The whole community grumbled

On Day 85, it was the enemy. Yesterday it was lack of water. Today it is lack of food. After all the marvelous ways in which the Lord had saved them, they still did not have confidence in Him. It was not a matter of a few people, but “the whole community.”

Their problem was real: No food, hunger. And nothing in sight either. No one could think of any plan of action. Things looked bleak indeed.

Bleak? Come on, Israel! Don’t you ever learn anything? Why do you always forget the tremendous acts of God that He has done for you? Do you suffer from amnesia – the sickness of forgetfulness? Look how He opened the Red Sea for you. Remember the water of Marah, not to talk of all the miracles on your behalf in Egypt.

There is one plan of action that is always available. That is the plan of prayer. To be sure, the situation contained nothing promising. But their greatest “Resource” was as close to them as prayer. They did not have to send a delegation anywhere to contact Him. Right there on the spot. So, why ignore Him who had proved Himself the perfect “Resource” to them time and again?

Such spiritual stupidity! Astonishing!

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The Bible does not advocate prayer without action. But when there are no further alternatives, the avenue of prayer is always there. God remains a powerful “Resource” that is never tapped in vain. Prayer is far more effective than grumbling.

Day 91 Manna and Hoarding

Exodus 16:4 I will rain down bread from heaven for you.

Read the whole chapter to see how God took care of the people by means of quail, a well-known bird, and manna. There are those whose worldview says that God does not do anything that goes against the normal rules of nature. These people will explain that this manna was a normal thing that used to come from a shrub in the desert and that would melt in the heat of the sun. Others insist that there was no natural base for this manna and that it was a “pure miracle” from God. It does not really matter whether God works through normal channels or not. In both cases it is He who provides.

What *is* important is the amount God provided – enough for each day. Anyone who gathered for the next day would find it rotten. *No hoarding*. No piling up of food. It reminds us of the Lord’s Prayer: Give us this day our daily bread.

This arrangement is a far cry from today’s practices. In today’s world we have small groups of people who hoard unbelievable wealth, while the rest go begging. It is one thing to arrange for a pension or even to save for old age under today’s circumstances. But to go so far beyond one’s needs calls for a cry to heaven, for it is at the expense of the people.

Are you a hoarder?

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Day 92 The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-17 And God spoke all these words

Today, we will begin a very long journey by exploring the Ten Commandments. Our interest is not in studying their full meaning. Remember, we are concentrating on the *social* aspect of the Bible. But before we get into the actual text, we will consider some introductory issues.

This was considered a very important document by God Himself. He told Israel to store it in the ark, that sacred box resting in the Tabernacle (Ex. 25:16, 21-22). The ark with the Testimony (the two stone tables of the law) inside was then placed in the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies (Ex. 26:33-34). Its storage there showed how extremely important these commandments were to God, unusually important, for that is where the Lord would meet with His people (Ex. 38:6). This law stood at the very centre of God's relationship with Israel.

The importance of the Ten Commandments is also highlighted by the demand that a version of them be read by the Levites to the people (Deut. 27:4ff), including during important festivals (Deut. 31:10ff).

Because of the central place of these Ten Commandments in God's relationship to His people in the OT, some churches regularly recite them during their Sunday services. It is a recognition of the importance of the law in the lives of the people.

May these meditations help you to put this law in the centre of *your* life to serve as your daily guide in all your decisions.

Day 93 No to the Law

Romans 3:20-21 Therefore no one will be declared righteous ... by observing the law But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known

For the next couple of days we will shift to the New Testament. If we are going to meditate on the Law, we need to have confidence in it. Unfortunately, there are

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some Christians, in fact, some entire denominations, who ignore the ten commandments or the Decalogue (Ten Words), as it is often called. Why should that be so?

One reason is that in the NT there are some verses that talk negatively about the Decalogue. In addition to the above verses there are others, mostly in the book of Romans. Romans 3:28 says, "... a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." In Romans 4:14 we read, "For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless." Again, according to Romans 6:14, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."

These verses do not reject the law itself, but they deny that the law can lead to justification, to righteousness, to forgiveness. We agree. Sin clings to *all* of us without exception, including *you*, in all that we do. None of us can fulfill the law entirely. We all fall short. We all sin.

The Pharisees in Jesus' days thought they were righteous, because they obeyed the law. Many people think so. Perhaps you do. Don't fool yourself! You can't. Definitely obey that law of God, but not in order to be declared righteous by God. You can only be declared righteous by forgiveness, not by obeying the law. You will fall short every time.

Day 94 Yes to the Law

Romans 7:12 So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Paul, from whom you learned yesterday that you cannot receive forgiveness of sin by fulfilling the law, today tells you that this law is holy, righteous and good. In Romans 7:16, he writes, "The law is good." The Lord Jesus said He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Not one single letter from the law will lose its force, He insisted (Matthew 5:17-18). The law is useless if you use it wrongly, but it is good when you submit to it in the right way.

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Even more, Paul writes that “in my inner being I delight in God’s law (Romans 7:22). *Delight* in it. Not simply put up with it. Not simply tolerate it. Not simply do the best you can with it. Not simply see it as the price you have to pay for salvation. *Delight* in it.

And that is the way people in the OT saw the law also. Turn to Psalm 19:7-11 and see how the writer delights in that law. It revives the soul, it is trustworthy, makes wise, gives joy and light, is righteous, precious and sweet.

Or turn to Psalm 119. It tells us that those who keep it are blessed and will not be shamed. The writer delights in meditating on it and reciting it. He longs for it. The law gives him hope and comfort. He sings about it and thanks God for it.

Day 95 Where the Law Came From

Exodus 19:20 The Lord descended to ... Sinai and called Moses to the top

If I were to ask you where the Decalogue came from, you would probably say, “From Sinai.” That would be true but not the full truth. As the story goes, Moses received the two tables of stone from God and brought them down. OK – but that is not the actual beginning of the law itself.

Exodus 20:8 reads, “*Remember the Sabbath day*” That reminder goes back to the creation story. The Decalogue was not new; it was a reminder of the law of God that our first parents already had in their hearts. Adam and Even did not need these laws written in stone, for they were embedded in their hearts. These are the original laws God embedded in creation, in nature, in all of reality. After the fall, as people grew away from God, they also grew away from His laws. But many nations still remembered at least certain aspects of the law of God. That is why you find that other ancient peoples had laws similar to these.

These laws were natural to Israel and to all people, including you. They came along with creation. The law is to us as water is to a fish. A fish would not only be unhappy on land, but it would die. It cannot live outside of water.

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Neither can *you* live outside of God's law. Nigeria is in trouble because we ignore that law – and that *cannot* work.

Day 96 Disobedience Naturally Brings Punishment

Exodus 20:12 ... so that you may live long in the land ...

A mother punishes her child when he disobeys. The punishment may be a verbal reprimand, a physical spanking or whatever. The punishment is arbitrary when there is little relation between the type of punishment and the kind of disobedience. However, there is an ancient wisdom that suggests the punishment should always fit the crime.

In God's scheme, the punishment always fits the crime. In fact, often the punishment is the natural result of our disobedience. When you are selfish, people will notice it and you will lose your friends. If you are dishonest, people will refuse to give you the loan you need. If you drive too fast or do not take care of your vehicle, you will likely get into an accident. If people let their rulers and civil servants get away with corruption, they will all go backwards together. If people cut down all the trees, natural disasters like erosion and drought will overcome them, animals will die and crops will shrivel. *AIDS* is such a punishment. It is the natural consequence of wholesale sexual immorality. People do not like to talk of it as God's punishment, but it *is*. His natural punishment embedded in nature. It was bound to come. Ignoring God's law will eventually bring a nation to a stone wall beyond which it cannot go. But obeying God together will produce a stable community that stands firm. The choice is yours. Long life or chaos.

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Day 97 Law in Stone or Heart

Psalm 119:11 I have hidden Your word in my heart

The Decalogue was written on two cold stone tablets. Some people think of it as a legalistic set of laws that belongs to the OT era that we Christians of the NT have outgrown.

One reason the Decalogue was written in stone is that stone symbolizes permanence. Something written in stone lasts longer than something written on paper or in a computer. I have held letters written on paper 70 years ago and left in church files in Jos, but when I touched them they would turn into dust. I have been able to clearly read gravestones written over 100 years ago. The law of God is permanent and stone is a good symbol of that.

In Psalm 119, that long hymn of praise for God's law, there are several references to both law and heart. Verse 2 – "Blessed are they who keep His law ... with all their heart." Verse 10 – "I will seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands." See also verses 11, 30 and 34.

Obedience to God's law is a necessary condition of life, but it is possible only if it is in your heart – not just on stone or even in the Bible. I advise you today to pray for that law to be written in your heart so that it will control *everything* you do. That law is powerful and living. It is permanent. And it holds even today.

Day 98 Thank God for the Negatives

Exodus 20:4 You shall not

Some people find the Decalogue too negative. There are too many "You shall nots." That, so the argument goes, leads to a negative legalism. As long as you refrain from doing the prohibited things, you develop the false impression that you have fulfilled the law. In addition to legalism, such an attitude also leads to hypocrisy and pride.

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Imagine that the Bible gave us only positive laws: “Do this” and “Do that” and that these were the only things you were allowed to do. How many laws would there have to be to make life possible? Too many! You would need a law for every little thing you do in life. And if it were not included in this written law, you would not be allowed to do it. Now *that* would create legalism: that is, living by the law. That would rob you of all freedom.

The Decalogue actually gives you a lot of freedom. By merely prohibiting very few things, those that go against the nature of things anyway, God gives you the freedom to do *everything else!* The only things that are prohibited are those listed in these commandments. *You may do everything that is not prohibited here.* Now *that's* freedom. What more do you need? If you do the things prohibited, you will find that your life will become miserable anyway. Doing any of these goes against the created nature of things and will invariably lead to suffering.

Day 99 The Law for Everyone

Deuteronomy 17:19 (The king must) follow carefully all the words of this law

The laws of Nigeria are for everyone. There is not a single law in Nigeria which says that a powerful group may ignore it. In the above verse, Israel is promised a king in the future, but immediately attached to that promise is a whole string of laws that the future king must obey. He is under the law like everyone else. Read Deut. 17:14-20.

Why were these laws written there long before anyone had been appointed? If you read the books of Kings and Chronicles in the Bible, you will see how hard it was even for the best of kings to rule justly. And one does not need to look far in our own country to see that powerful people often act as if Nigeria's laws are only for the poor. We often hear of a poor man who has stolen perhaps a bag of cement and is jailed for two years. The next day, a highly-placed civil servant or church official may have defrauded the government of thousands of naira by the mere stroke of a pen and he will only be demoted or dismissed. No jail for him.

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The laws in the Bible are meant for *everyone*, including chiefs, politicians, governors, generals, church officials, etc. *No one* may murder, steal or lie. Christians should not only obey the Decalogue themselves, but they should also insist that the powerful do. Including church leaders. Years ago, I wrote a Hausa-language commentary on the OT book of I and II Kings. The artist who designed the cover drew a picture of a prophet wagging his finger at the king sitting on his throne. This served to illustrate that even the king is subject to the law of God and that the “man/woman of God” has the freedom, in fact the obligation, to remind the authorities of that law.

Day 100 God Enables Us

Ephesians 2:4-5 God ... made us alive ... even when we were dead in transgressions.

You may remember from earlier months that the Bible describes us humans as dead. Same in today’s verse. Dead – that means we are not able to keep the law of God by our own power, for the power of sin is stronger than we are.

But things are different with you, a believer. You who have accepted Christ are a new person. You have been made alive. The powers of sin and Satan have no more hold over you. You are free. You now have the power to basically obey God’s law.

That new power of yours is God’s gift to you. That is the first stage of salvation that goes on into eternity. It is *God* who makes you alive, who empowers you, who enables you to obey. It is a gift you can count on, for it is God’s promise to everyone who believes in Christ.

So, we should get rid of our defeatist attitude. Whether you are a civil servant or a businessman, remember and believe the promise of God to empower you. If you stare yourself blind on the opposition your colleagues will give you, you will not have the power to stand and obey. But if you concentrate on God’s faithfulness and His promises, you will be able to stand up where it counts.

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Have you been made alive? Then you have the power to stand. Rise up and exercise your new power today!

Day 101 The Foundation for Social Action

Exodus 32:15 Moses went down ... with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands.

The Ten Commandments were written on two tablets. There has always been disagreement among scholars as to exactly how the materials were divided among the two tablets. However, there is general agreement that the first tablet emphasizes our responsibility to God, while the second is more concerned with how we treat our neighbour.

It is no accident that the first laws deal primarily with our relationship to God, while those dealing with our neighbours come afterwards. The reason is that unless your relationship with God is healthy and strong, you will not be able to stand up in society in His Name. You will be weak and will fall for every temptation and be like everyone else.

So, Sister or Brother, preacher or director general, politician or businessman, throughout the pages of these meditations you are called upon to lead your people out of bondage, to free them from exploitation, to be heroic. Well and good. Do it. But do not neglect your relationship to God. Stick close to Him through it all, for He is your strength and wisdom. Continue to keep your eyes on Him. Always remember His promise to empower you. Otherwise, you will find that you will betray the trust people have given you and your attempts will be scattered.

Let your programme be a close partnership between your heavenly Father and you. That will be a hard one to beat.

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Day 102 No Other Gods

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before Me.

God's special relationship with Abraham's descendants was already of long standing. There were the generations of Isaac and Jacob. There were the 400 years in Egypt. During the centuries of slavery it appears that Israel's knowledge of the God of their fathers had grown dim. As it grew weaker and weaker, their fascination with the idols and religions of the Egyptians and other Pagan nations grew stronger and stronger. In fact, one of the main themes throughout the OT is the struggle of Israel as to whom it should serve, the God of their fathers or the idols of their neighbours.

Egypt had its idols, the sun and the moon. Their king, Pharaoh, was considered divine. Later, in Canaan, Baal, Asherah, Moloch and other idols became temptations to Israel. So, God had a good reason to warn them.

You, a modern Nigerian, are not likely to bow down to idols. You are too educated for that and too sophisticated. But that does not mean this commandment has nothing to do with you. Idols change with time. Ancient idols have been replaced by modern ones. Instead of worshipping heavenly bodies, many now worship the technology that hopefully will help us reach them. Instead of Baal, some worship money, power or sex. An idol is anything in creation to which you devote yourself fully, anything that you have placed at the centre of your life.

What is the centre of *your* life? God or something else?

Day 103 The Root Command

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before Me.

Bible teachers often make much of the fact that the Decalogue was given on two tablets. The first is said to deal with our relationship to God, while the second tablet deals with our relationship to each other. This first commandment definitely zeroes in on our relationship with God. That relationship is so basic also

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to all other relationships that this distinction must not be pushed too hard. In fact, this command is the root of all other commands and relationships.

The very cement or glue that holds creation together assumes that all humans will serve God the Creator and Redeemer. As long as this was true, all other relationships were also as they should be. As soon as our relationship to God is replaced by something else, chaos sets in. Chaos in personal life, in church life and in society in general. Is that not clear enough all around us? Do I need to belabour this point?

When God is the centre of your life, you will see and treat everything and everyone in the right perspective. As soon as you replace Him with, for example, money, everything in your life will revolve around money. Your relationships with others, the way you do your job, the things on which you spend your time – in short, everything will be distorted according to the kind of idol to which you have given your heart and life.

Be honest. How has *your* idol distorted *your* life?

Day 104 Not No God

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before Me.

It is significant that this command mentions other gods. It does not forbid having no god at all. It does not forbid atheism. Why so?

The reason is simple: there is no human being who does not have a god. It is simply impossible. If by “god” we mean anything to which you have given your heart, anything to which you are devoting your life, there is no one who does not have one. Your god may be God Almighty. Your god may be money, power, prestige. It may even be good things like justice and liberty. Until recently, Nigeria had one very famous atheist, a relatively good man. If you were to get close to him, you would find that even he is dedicating his life to something – and that something is one of the “other gods” which this command forbids.

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So, do not deceive yourself. *You have a god, even if you deny it. You may not even be aware of who or what your god is.* Many people go through life dedicating themselves to something without realizing that that “something” is in effect their god. If the god in *your* life is anything other than the God who speaks in both nature and the Bible, you are not only disobeying the first commandment. You are also basing your life on a foundation that easily crumbles when you face a crisis.

It pays to put God first. It is the natural thing to do.

Day 105 Not No Religion

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before me.

My friend Ibrahim wrote a book about how a multinational corporation and government went into cahoots with each other to defraud the people of his state of 100 million naira. The money has been paid out, but the people have yet to see the results. The official charged with supervising the project tried to stop the fraud, but he was terminated and replaced by a successor who played the game and received the expected “gifts.”

You may wonder why I should write about this true incident in a meditational book. Is this not a purely economic or business concern? What does it have to do with the first commandment or even with the Christian religion as a whole? When Ibrahim brought the book to a Christian publisher, they could not see anything religious in this story and would therefore not publish it.

Of course, it is a deeply religious story. It is the story of a corporation and of officials who served a god other than God the Creator. Many of the people involved were officially Christian or Muslim, but in reality they were neither, for they served an idol, the idol of money, the one sometimes called Mammon.

Yesterday you learned that everyone serves some kind of god, either the real Creator God or something found in His creation. This is true not only of individual.

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It is also true of organizations. They, too, are guided by religious concerns, often without realizing it.

Day 106 Idols and Discipline

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before me.

Today I am addressing especially pastors and elders. It is the tradition of many churches to prevent those who still appeal to idols from taking Holy Communion. The aim is to encourage people to seriously reconsider their relationship to God and lead them to repentance. It is a practice that has a valid Biblical basis.

It is also a practice that is more often applied to the poor and uneducated than to the more educated or powerful people. The reason for this unhappy situation is that many of us church leaders easily recognize the traditional idolatry that is associated with our traditional religions. It is obvious to us that church members going after such idols are not faithful to God and that at best they have divided hearts.

It should also be realized that there are modern idols that are followed by many of our elite members. The idol of money, Mammon, has already been mentioned as have those of power and sex. We tend to admire the successful amongst our members and solicit their support. However, those members also need to be encouraged not to worship modern idols. A man who has given his heart to politics is an idol worshipper. The woman who is interested in nothing but business is an idol worshipper.

Church leaders, if you want to minister to modern Nigeria, you must understand modern forms of idolatry and have the courage to face it amongst your members.

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Day 107 – Tribalism

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before Me.

There is much friction these days between Christians and Muslims. Sometimes people talk as if Nigerians will go to war against each other because of religious differences. May God forbid this from ever happening. The God we know from the Bible is a God of peace, though He can be pushed to the wall and do things He normally does not like.

One wise man said to me one day that Nigeria will never go to war over religion, but it *might* do so for reasons of tribe. That is, to most of us our tribe is more important than our God. Thus tribalism becomes a form of idolatry and a transgression of the first commandment.

That being the case, it is no wonder that so-called Christians will sometimes use the church for the advantage of their own ethnic group at the expense of other groups belonging to the same church. Again, it is no wonder that some people are ready to break up a church for the benefit they think their own group will receive. In all such cases God has been replaced by the idol of the tribe.

Tribalism is idolatry. It is putting an idol, the tribe, before God. It is also rampant in politics and business—and it brings destruction.

Well, what would you expect when you make God secondary? A healthy country? A healthy church? A healthy community? Of course not. Thank God for your tribe, but beware of tribalism.

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Day 108 God Before All Men

Acts 5:29 We must obey God rather than men!

Today we have a break from Exodus. The Apostles, standing before the full assembly of Jewish elders, were ordered to quit preaching. They replied, “We must obey God rather than men.”

The temptation to follow human rules, even when they are against those of God, is always with us. We see people; we do not see God. The people who put pressure on us to put something before God may be our relatives – and it is difficult to resist relatives. The person who tempts you to put something before God may be the one who has the power to promote you. How do you resist someone like that? In the case of the Apostles, those demanding that they disobey God had the power of life and death over them – but *they resisted*. What would *you* have done?

The pictures of the Head of State and the Governor hang in many offices, also in many church offices. That is good. It shows we rightly respect these leaders. In the Institute of Church and Society office, a picture of Christ is hanging *above* that of our rulers. What does that show?

Give this commandment a prominent place in your life and office, for the pressure to put something before God is always there. Think of some examples how *you* are pressured in that way and how you resist. You have no examples? What does that show?

Day 109 No Neutral Area

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before Me.

Ancient gods were local deities. Every nation had its own god(s). The power of a god was thought to be limited to the border of its own country. Once one crossed the border, he would find himself under the authority of another god or gods.

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The God of the Bible is not a local deity. He is the God of all creation. When the Arameans sought to turn Him into a local god, they fell into their own trap and were defeated (I Kings 20:23-28). This God is not merely a god of the hills or of the valleys: He is the God of all creation.

Among other things, this means that the phrase “before me” is not a limited place. No matter where you are, you are before Him. Whether on the mountain or in the valley. Whether on the farm or in Abuja.

Recently Christians are advocating a secular approach to government. If you study the history and meaning of the word “secular,” you will realize that many understand it to mean an area of life where religion plays no part, where it is excluded. God has not made an area that excludes religion. God is always to be first in our loyalty, no matter what area in which we are engaged. Christians should design an approach that does not leave God out. Advocating secularism is both bad witness to Muslims and poor theology.

Day 110 The Positive Command

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before Me.

Some days ago, I explained that a few negative commandments make for much more freedom than a long list of positives to do this and do that. It should also be remembered that behind the negative prohibition hides a positive command: You shall have only Me as your God.

Israel was tempted to forget this natural attitude during her Egyptian days. And even during her later history in Canaan, she was constantly “flirting” with Pagan deities. And every time she did so, she would get into trouble of one kind or another. Sometimes God would actively arrange a punishment. At other times, He would just allow them to dig themselves deeper and deeper into a hole. The final punishment was often the natural consequence of a weakened condition.

And so God reminds all of us to put Him first. The alternative is not only idolatry, but it invariably leads to disaster of one kind or another. In His love for us, He has

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reminded us through this first commandment how to avoid basic disaster: by keeping Him and His law in focus. That's how He created us. That's the basic law for survival in this world. That's the only way to happiness and fulfillment.

The basic aim is thus a very positive one. It is to show us how to enjoy life to the full. He does not want us to suffer needlessly.

Why do you think Nigeria is suffering so much?

Day 111 A Godly Father's Voice

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before me.

Before moving on, I want to share with you the words of a godly man, Abraham Kuyper, wrote about the first commandment over 100 years ago.

The main purpose of this commandment is to let God be God, to honour and serve Him alone. Let your thoughts constantly be geared to Him. When you cannot sleep at night, let your thoughts about Him be sweet. When you arise in the morning, let your first consideration be about Him. You should reach out to Him, not only during 'official prayer' times, but all day, while you are working. Pray without ceasing: it will not interfere with your work but hallow it. The Lord stands ready to inspire you, to be the utmost in your thoughts and deliberations. If you boast, let it be in Him. If you seek beauty, delight in the splendor of His majesty. Lose yourself in the depth of His love. Be enthralled in the adoration of His Name. Compared to life with Him, everything else is barren. Around and within you all is dark, but He is the source of Light. He is the Fountain of all good, the wellspring of all strength and power.

Therefore let fellowship with Him be your deepest joy and satisfaction. Then you simply *cannot* turn to other gods. They will separate you from your greatest Delight. Sweep them aside. Fully enjoy Him in this life as you will in eternity.

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Day 112 No Idol

Exodus 20:4 You shall not make ... an idol

Remember, these are meditations with a *social* emphasis. None of the materials we touch upon are exhaustively explained. That will also hold for this Second Commandment. While the first commandment instructs us to have no god but God, the second emphasizes *how* we worship God.

The OT is full of references to idols. Egypt and all the other nations around Israel had their idols. These idols were then represented by images. These idols could be like fish, like sun, moon or star, like a bull or calf – anything that a people would turn into their god.

The problem was that a people who had their god represented by, let's say, a bull, also thought of their god in terms of a bull. A bull was thought to represent life force. They would reduce the great Majesty of God with His many-splendoured characteristics to that of life force, to that of a bull. Thus, their view of god was greatly reduced and impoverished. It had no relationship to Almighty God Himself. It was a nothing.

The second problem was that by thus reducing God to an idol they could see and touch, they also felt they could *control* Him. There are few things that enrage God more than when His creatures try to *control* Him instead of *servicing* Him.

No wonder God gave a loud “no” to idols.

Is there an idol in your life? Identify it. Then junk it. Turn your life over to the real God.

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Day 113 A Modern Form of Idolatry

Deuteronomy 5:8 You shall not make ... an idol

There is a slightly different version of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5. Read and compare.

Some Nigerian professors are trying to revive traditional forms of idolatry and to give it a modern kind of respectability. However, most educated people do not wish to return to that era. You may be one of that majority and therefore think that idolatry is no temptation to you. That's one sin of which you are not guilty. This is one commandment you do not need.

Wait a minute! Not all idols are images of wood or stone. Idols can also be *mental* images or ideas that control your life and on basis of which you defend your own interests. Such ideas thus serve as your god. For example, I favour private enterprise limited by strong controls. But there are those who worship this system and turn it into an idol. They feel free to do anything private enterprise allows and end up oppressing people. For them, private enterprise is an idol. Others have a mental image of God as warlike, arbitrary and remote. As a result they themselves become warlike and arbitrary (oppressive).

Idolatry can have direct impact on society. People shape society according to their God or gods. If their god is one of justice, they will advocate justice. If their god is intolerant and oppressive, they will be the same way. Perhaps you know some people like that.

Might you have a mental or ideological idol? Yesterday's advice still holds.

Day 114 Moralism

Exodus 20:4 You shall not make ... an idol

Have you ever wondered why some governments and churches insist on teaching religion in schools? When you study this issue, you will find that some churches

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and almost all governments have one aim in mind: to teach children two major morals: respect for and obedience to authority.

Of course, both Christianity and Islam insist on respect for and obedience to authority. Where these important virtues are neglected, society will become confused. However, too many authorities want these virtues taught exclusively. Such people want to use religion, whether Christianity or Islam, to make people submissive to the authorities, passive, sleepy, so that these authorities can continue to steal from and oppress the people without opposition. They have a mental image of God that contains only a few morals, namely, respect and obedience. That is called moralism, the inflation of one or two morals – and it is an idol. It is religion on behalf of the powerful.

The Bible also teaches other Christian virtues such as justice, righteousness, equality, human rights, accountability. Christian education must include these as well. We must teach our children *all* the virtues we find in the Bible. In that way, they will be obedient and respectful to authorities, but they will also be prepared to call to account authorities who betray the trust given them.

Christianity does not put people to sleep. It wakes them up. If you are a teacher or preacher, whether in church or school, what is your major goal?

Day 115 Yes to Art

Exodus 20:5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them

Christians and Muslims reject idolatry. The Bible and the Qur'an strongly condemn it in any form. In the Decalogue there is provision against it. You may have no idol or image of anything in all of creation-- "in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below"-- to which you will bow or which you will worship. Islam goes a step further and simply forbids images of any kind. Hence Islamic art is very beautiful and decorative, but it does not allow images of people.

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The Bible forbids the making of any idol or image to which you bow down, even if you *mean* to worship God through that image. That's why God rejected Aaron's golden calf in Exodus 32. Because of this, during the Reformation, Protestants rejected the various images found in the churches, even though the people did not mean to replace God with an idol. They just wanted some sort of image and wanted to worship Him through that image. God says "*no*" to that, for He knows the danger of it.

The Bible does *not* forbid the making of images for other purposes. For example, on top of the ark there were images of cherubim (angels – Exodus 37:7-9). Christians are free to make images of creatures as long as they are not idols. Christianity encourages artistic presentations of creation for the glory of the Creator. Christian artists, come out of your hiding place.

Day 116 Be His Image

Exodus 20:4 You shall not make ... an idol

Behind the negative statements in these commandments stands a positive intention. The positive in this commandment is *to be God's image*.

God originally created us in His image. His image in us includes ruling the world, taking care of it, remember? Because of sin, we largely lost that image. Therefore people look for that image elsewhere by taking something out of that creation and turning it into an idol to worship, to obey, to serve. That is turning things around completely.

Thus this commandment reminds us of the original Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1. Do you remember that term? That Mandate needs to be revived. We are *to be God's image*, to reflect Him. We are to rule and care for this creation, not to worship or bow down before any of it.

In the NT we learn that Christ is the perfect image of God. II Corinthians 4:4 says that "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

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Idolatry is thus ignorance and darkness. But see also Colossians 3:18 where the believer is described as “renewed in knowledge in the image” of God. *The image of God and knowledge go together.*

So, why *make* an image when you can *be* the image. When you can be master instead of fearful servant of creation? When you can have true knowledge? Idolatry makes no *good* sense.

Day 117 Punishment for Idolaters

Exodus 20:5-6 ... punishing the children ... to the fourth generation

“Woman jailed for idolatry.” Have you ever read a heading like that in a newspaper? I suspect not. No one is arrested by the police and accused in court of idolatry and then jailed. The laws of the land don’t concern themselves with idolatry. It’s not a legal matter. Of course, in some Muslims countries this would be possible.

On the other hand, if you steal one bag of cement, you could be hauled to court and put in jail – at least, if you’re poor. This may make it seem as if stealing one bag of cement is much more serious than idolatry, as if idolatry is of no consequence. You can get away with it for all your life without any authority disturbing you.

In God’s eye, idolatry is a most serious offence. He describes an idolater as *hating* Him. That’s how He regards all who make images to worship, even if they mean to be worshipping Him through them, like Aaron and his calf. That is strong language for a God who is basically love. It shows you should not take it lightly.

The punishment is heavy as well. Punishing the children of an idolatrous generation up to four generations down the line! Wow! That’s no joke. Such punishment will often come as a natural consequence of the resulting darkness and leads to weakness. Read OT history and see how it affected Israel.

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It is dangerous for your children *and* your country for you to play around with God. Just look at Nigeria today!

Day 118 Love to a Thousand Generations

Exodus 20:6 ...showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Quite a few of these meditations are warnings *against* something. Sometimes you get tired of warnings and would like to hear something else. This is your day. Today's emphasis is on God's love, the most beautiful thing on earth and in heaven. It is the centre of the Gospel, the Good News.

God's final word here is not a threat but a promise of love for a 1000 generations. That is to say, everlasting, without limit. *That's* what God really is all about. *That's* what He really wants to give us – love. *That's* what He created us for.

The reason He speaks so strongly at first is that He knows what idolatry will lead to – to darkness and ignorance, to weakness of the community. It undermines all sound foundations. He does not want us to go in that direction because He wants the best for us. He wants us to enjoy His world as our original parents did before the fall.

Thank God the punishment is not an inevitable fate that *must* come. Even if you are or have been an idolater, you can turn around and worship God in His way. When you do, punishment will change to blessing for you and your children – a 1000 generations. What a promise! To you *and* to your children!

Nigeria, when are you going to listen? How long will you grovel in garbage of your own making?

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Day 119 Spirituality and Justice

Exodus 20:7 You shall not misuse the Name of the Lord

Does it not surprise you that in a document that aims to set the tone for all of life in just ten basic rules, so much space is given to purely religious questions? No other gods, no idols and now no abuse of God's Name. Are these things so important for individual or social life? Are there not more important issues like hunger, unemployment, justice to which we should pay more attention? I promised that these meditations would have a social thrust. Why then be so concerned with these religious issues which the government can hardly control and about which politicians can do little? Why not pass them by and go on to more practical and concrete issues? Is religion maybe just a diversion after all that keeps us occupied and prevents us from doing the things that really count?

I have a friend who grew up in a country where the church was only religious and did nothing to clean up society. He became an atheist. He sees no value in spirituality or God. True, spirituality that does nothing about society is a harmful diversion. But *true* spirituality does not separate them. In fact, it becomes a firm platform from which to go out into society. That's the reason there is so much concern in the Decalogue for true spirituality.

If you want justice, work at your spirituality and that of your neighbours. *Know how to use the Name of God.*

Day 120 "Oh, My God!"

Exodus 20:7 You shall not misuse the name of the Lord

The basic meaning of this law is summarized nicely for us in an ancient creed called Heidelberg Catechism, a series of questions and answers about the Gospel.

Question: "What is God's will for us in the Third Commandment?"

Answer: "That we neither blaspheme nor misuse the Name of God by cursing, perjury, or unnecessary oaths, nor share in such horrible sins by being silent

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bystanders. In a word, it requires that we use the holy Name of God only with reverence and awe, so that we may properly confess Him, pray to Him, and praise Him in everything we do and say.”

To blaspheme the Name of God is to use the Name in a way that dishonours Him, that cheapens Him, that opens Him up to ridicule. To blaspheme is to pull Him down into the realm of the creature. A Bible dictionary defines it as “the sin of consciously using derogatory language about God.”

Actually, blaspheming often is not conscious. Many people use the holy Name a hundred times a day in the most flippant manner. At the drop of a hat, they will exclaim, “God!” or “Christ!” or “Allah kuwa!” or simply “Allah!” In places like Facebook that becomes “OMG.”

It is right to be conscious of God in all you do. It is wrong to call His Name flippantly merely to spice up your conversation. That Name is too precious and too holy to be used so cheaply, especially if you don’t revere and love Him to begin with.

Day 121 Blasphemy in Church

Exodus 20:7 You shall not misuse the name of the Lord

Someone said that His Name is blasphemed against in church and mosque more than anywhere else, even more than in bars and other places where people tend to utter His Name frivolously. Does that surprise you? Blasphemy in church? In mosque? Yes, in a 1000 ways.

In church of mosque, a preacher may preach very piously, while the people know that his works are ungodly. His words, true as they may be, become blasphemous. The contradiction between word and deed makes God look ridiculous in the eyes of the listener, especially the unbeliever or seeker.

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You are sworn into the church council, but people know that your business is crooked and that you and a fellow council member bribe each other to get business. You are blaspheming.

You are marrying in church. You say, "I do" before the Lord and His people. Then, when things get a bit difficult between you and your spouse, you forget all about your "I do" and run home. You are blaspheming.

In fact, blasphemy is more common in church than anywhere else. It is the place where you utter God's Name hypocritically or unthinkingly more often than in a bar! You go through spiritual routines like prayer, creed and song without thought. That kills the spirit, *your* spirit. It leads to barren worship *and* barren life. When God forbids it, *that's* the reason. His Name is to bring you joy, not to shrivel up your spirit by flippant use in church.

Day 122 False Oath

Leviticus 19:12 Do not swear falsely by My Name

In addition to flippant, unthinking, use of the Name of God, there is the use of false oaths that is also forbidden in the Third Commandment. One Bible dictionary describes an oath as a "declaration or solemn promise in which one invokes God (or gods) as witness." You use an oath when you marry, when you testify in court and in many other ways. Most frequently it is done orally, often with the right hand on the Bible or the Qur'an. It can also be done by placing your signature under a document.

Now there are certain Christian groups that reject the use of the oath altogether. They appeal to Matthew 5:33-37, where Jesus says, "Do not swear at all Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No,' 'No.'" Let me point out that the same Jesus swore in front of Caiaphas (Matthew 26:23-24). In Matthew 5 Jesus warns against the flippant kind of swearing that had become very common. If you study both OT and NT, you will find that oaths are referred to often in an approving way, but

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they should be reserved for important occasions. When they are used flippantly they no longer carry any meaning.

The commandment is against *false* oaths, not against all oaths. The Name of God stands for justice, blessing and truth. *That's* what He wants to be associated with.

Day 123 Oath, Perjury and Government

Exodus 20:7 ... the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His Name.

Governments are not to concern themselves with what God you worship or whether you have idols, provided your religion does not infringe on your neighbours' rights. It is different with misusing the Name of God in an oath. The government often demands oaths. Sometimes in court. At other times to determine your identity. If you do so falsely, you are liable to a fine or even imprisonment, for you have committed perjury. You have knowingly and voluntarily sworn a false oath. You have invoked the holy Name of God and placed your right hand on the Bible or on the Qur'an – but on basis of a lie.

The reason the court will punish perjury is that it is an attack on the final guarantee of truth. There is much evil and falsehood in this world. The oath is called for as a final measure against all that falsehood. It is like a dam that holds back the waters of the raging sea. But if one little hole occurs in the dam, the country is lost. Perjury or swearing falsely is like that hole in the dam. It must be stopped immediately, for if the oath loses its value, there is no further guarantee of truth. The country will be destroyed by a raging sea of lies.

Thus even a government has to pay attention to the honour of the holy Name of God.

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Day 124 What's in a Name?

Revelation 4:8 ... Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty

A name is not simply a sound by which you draw attention to someone. When Adam named the animals in Genesis, he gave them names that reflected their nature. In the ancient world as well as in traditional Africa, people felt that if you know someone's name, you have some kind of control over the person.

The same is true in religions. In Islam, Allah is said to have 100 names, but humans know only 99. If we knew the last one as well, it is thought, we would have control over Him. The Jews were so afraid of blaspheming the name of Jehovah, another name for God, that they simply never used it. They would, instead, use the name "Adonai," "Lord."

The point of this Commandment is not to forbid the use of God's Name, but only its abuse. We should not be afraid of using His Name, provided we do so with respect and integrity.

Positively, God invites us to use His name. He wants us to call on Him. He wants us to praise and adore His marvelous names. Especially does He want us to live so that others will also praise His Holy Name. One day we will all join the creatures around God's throne to sing as in Revelation 4:8. Now *that* is using the Name properly!

Day 125 Yes to Sunday

Exodus 20:8 Remember the Sabbath day

The Fourth Commandment is the centre of much controversy among Christians. Especially the question whether Sabbath and Sunday are the same has brought so much disagreement that we cannot simply think of them as the same. The difference will be explained in due time. However, before going on, I want to quote a passage written back in 1906 by a missionary scholar, Dr. James S. Dennis:

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The appointment of [the Sunday] is a benign provision of the Creator. It is an act of mercy, suggested by God's infinite knowledge of man's need, and His desire that the important interests of man's religious nature should be sacredly guarded. All nations are entitled to this gift; all races need it, and its wholesome influence is intended to be helpful to all alike. It is a day for religious worship and periodic rest from toil, and in both these it becomes increasingly necessary in proportion as human life grows more complicated, more intense and more strenuous.

Conscientious observance is a profitable school of reverence. It serves as a test of loyalty and fidelity. It is a nursery of virtue and self-control, and a guardian of liberty, civil and religious. It is a stimulus to piety, a balm to weariness, a tonic to both our physical and spiritual natures, as well as a help to orderly and quiet living.

Dennis wrote this after surveying Sunday observation throughout the world. Clearly, God knew what He was doing.

Day 126 Remember the Sabbath

Exodus 20:8 Remember the Sabbath

Remember! That's what God ordered the Israelites to do. Remember! That seems to mean that the idea of Sabbath and rest was not new to them. You do not use the word "remember" to refer to something that is new or that you do not know about. Besides, already back in Exodus 16:23-29 there is mention of the Sabbath and there also it is referred to as something known: "Bear in mind that the Lord has given you the Sabbath."

It should not surprise us that this commandment may not be new. I have stressed time and again that most of God's laws in the Bible are republications or reprints of laws He put in nature but which were often forgotten.

Again, it should not surprise us, for the motive given for this commandment goes back to God's rest after creation. *Because* of the rest, *therefore* God made

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something special out of the seventh day. And now He commands His people to do likewise.

Some writers insist that the idea of a regular rest day was already common among some Pagan people around Israel. That would be no surprise either, since it could represent their memory of the early traditions of the human race. Besides, experience may also have taught them the wisdom and helpfulness of this provision.

According to this verse, the main reason for God's people resting is to follow His example, to reflect His image. Part of that image is to pattern our lives after that of God, who worked and then rested on that day. You cannot go wrong doing that!

Day 127 Jesus' Sabbath

Matthew 12:12 ... It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

Since there is a lot of confusion about whether the Sabbath holds for NT Christians, it is good to know what the NT says about it. Today we will listen to Jesus Himself. Please read Matthew 12:1-13.

Jesus' disciples helped themselves to the grain in the fields on the Sabbath, for they were hungry. The Pharisees, the religious leaders, said this was wrong. Jesus defended them on basis of their need. Next, they argued against Jesus for healing someone on the Sabbath. Jesus answered that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees had developed a whole legal system with many refinements about what they might do on the Sabbath. There is a list of 39 different classes of activities that were forbidden! Some thought it wrong to defend themselves if they were attacked on the Sabbath. People were not allowed to travel more than 900 metres – a "Sabbath Day's journey" (Acts 1:12).

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Jesus did not argue against the Sabbath, but He opposed the legalistic limits the Pharisees had imposed upon the people. He opposed making it an unpleasant burden that was hard to carry for the people. The Sabbath was meant to be a blessing, not a burden. "The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath," said Jesus (Mark 2:27).

Jesus upheld the Sabbath. He sought to purify it, to restore it to its original intention. He honoured it as a law of God.

Day 128 Paul's Sabbath

Galatians 4:9-10 ... How is it that you are turning back? ... You are observing special days

Jesus lived among the Jews, the people who had the OT laws from God. He did not argue against the Sabbath but tried to purify it. Paul worked among both Jew and Gentile and brought some of both into the church. It did not take long for some problems to arise. The Jewish Christians wanted to continue with the OT laws. After all, were they not from God? They also expected the Gentile Christians to adhere to such Jewish laws.

Paul opposed that attempt. There was no need for these other Christians to submit to Jewish OT laws, for these were mere shadows of what was to come, namely Christ. He is the new reality. There is no further need for these shadows. Therefore, no one should be judged by whether or not he keeps the Sabbath (Colossians 2:16-17). In Romans 14:5-6, Paul again warns against judging others on whether they keep special days. Each one must do what he sees right in this respect before the Lord.

Thus, Paul was opposed to the Sabbath; it does not belong in the NT church. It was good for OT times, but it now belongs to the past. Insisting on it would amount to going backward as in our text. If you want to keep it, he said, go ahead, but do not force it on others. It is a purely private decision before God. However, this is not the last word. More to come tomorrow.

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Day 129 The First Day

John 20:19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together ..., Jesus came and stood among them

“The first day of the week.” This is a phrase that is used often in the NT. It is first used when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb (John 20:1). In the same chapter, our text uses it to show how the disciples, right after the resurrection of Jesus and before they understood, met in the evening of that day. And so it continues throughout the NT.

Acts 20:7 tells us that Christians came together during the evening of the first day of the week. They broke bread. That is, they took communion. And Paul spoke to them for a long, long time.

Another activity for the first day of the week was to lay aside money to be sent to Jerusalem to help the persecuted church there (I Corinthians 16:1). Each one is to save up his money for that purpose at home until Paul comes to collect it.

The conclusion most Bible teachers have come to is that the Sabbath was done away with by the NT church. In its place came the Christian Sunday, the first day of the week. The day was not used for resting, but it was used for meeting with other Christians. Note that both reports are of meetings held in the evenings. Apparently, the people worked during the day.

Let us heed the advice of Hebrews 10:25 – “Let us not give up meeting together.” And that was done on Sundays.

Day 130 Sunday Work

Exodus 20:10 ... On [the seventh day] you shall not do any work

Today we’re back in Exodus. Here we read that no work was to be done on the Sabbath. In the story about manna in Exodus 16, we see how seriously this was to

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be taken in the OT. It was to be observed even during the crucial period of harvest, when every day counts (Exodus 34:21). No fires were to be lit (Exodus 35:3). They would not buy from the peoples around them on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 10:31). These were not the regulations of the Pharisees; they were God's.

Jesus accepted these laws but in a free way. Whenever they would get in the way, whenever someone was in danger or even an animal, He would release people from these strict rules. He would allow others to work under such circumstances and defended them against the legalism of the Pharisees. In this respect, Jesus was a transition figure – somewhat between the two testaments.

The real break with the Sabbath came with the resurrection. Though for a while Jewish Christians, including the apostles, continued to observe the Jewish Sabbath, with the coming of the Gentiles into the church, the Sabbath fell away as no longer relevant. Christians freely worked on both Saturdays and Sundays. Sunday, the first day of the week, was the day for Christians to meet and worship, but it was often in the evening, since people were working during the day.

Why then does the church today talk of resting on Sundays? Till tomorrow!

Day 131 Sunday Rest

John 16:13 But when He, the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all truth

Yesterday's question cannot be answered without understanding Jesus' promise to lead us into the truth by the Holy Spirit. We learnt that the church in the NT did not rest on Sunday. They worked and then had their meetings in the evening. From where then today's church's talk of rest?

The answer lies in history. It was during the fourth century after Christ that Christians began to turn Sunday into a day of rest – 400 years or so after Christ, a long, long time. It did not become law until the year 789 after Christ, when Emperor Charlemagne forbade all unnecessary Sunday work as a breach of this

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commandment. The church agreed with this decree. But the reformers, Martin Luther, John Calvin and others, insisted that the Christian Sunday has nothing to do with the OT Sabbath.

Yet these Reformers advocated Sunday rest. Their reason was that human nature needs it. Besides, it had become a tradition. So, they supported it, but not as a strict law so much as a blessing for the church.

The Reformers' "liberal" idea about Sunday rest led many people to become careless about Sunday observance. To oppose this carelessness, churches once again began to insist on it as a law based on the Fourth Commandment. And that is how it stands with many churches today.

Though Sunday observance is not to be based on the Commandment, Christian experience has shown that we need it and that it is beneficial.

Day 132 Rest and Creation

Exodus 20:11 ... [The Lord] rested on the seventh day

The first time we hear of a restful Sabbath is not in Exodus but in the creation story. God is there pictured as having worked for six days and resting on the seventh. That situation is now presented in the Fourth Commandment as the basis for the Sabbath of rest. God pronounced a special blessing on the day *because* He Himself rested on it.

We have discovered that NT Christians are not under the Sabbath law. This is the one member of the Decalogue that has been abrogated, done away with. We also found that the NT church met on Sunday, the day of resurrection, but in the evenings. In the daytime they were doing their normal work. It was later that experience showed the need for a day of rest. The church reacted differently to this need. Sometimes it reacted legalistically and imposed all sorts of do's and don'ts on the people. At other times, she would reject such legalism but still insist on the need for a restful Sunday. The constant theme was: yes, rest.

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This should not surprise us. If this pattern has a basis in creation, then you can ignore it only at your own peril. It is natural to rest regularly. Even God Himself did it. Tomorrow we will show how this day is observed even in non-Christian societies. Let us be wise, therefore, and enjoy this regular day of rest, giving thanks to God for it.

Day 133 Sunday Amidst the Nations

Exodus 20:11 ... [The Lord] rested on the seventh day

Today we want to hear how the Sunday is treated in countries where Christians are not in the majority. When the British had their colonies, they tended to impose the Christian Sunday, even on non-Christians. After the people became free, some rejected the arrangement. In 1966, Buddhist Sri Lanka, for example, rejected it and turned to a Buddhist pattern. But this has not been the main trend.

The British colonial heritage of Sunday has prevailed in India and Pakistan as it has in Nigeria. In Jewish-dominated Israel, Muslim communities have Fridays off, Jews Saturdays and Christians Sundays. In Lebanon, Syria and Turkey many Muslim businesses close on Fridays, only long enough for their Friday hour of *sallah*, but shut down completely on Sundays. In Malaysia many Muslims and Hindus visit their mosques and temples on Sundays simply because urban business is largely closed on that day. In 1876, Japan, a country even now with only about 1% Christians, shifted to a seven-day week with Sundays off. China adheres to the Sunday since 1912, even under Communism. The Communist regime of the former Soviet Union tried to do away with it in 1929, but, of all people, Stalin reinstated it. Indonesia, a country with 90% Muslims, gives Muslims off early for Friday *sallah*, but Sunday is the official day of rest – an arrangement like ours in Nigeria. After attempts to undermine the Christian Sunday during the French Revolution, the French still observe Sunday.

Even non-Christians know what is good for them.

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Day 134 Sunday: A Colonial Imposition?

Exodus 20:10 ... On [the seventh day] you shall not do any work

Sometimes our Muslim neighbours charge that the Christian Sunday and week was imposed on Muslims by the colonialists. Well, yes, there is some truth to that, but it is not the full truth. That the arrangement was imported by colonialists – that is true. But things were not that clear cut.

Karl Kumm, the founder of the Sudan United Mission (SUM), reported that these same colonialists in the Sudan, forced soldiers who adhered to African Traditional Religion to attend mosques on Friday and to work on Sundays. The same Kumm told how the Germans in Adamawa forced children in a freed slaves' home to attend Friday mosque but not Sunday church. Maxwell, another SUM missionary, reported that colonial officers stationed in Ibi, now Taraba State, generally ignored the Christian Sunday. Their medical people operated a vaccination programme on Sunday. One Bishop Smith complained that Christian boys in industrial schools were compelled to work on Sundays. These instances were part of a general tendency on the part of the colonial government to favour Islam in general to such an extent that for many years there was a virtual state of war, though restrained, between missionaries and colonialists. Though the general tendency was to give both religions freedom to worship at their appointed times, the Christian Sunday received less favourite treatment and was infringed upon more than the Muslim Friday. For some reason, Muslims did not complain about that!

In spite of such mixed colonial policies, both Christians and Muslims should appreciate that our Constitution recognizes the God-given right of all of us to worship on days and in ways suitable to our religions. Be sure you protect this right *and* exercise it.

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Day 135 Muslims on Sunday

Exodus 20:11 ... [The Lord] rested on the seventh day

With many Muslims amongst our neighbours, it is good for Christians to understand the Muslim attitude towards a special day of rest. When we understand the Muslim attitude, we will understand the meaning of our own even better. I discussed this question with a learned *mallam*.

Basically, I was told, the idea of regularly observing a special day of rest as Christians do is condemned. In fact, the practice almost puts Christians in the category of *kafir*, a very low spiritual class of people. The idea that God rested shows Him to be weak and is therefore offensive. Allah resting? Allah tired? It is blasphemy to say such things about the Almighty. Muslims are to leave their work only during the Friday *sallah* period. And that is only to do *sallah*, not because they follow a tired Allah. They work before and after on Fridays.

Of course, the Biblical idea of God resting has nothing to do with tiredness or weakness. If Muslims would study the Bible objectively, they would realize that. God rested because He enjoyed what He had created. And even then, He only rested from creation activity. At other fronts He never rests, for were He to cease working, the entire creation would collapse. He upholds it every second in His providence and power.

When Christians rest in imitation of their Creator, they do so to worship Him with special intensity and to enjoy Him and His creation.

Day 136 In the Sweat of our Brow

Exodus 20:10 ... On [the seventh day] you shall not do any work

God created the human race to work. See Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:15. It was good to work, enjoyable and natural. That all changed after the fall into sin. Now our human race has to work “by the sweat of our brow” (Genesis 3:17-19).

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Work has become difficult and that is not natural to us. The main reason most people work today is to feed themselves. That, too, is not natural to us. It is the result of sin. Just think how millions of people, perhaps including you, spend their days in the sweat of heavy toil. How meager their lives. How exposed to danger. How their faces betray anxiety and stress at the end of a tiring day. Such labour oppresses them, exhausts them, consumes their strength. And the worst of it is that they so labour not because of the joy it brings in their hearts, but because they are driven by hunger. Such forced labour robs most of our generation of the pleasure of life. No time or money for recreation. Constantly under pressure. And at the end of the day only the plainest food and a hard bed. No time for spouse or children either.

If you are among such people, then the Sunday is God's gift for you. A break from your daily drudgery. A day to worship God and to fellowship with family and friends. Use it gratefully.

Day 137 Sunday Not Profitable!

Amos 8:5 When will the ... Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"

There are always those who think they cannot afford to rest on Sunday. That was the case with the people of Amos' days. Their end was a great fall (Amos 8:14).

Some time ago a widow in a Japanese village came for baptism. She was a hairdresser and barely earned enough to feed her children. Hence she was not prepared to celebrate the Sunday along with her fellow Christians. She was afraid her customers would all leave her if she did not open on Sundays. Her pastor then advised her to try closing and see its effect on her business. If she did have to open on Sunday to avoid losing her customers, let her provide free services and explain it to her clients. After six months of doing this, her clients, many of them non-Christian, voluntarily shifted to another day and she had more business than ever before, while she could enjoy a Sunday of rest and worship.

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Amos' people were wrong. They did not get more business and their end was a great fall. The Japanese lady received God's blessing. She enjoyed her Sundays in the fellowship of other Christians, while her business improved. You can count on the Lord when you follow His ways. Let's not think we know better than Him. You don't need to doubt His ability to bless abundantly when you test Him. I challenge you: try Him!

Day 138 Sunday and the Other Six

Exodus 20:8 Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

To be holy means to be free from sin and to be dedicated to God. The Christian Sunday is not an exact copy of the Sabbath, but it *is* a day set aside for worship, fellowship and rest from the work of the other six days.

Even in the OT, it was not a case of making the Sabbath holy and never mind how you spent the other days. Do as you please. Make your money anyhow. Do whatever work you want. But be sure the Sabbath or Sunday is holy and dedicated to God. God will not accept that kind of life.

All days were and are holy. All days are Lord's Days. However, ever since the fall into sin, we are subject to so many pressures to do things in a wrong way. There are the pressures of your work, pressures of your colleagues in the civil service, pressures of your business partners – ah, so many pressures that force you in the wrong direction. Not the least is the pressure to feed your children.

The Sunday is meant to be a day free from those pressures and dedicated in a special way to God. Among others, its aim is to infuse holiness of life and work also into the other days. The holiness of Sunday is meant to flow over into all the others. Keeping the Sunday will help in keeping the others holy also as you do your work.

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Day 139 Rest for Slaves and Animals

Exodus 20:10 ... On [the Sabbath] you shall not do any work, neither you ... nor your servants, nor your animals ...

It took the human race many many centuries to learn that the keeping of slaves is wrong – at least under most circumstances. We will come back to this subject later. In the OT, that lesson had not yet been learned. All people, including Israel, kept slaves.

Among most people, such slaves were often mistreated. Some religions have helped make life more tolerable for slaves. That is true of the OT form of Judaism, of Christianity and, perhaps of Islam, though I'm ambivalent about that. Today's text shows God's concern for servants, who included slaves, and animals.

God created all people, both free and slave, and the rest of nature, including animals. He loves them all. He wants the best for all. And so He insists that slaves and animals should share also in the blessing of the Sunday. The slaves, as human beings, also need to worship, fellowship and rest. Animals do not worship, but they do get tired from daily work. Thus even they are to enjoy rest.

We do not have slaves today, but we may have servants. You may be a servant yourself. As an employer, the law of God holds for you. Your servant is to enjoy that Sunday rest. As a servant, you have the right to it. Insist on it if you are denied this God-given privilege. Church leaders, help your members protect this right.

God's law, yes, but not in the sense of the OT Sabbath. Rather in the sense that we need time and space for both special worship of God, rest from exhausting labour and fellowship with family and community.

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Day 140 Necessary Sunday Work

Exodus 20:10 ... On [the Sabbath] you shall not do any work

The blessings of Sunday sometimes are hidden under many do's and don'ts. We saw some of that with the Pharisees in the Gospels. Sometimes churches make very strict laws about Sundays. We must be careful with that.

Life does not stop on Sundays. There are all kinds of functions that need to carry on even on Sundays. Both you and your animals need to eat, though sometimes fasting will be good. Someone needs to cook. Criminals do not rest on Sundays and therefore the police must work. Sickness knows no special days and so some healthcare workers need to be on duty. Cities depend on water systems that need taking care of every day. Churches use loudspeakers and light that require electricity on Sundays. The Fire Brigade in the cities never closes down.

Those engaged in such occupations need to take special care that they can enjoy at least part of the Sunday blessing. Perhaps skeleton crews can relieve each other halfway through the day. Or Sunday duty can be restricted to every other Sunday. Christians and Muslims can help each other out by working on the other's rest day. Churches should make special arrangements. Perhaps a worship service during the week. Above all, we must not condemn those who have to work on Sundays. Pray for them. Reach out to them.

If you are one of these Sunday workers, be sure *you* reach out to God and to His church.

Day 141 Sunday Sports

Exodus 20:10 ... On [the Sabbath] you shall not do any work

Sports and other forms of recreation are a gift from God. But every gift from God can be turned against Him. Sports is an example of it.

It looks as if no one in the world of professional sports has ever heard of Sunday as a special day – except as a special day for sports. On this day many of the most

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important matches are played. The Christian Sunday is largely ignored, even by most sports-minded Christians. Though you sometimes hear of a professional sportsman/women who refuse to play on Sunday, such are a small minority. Most of them will not make it into the best teams *because* of their faith.

Millions of “Christians,” after they have attended the Sunday morning service, will hurry to the local stadium to watch their favourite team. For the rest of the day they will forget everything to do with a holy Sunday. They will forget church, God, their families. They will forget everything except the ball game.

That is no way to keep the Sunday, to grow in the knowledge of Christ or to develop your family. It is not what the Spirit had in mind when He taught the church to remember the Sunday.

Brother, sister, ask yourself whether you may have turned sports into an idol at the expense of your spirit, your family and your church. Christians might consider boycotting Sunday sports. That would *force* the sporting establishment to take notice, for it would definitely cramp the flow of income. We would be doing the entire community a big favour, though not everyone would recognize it as such.

Day 142 Concluding Thoughts on the Sunday

Exodus 20:11 ...The Lord blessed the Sabbath and made it holy.

Ask yourself today: do you desire the blessing of a godly Sunday? And if you are older, have you noticed that the Sunday blessing becomes richer and richer as the years pass?

Of course, just rest will not bring *the* blessing. You have to remove the curtain from the stage on which the drama of the Kingdom is enacted. You need to seek the fellowship of the saints and the blessing of the Word. On Sundays especially you do good to others, encourage the weak and comfort the grieving – all things for which you hardly have time on other days. On Sundays you live on your knees. You develop spiritual strength. You review your past and meditate on your future,

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especially your eternal future. On Sunday you battle to push Satan out of your life and to open up your heart for the Lord to enthrone.

You do not need to make a list of do's and don'ts for the Sunday, for deep down you know what takes place in your heart, in your spirit, in your sensual life and what you are planning for tomorrow. You know how you spent the day and how it has profited you. You can go to bed Sunday night with a conscience that says you have wasted the day. Or you can end the day with a heart overflowing with the quickening oil of the Spirit.

Day 143 Honour

Exodus 20:12 Honour your father and your mother

Today we begin meditating on the Fifth Commandment. It is a commandment that has led to a lot of long discussion, something that may well surprise you. Why should a simple, straightforward commandment need so much discussion? The reason is that it is generally agreed that this commandment talks not only about parents, but that parents here represent all other authority as well – government, employer, teacher, and so on. Our meditations will therefore also venture into those areas.

But let us first ask what it means to honour someone. As used here, “to honour” is related to making heavy or weighty. The opposite of heavy is light. When you discuss a matter that is light, it means it is an easy matter of no great consequence. On the other hand, in politics we talk of heavyweights. Those are important candidates who must be taken seriously. If you ignore them, you will be making a big mistake and probably lose the campaign.

Your parents are not to be taken lightly as if they are of no consequence. They are heavyweights you may not and cannot ignore. The Lord Himself has given them that status. He tells us here to *see* them and to *treat* them as heavyweights. Thus, we are to give them respect. We are to take what they say seriously. We are to obey them. Why? Because God says so in this commandment *and* because that

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was His arrangement at creation. That makes for strong individuals, strong families, strong communities and, finally, a strong nation.

Day 144 God's Mouthpiece

Exodus 20:12 Honour your father and your mother

Remember that God said to Moses, "I have made you like God to Pharaoh"? Please remember the meditation on that verse (Day 78). We have a similar situation with parents.

God was the original authority at creation. There was no other authority. Adam and Eve were given the Cultural Mandate – authority over the world. But it was not their own authority they wielded. It was God's, who delegated it to them. They were to wield this authority in His name and in His ways.

So, the parents you are told to honour represent the Most High God. To us, they are "like God." They represent His authority. They have an exalted position and authority that God gave to them. When we honour them, we honour God through them. Romans 13:2 says that if you disobey authority established by God, you disobey God. The same is true for obedience. When you obey your parents, you are obeying God.

Thus obedience to parents is no small thing. They are indeed heavyweights that must be taken seriously. No, not simply taken seriously. They are to be obeyed. This is not a matter of choice. You do not *choose* to obey them as if there were an alternative. You are expected to do so.

Remember, these commandments were not new. They are re-statements of laws that are embedded in creation. It is *natural* that we should obey our parents. To disobey them is against nature and will lead to disaster.

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Day 145 Honour Your Mother

Deuteronomy 5:16 Honour your father and your mother....

The first part of the 5th Commandment reads exactly the same in both versions of the Decalogue. They use the same word for “honour” and both read “your father *and* your mother.” We are expected to honour *both* of our parents, not just one of them.

In most cultures, including Nigerian cultures, men are honoured more than women. In such cases, it is difficult to honour your mother as much as your father. But remember, in the beginning men and women were *together* given the authority to rule the world. Israel and most other nations had forgotten that original equality and began to discriminate against women. In Babylonian literature of the time there is a warning to honour your father, but the mother is not mentioned. The Roman Empire, the superpower of NT days, knew only of father power and hardly mentioned the mother.

It is against this tendency that both versions of the Decalogue emphasize that honour is due to both parents equally. The Word of God is a liberating Word. It always seeks to free people from every kind of oppression. Here we have the original creation emphasis on equality of honour.

When a mother becomes a widow in Nigeria, she often loses everything, children as well as property. This commandment opposes such practices. It is time church, state and ethnic group unite to restore mother’s honour, including that of the widow.

How do you honour *your* mother?

Day 146 Freedom or Purdah

Exodus 20:12 ... Honour your ... mother.

As you read through the Bible, you will find that much of its language assumes a male-dominated world in which women are sort of second-class citizens. The

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creation story shows, of course, that this was not the intended arrangement. But God is a God of patience. The fall led to sinful distortions between men and women, with men lording it over women. Here and there in the Bible there are reminders of God's original intentions, as in this commandment. For the rest, God sort of tolerated it, knowing that the human race was not yet prepared for correcting this distortion.

After His coming at Pentecost with a new intensity, the Holy Spirit has been working on many issues. For example, it slowly dawned on people that slavery is not acceptable, even though the NT does not outrightly forbid it. Likewise, it is slowly dawning on the community as a whole, including the Christian church, that women are to be honoured equally with men. This awareness is not limited to the church. It is strong in Nigeria in general. Just read the newspapers.

In Nigeria, Muslims "protect" the honour of women by keeping them at home (purdah). This arrangement may protect women, but it hardly honours them. It assumes a male-dominated world in which men may move about freely. It seems more a case of a man protecting his own honour and property than of honouring his wives.

Let us be guided by God as we develop *honourable and equal* new gender relationships as our world follows the prompting of the Spirit in this regard.

Day 147 Honourable Dress

Exodus 20:12 ... Honour ... your mother.

If you want honour, you must act honourably. There is no way people will honour you, if you act shamefully. This holds true for all, men and women, including mothers and wives.

You should face it, women, mothers. Too many of you dress in ways that may draw attention to your beauty, but not to your honour. During the 1993 petrol shortage, I picked up a man and two women in my car. One of the women decided to sit in front. I could not fail to notice her beautiful legs because of the

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way she was dressed. I know nothing about her honour, but there certainly was nothing in her dress that even encouraged me to think of her honour. And you do not only see this on the street, but even in church!

I agree with the outrage of Muslims about the loose fashions of today. I agree with the newspaper complaints about women that dress so provocatively. Or about female students on the campus, who then turn around and cry "Rape!" What do you expect? You get what you ask for. If you sow dishonour, you harvest dishonour.

Mothers, if you want equal honour with your husbands, dress so as to earn it. If you want your daughters to be so honoured later, model modesty and honour for them today. Husbands, encourage your wives and daughters to demonstrate modesty and so deserve the honour due to them.

In our dress also we all must reflect His image!

Day 148 Honouring the Elderly

Proverbs 23:22 ... Do not despise your mother when she is old...

Some theologians explain the Fifth Commandment in quite a different way. They say that Israel had no need for such a command to children, for obedience to parents was deeply ingrained in their culture. Well, I have never heard of such a perfect world where all children obey their parents!

They claim that this command first of all addresses adults who have aged parents. Such adults are told to honour and care properly for their parents who have become weak and dependent. One writer says that "helpless and aged dependents ... are not to be sent abroad to be eaten by beasts or to die of exposure, as was the case in some societies." He could also have commented on the practice of some people today in Western countries who place their aged parents in special homes and then abandon them to cruel profiteers. Though I do not accept this interpretation, it does remind us of something important.

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Another writer correctly points to Jesus, the adult Son of Mary. *While He was on the cross*, He handed responsibility for His mother to disciple John. In the midst of terrible agony, He remembered His responsibility for her and carried it out. He did not use His own difficulties as an excuse.

Let us not allow modern pressures to rob us of that sense of responsibility that is part of our Nigerian tradition. Protect and honour your aged parents, no matter your own difficulties.

Day 149 Imperfect Parents

Exodus 20:12 Honour your father and your mother

Some heavy things have been said about honouring and obeying our parents. It may have sounded kind of unrealistic or even simplistic. What if your parents are simply bad parents, irresponsible? What if they make all kinds of evil demands from you? What if they are not Christians and expect you to perform things Christians don't do? These questions are fair enough. The world is much more complicated that a first reading of this commandment would allow.

Well, yes, but *only* a first reading. When you begin to think about these questions, you should soon realize that God was not altogether ignorant of these complications. He experienced the fall into sin and the separation between Him and people that followed. He had already struggled with Noah, with Abraham and his descendants. Most recently His struggle has been with the children of Israel. He knew their lack of faith, their disobedience.

So, when He presented Moses with the Decalogue, it was in full awareness of all these complications. And yet He insists: Honour your parents. Sin may have brought distortions into life, but disobedience to parents will only make them worse, not better. Honouring and disobeying imperfect, sinful parents may become more difficult under these circumstances, but it is still the rule of nature.

Use your imagination. What would the world look like if children obeyed only *perfect* parents?

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Day 150 Do Not Anger

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Our NT verse for today follows immediately upon the heel of a repetition of the Fifth Commandment. The same situation is found in Colossians 3:20-21. Children, obey; fathers, do not provoke or anger. Here is a clear recognition that both parents and children have a responsibility in this matter. Most parents are unreasonable in their demands of their children once in a while. I know I have been. But when this becomes a pattern, when parents are unreasonable most of the time – and I hope this has not been the case with me! – then they make it impossible for children to obey them.

Paul writes twice: Children, obey, honour. But, parents, do not make it impossible for them to do so. Do not embitter them so they become discouraged and conclude that it is all hopeless, for then they *will* disobey and provoke you, often intentionally.

If you find this to be the case between you and your child, you must ask yourself the reason. What is in the child that has brought her/him to this point? Yes, but also: what have *you* done to cause this situation? You cannot hope to correct the child, unless you also correct yourself.

Our text shows that bringing up a child in the way of the Lord and provoking them regularly are opposites. You cannot do both.

Make it possible for your child to honour and obey you.

Day 151 Provoking Ways

Colossians 3:21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

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Both yesterday's and today's verses call upon fathers not to embitter or exasperate their children. Of course, this holds for mothers as well. Mothers are not free from this fault either, though I suspect that fathers are more prone to it than mothers. I have observed that mothers often can break through the anger of their children and solve the problem better than fathers. Men tend to be more aggressive. Mothers tend to be more patient. In such situations, aggressiveness is less helpful than patience. Or am I only talking about my wife and myself?

How do you embitter or exasperate your child? One writer gives a list of opposites, both of which will eventually create problems. You can either bring him up in too much luxury or withhold necessary nourishment or support. You can either fail to teach patience and gentleness or instill imprudence or undue passion. You can either fail to provide education or you can force your own educational goals on her that ignore her interest or talents. You can either raise your children in idleness and fail to discipline when needed or you can be too severe and cruel. All of these are common ways in which parents end up embittering or provoking their children.

Watch out if you are ambitious. When my three children were teenagers, I did not pay enough attention. I was too busy and now have reason for regrets.

How do you score?

Day 152 Calling Adult Children

Proverbs 23:22 ... Do not despise your mother when she is old.

A few days ago we used this verse to emphasize the need to care for elderly parents because they are *weak*. There are many adults who do *not* honour their parents because of *anger*. Though I do not accept the interpretation that restricts the meaning of this command to adults, it definitely *also* addresses adult children.

But why should you honour parents who have neglected you? Who have forced you into a profession you did not want? Who have been cruel to you? The answer is simple: Because that is what the Lord commands.

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He gave this command at a time all these problems were already well known. Yet He repeated it because it is embedded in creation. Yes, your parents made some very serious mistakes and God knows that. Still: Honour them. Realize you are living in a broken world where nothing is perfect, where everyone makes *serious* mistakes, including *you!* Be aware also that, if you have children, *you* are also going to be making some serious mistakes and are hoping that *your* children will not turn against you.

A world in which adults honour their parents and forgive them for their mistakes is a much more pleasant world than one in which everyone goes burdened with grudges. Grudges are awfully heavy to bear. They weigh you down.

Besides, the positive things your parents have done probably outweigh their mistakes by far. Think of *them*.

Day 153 Obey in the Lord

Ephesians 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord

It is easy to write meditations about honouring your parents. In a world as broken as ours, it is not always easy to actually honour them. They have made some serious mistakes and Satan encourages you to think about these mistakes and forget all about the good things your parents have done for you. It can be difficult for you to do away with your grudges. You may even find some perverse pleasure in your grudges. But don't kid yourself. These grudges wear you out. They exact a heavy toll from you. They prevent you from being happy.

The Lord knows all of that. That's why Paul adds "in the Lord." Few can shed their grudges, forgive and then honour their faulty parents unless they are "in the Lord." In this context, "in the Lord" means to "forgive ... just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:33; Colossians 3:13). Once you have recognized your own shortcomings (sins) and have brought them to Christ for forgiveness, you will be surprised how easy it becomes to forgive those who have wronged you – including your parents. Then, all of a sudden, it becomes possible to "bear with

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each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another” (Colossians 3:13).

The Lord does not command what you cannot do, but He does command *what you cannot do by yourself*. Through Christ He enables you to forgive. Come, free yourself from your load of grudges. And be happy.

Day 154 Authority or Power?

Ephesians 6:4 ... Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Today we are going to think about one common mistake many people in authority, including parents, make. If parents are to train their children in the Lord, they should do so in a godly way. Ungodly ways cannot produce godly results.

The mistake is for parents to forget that their authority over their children is not their personal possession. They have been given this authority from God. It is a trust from God. They carry this authority in the Name of God and are expected to exercise it according to His will, as His representatives.

When parents forget the source of their authority, they can become tyrannical. They then exercise naked power. They will insist that their children obey them under all circumstances and to do whatever they command. And they will defend this power by yelling, “You must do this *because* I am your father (or mother).”

Now there may be situations where a child is regularly so disrespectful that parents may occasionally have to insist on their authority in such a way. However, usually such enforcement of parental authority is a sign that the parent has forgotten the source of his authority and now claims the right to exercise personal power over the child in any way he wants. He becomes dictatorial.

Parents remember your authority is not your own. It is a trust from your heavenly Father. Show the child you represent a loving Father, not a tyrant.

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Day 155 Selective Disobedience

Acts 5:29 ... *We must obey God rather than men.*

The Fifth Commandment stands under all circumstances: Honour your parents. That is the basic stance of the church and will ever remain so. All children of God are expected to have this commandment imprinted deeply in their hearts so that it is unthinkable that they should do otherwise.

Nevertheless, there may be occasions when a child will have to disobey his parents. That happens when the parents make demands that are against the will of God. Perhaps your parents want you to marry a person of another religion. The Bible warns against it very strongly. Perhaps your father is forcing you to take a job or enter a profession that can bring in much money, but in your heart you know the Lord is calling you elsewhere. You can think of other examples yourself.

In such cases, we are not only allowed to disobey, but we *must*. Our obedience to our parents is basically obedience to God. We obey Him through them. When this channel of obedience is blocked by parents standing in the way, then we have no choice but to disobey them, while we obey God. But this arises only when obedience to parents becomes disobedience to God. It does not hold when you merely disagree with them.

We are not talking of dishonouring your parents. Even in these examples, you still honour them. You should go out of your way to show honour to them especially in these situations.

Day 156 Different Religions

II Kings 5:18 ... *When I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive*

You are a Christian. Your parents follow African Traditional Religion or Islam. They are bound to make demands from you that will create tensions in you. Perhaps your father wants you to enter the sacred enclosure in the family compound to

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bring a chicken, which later will be sacrificed to your ancestors. Perhaps your father insists you attend Friday Muslim prayers in the mosque. If you refuse, there will be much palaver not only, but they will think you are rebellious, disobedient and dishonouring your parents. You may even be suspected of despising your ancestors. What would you do?

Here your conscience must play a big role, a conscience that has been bathed in prayer and faith. It is difficult to make hard and fast rules for such situations.

Take the story of Na'aman. He was converted to God. Yet he could not refuse to accompany his King into their Pagan temple and bow down before the idols. He asked for forgiveness even before he did it. The prophet Elisha sent him away "in peace." Was he right or wrong?

Some Christians refuse to have anything to do with the religion of their parents. Pastors hear complaints that Christians have contempt for their Pagan or Muslim parents. Non-Christian parents feel Christians despise their ancestors. However you solve the problem, be sure to show honour and respect to your parents, even if you have to disobey.

Day 157 Scope of the Fifth Commandment

Exodus 20:12 Honour your father and your mother

We have only meditated on the *primary* subject of this commandment, the relationship between parents and children. That is not all there is to it. Scholars widely agree that this command covers all human authority relations. Thus we could continue with this commandment for another two months or more. We will move on, for I do not want you to get bored. The other subjects will be treated as we find them in other Bible passages. Most of the subjects we have meditated on also apply to other authority relations. Honouring the Government is a must, even though the Government is *always* very imperfect. Teachers are also not to provoke their students. Workers are equally to obey their employers in the Lord. Church leaders are also to remember the reason God has given them authority

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and exercise it accordingly. Subjects in all spheres of life are to obey as the normal rule, but they are all called to selective obedience. When your authority expects you to disregard or disobey God, you have no choice but to disobey the authority, whether parents, government, teacher, pastor or employer.

But parental authority and honour is basic to it all. That's where it all starts. That is and was the original authority. If things go wrong here, they will do so everywhere. So, honour your parents. It pleases God and it works better for everyone. It is the way of nature as He created it.

Day 158 Long in the Land

Exodus 20:12 ... so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

Obedience and honour to legitimate authority leads to social stability. That's the promise attached to this command.

For OT days, this promise referred to the land of Canaan. From the OT we see that there was indeed a strong connection between proper honour and proper authority. When kings ruled according to God's law, all went well. But every time a king went beyond his bounds and turned into a tyrant or became an idolater, instability resulted. Sometimes this would lead to hunger. At other times, enemies would conquer them in their own land. In a few cases they were exiled *en masse* to live in foreign countries.

For today, the promise is no longer Canaan. Partly, the promise now refers to the church. A church whose members understand Biblical authority at home, in church and in the nation at large, will be blessed with stability and growth. People will flock to it, for it will represent a beacon of rationality in a confused society.

A nation whose citizens understand the Biblical notion of authority and obedience will likewise be blessed. It will make progress. It will be stable. Things will operate the way they ought. Its citizens will be respected by other countries.

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Reader, we have tried disobedience and dishonour. It has brought us chaos. Let us challenge God by trying His ways of obedience and honour. He still knows best.

Day 159 What is Murder?

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

As we move on to the Sixth Commandment, it is good to ask what is all involved in murder. I am again letting the Heidelberg Catechism talk. This Catechism expresses the Christian faith according to the tradition of the Reformed churches, the same tradition that underlies all of these meditations. It answers three questions about murder.

What is God's will in the Sixth Commandment? I am not to belittle, insult, hate or kill my neighbour – not by my thoughts, my words, my looks or gestures, and certainly not by actual deeds. And I am not to be party to this in others. Rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge. I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself either. Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword.

Does this Commandment refer only to killing? By forbidding murder, God teaches us that He hates the *root* of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness. In God's sight all such are murder.

Is it enough then that we do not kill our neighbour? No. By condemning envy, hatred and anger, God tells us to love our neighbour as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful and friendly to him, to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

This Catechism gives us a comprehensive summary of the Sixth Commandment. Reflect on this summary today. Where does it touch you?

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Day 160 Realistic?

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

This commandment and its interpretation in the Catechism seem totally unrealistic today. They fall on our ears like a drop of water on red hot coals. It sizzles for a moment and it is gone – evaporated. It bounces off the armour plating that protects our modern tanks. It rebounds from the cement with which modern man has built his nuclear shelters. It gets lost in the thunder of our guns and in the violence of our deadly weapons. The commandment is drowned out by political harangues on TV. It drowns in the blood of our soldiers. It is eaten away by the growing hatred in the hearts of millions of oppressed people and refugees. Not to kill my neighbour or even hate or merely belittle him; to smother all thought of revenge – in today's Nigeria this all sounds so foreign, so naïve, so out of step with everything around us, almost foolish.

And then that statement about the government holding the power of the sword for the prevention of murder. What do we do with that in this era of dictatorial and oppressive governments? Indeed, governments hold the sword – and a lot more terrible weapons: nerve gas, missiles and nuclear bombs. And they have these to *prevent* murder? Is this all a joke?

In the midst of all this, this commandment stands with its sovereign authority: You shall not murder. It has not been and must never be repealed. Our day needs it more than any other.

Day 161 Why Not Murder?

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

Murder is horrible. Why? In any normal society, people sense that it is horrible and they hardly need to ask this question. But our society today is not normal. The frequent murders show that we are badly in need of an explanation.

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Remember Genesis 9:6 where we read, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” We have meditated on this verse earlier. The image of God. That is the basic reason. If you murder someone, you attack God’s image in her. You attack God Himself. There is nothing more heinous than that. That’s the *main* reason. But there are others.

In fact, everything in the Bible, everything in the Christian life goes against murder. The Great Commandment to love your neighbour as yourself simply leaves no room for murder. Or take the Golden Rule: do unto others as you want them to do to you. Apply that to murder and see how far you get! Or the admonition to take on each others’ burden. Surely that excludes murder. Then there is the expectation that we display the glory of the living God. Can you square that with murder?

Ah, there is so much in the Bible that is against murder. We actually do not even need this commandment, for the whole Bible breathes a spirit that makes murder simply unthinkable.

But it does happen. How do you think that can be?

Day 162 Death Penalty

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

The question for today is whether it is lawful for the government to apply the death penalty (capital punishment) for any crime. We are here treading on difficult ground, for as one learned theologian back in 1853 wrote, this is one “question on which wise and good men are not agreed.” This is true today as much as then. Many books and articles have been written by Christians on this subject through the centuries and we are no nearer agreement. Thus we do well to step carefully here.

It is good to realize that the word for “murder” here does not cover all forms of taking someone’s life. The Hebrew language in which this was originally written,

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uses different words for killing in war and for authorized executions. The word used here does not refer to capital punishment.

The question is whether capital punishment is *demande*d here. The Catechism (Day 161) affirms Romans 13, where we read that the government is armed with the sword. It applies this principle to capital punishment in order to prevent murder. Does that mean that the government *must* punish *all* murderers with death? Few would say “Yes” to that question.

Murder is an attack both on God’s honour and on the very foundation of society. If we cannot live together, if we murder at random, then what do we have left? Today we have come close to such a stage of chaos and murder in our country. So, meditate on this question today.

Day 163 Three Tough Questions

Romans 13:4 ... for he [the Government] does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Yesterday I left you with the question whether the Government has the right to practice capital punishment. We went even further to ask: *Must* the Government punish all murderers with death? The answers various Christians have given to such questions vary widely and often contradict each other. It is not possible in the context of these meditations to summarize all the arguments for and against.

My own church is the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), represented in Nigeria by the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (administrative headquarters in Taraba) and the Church of Christ in Nigeria among the Tiv (administrative headquarters in Benue). These churches are associated with the Fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Nigeria, more popularly known as TEKAN, and with the Servant United Mission (SUM), formerly known as *Sudan* United Mission. The CRC wrote a very sensitive 45-page report on this question that I want to share with you.

The Report asks three carefully-stated questions about capital punishment:

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(1) Is it *mandatory*?

(2) Is it *permissible*?

(3) Is it *desirable*?

Since murder has become so common in our country and life so cheap, Christians should have a responsible answer to these questions so we can give guidance to our Government. What do *you* think: Is the death penalty mandatory? What is the reason for your answer?

Day 164 Capital Punishment Mandatory?

Numbers 35:20-21 If anyone with malice and forethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies, ... that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer....

The above text seems to leave us with no choice, but to execute someone who willfully kills another person. The CRC Report referred to yesterday shows it is not quite that simple.

For one thing, the OT demands the death penalty for some other offenses: adultery (Leviticus 20:10), having sex with animals (Exodus 22:19), sacrificing to other gods (Exodus 22:20), oppressing the poor (Exodus 22:22-24). If we were to apply the death penalty for these today, how many people would be alive? I do not know of anyone who says such people should be killed. Why apply it in only one case but ignore it in all the others?

Genesis 9:6 seems to demand the death sentence. However, the authors of the Report, whom I personally know to be careful and pious theologians, have concluded that the verse is a poetic proverb. It is a piece of wisdom like "He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword." It is a truth no one should ignore, but it is *not* a law to be applied by some authority.

Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13-14 affirm that the Government has the power of the sword, but neither insists that this power *must* lead to capital punishment.

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The answer: No, the Bible does not make it mandatory for NT times. But would that make it wrong?

Day 165 Death Penalty: Allowed?

Numbers 35:16 If a man strikes someone with an iron object so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death.

The death penalty, we saw yesterday, is not mandatory. Today's question is: Is it allowed? Permissible? The CRC Report "joins the vast majority of Christians who throughout the ages have held that capital punishment is in accord with the Scriptures."

Genesis 9:6 does not make the death penalty mandatory, but it does allow it. In fact, under certain conditions it is the appropriate response to murder, especially to wanton, random murder. Similarly, the Romans 13 and the I Peter passages give scope to the Government to execute murderers, though they do not demand it.

Other passages like Romans 12:17-19 that talk against vengeance, do not apply here. They forbid individuals from taking the law into their own hands. They do not touch upon the duty and task of Government. They do not forbid the death penalty.

The question then becomes: If it is not mandatory but allowed, on what basis do we decide when it is good or bad? The answer lies in the situation. Where life is no longer valued; where people kill left and right; when the very life of the community is threatened – there the Government may decide to resort to the death penalty. There a dam is needed against bloodshed. Today, the extreme shedding of blood by Boko Haram could be one of those situations.

But even then great care is needed. Who needs to be punished? The actual killer or the one who created the situation?

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Day 166 Is the Death Penalty Desirable?

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

If the death penalty is not mandatory but permissible, we are left with the question whether governments *should* routinely practice capital punishment. The CRC Report says that the death penalty should not be used routinely. It should be applied only when there is a *serious* threat to the foundation of society and to the safety and welfare of the people. This penalty should be surrounded by safeguards that ensure the preservation and enhancement of life to the maximum, for life is sacred, even the life of a murderer.

Care must also be taken because judges make genuine mistakes. Sometimes they are corrupt and can be bought by bribes. Do we want to place the power of life and death in such hands?

Here we must be very careful.

On the other hand, when people have become very careless about the lives of others, when the foundation of society is in danger and people are no longer safe, then it may be necessary to apply the death penalty. When armed robbers are common, serious measures must be taken. When ethnic groups kill their neighbours routinely as we are seeing in some states, there may be need for the ultimate penalty especially to the brains behind such situations. Not to speak of Boko Haram—especially those behind it.

But be careful, for few are the brains who are punished. It is usually the poor who are used by the brains who bear the punishment. Christians must move cautiously between protection and justice.

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Day 167 An Imaginary Case

Deuteronomy 27:17 Cursed is the man who moves his neighbour's boundary stone.

It is well known that the British often placed Middle Belt societies under Muslim chiefs. These chiefs would often use their positions to advance Islam and the interests of their own people, even though they were settlers in the area.

This happened in the imaginary Mountain State. The settlers had moved into the area before colonialism, and the British placed the whole area under a Muslim chief of a distant city. Muslims are known for their contempt for Traditional African Religion. That contempt and their adeptness at the power game over a few generations produced extreme frustration on the part of the original people. Their complaints all fell on deaf ears.

One day the natives of Mountain State exploded into anger. In their long pent-up anger they acted rashly and unwisely by killing a number of the settlers.

Now, who was deserving of capital punishment? That the natives broke the law cannot be denied. But *why* did they break the law? Because those in power refused to act on their complaints. The law was used against them. The contempt with which they were treated aggravated them beyond measure.

The courts in this case must recognize the long history that led to this situation. The settlers are as responsible for the explosion as the local people. Here capital punishment will further upset the society and produce the opposite effect it should have. It is not desirable in this case.

Day 168 Wholistic Justice

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

Some time ago, Kenyan church leaders opposed hanging armed robbers. Instead, they suggested, the government should find out how robbers learn where there is money to be stolen. They should also find out how robbers get arms and police

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uniforms and who coordinates their activities with the staff of the offices they attack.

What these leaders were calling for can be called “wholistic justice.” That means justice that takes the *whole* situation into account and seeks to get to the *root* of crime, to the people who are behind it all.

In Nigeria some ethnic groups, often so-called Christians, have been attacking and killing each other. Wholistic justice would not simply kill all those who are involved but would seek out those who are behind such attacks, the brains who organize them. In the north, Muslims have for some years killed Christians and destroyed their properties. Recently, Christians have said, “Enough is enough” – and have paid in kind.

Again, wholistic justice would determine the causes behind it all and those who organized them. It could be that wholistic justice would also demand the death penalty for those “brains.” But this would be only after thorough and honest investigation. Anger, malice and religious discrimination should not be allowed a role in such decisions.

Unfortunately, the death penalty is seldom applied to the real culprits, the brains. Only the ordinary poor who are used, get executed – except, of course, for the brains behind attempted coups. Ask yourself, “Why?”

Day 169 Taking the Law into Your Own Hands

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

There is much despair in our country today. People have come to doubt that the police can or will provide adequate protection against criminals. As a result, they are increasingly taking the law into their own hands. Lagos is famous for its crowds burning suspected thieves on the spot.

This commandment forbids the taking of a life by people not appointed to do so. In the OT, the death penalty for murder was to be executed by a so-called

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“avenger,” a blood relative of the murdered person. Sometimes this had to be done in conjunction with an assembly (Numbers 35:21, 25). Later this responsibility was taken over by government institutions. The point in the OT is that killing anyone without proper societal or governmental sanction is forbidden as murder.

Government is seriously guilty when people take the law into their own hands because of lack of confidence in government protection. In such a case, the government itself is responsible for the resulting murders that will surely take place.

At the same time, as individual citizens we must guard ourselves against developing an attitude where it becomes easy for us to kill. We can easily let poor government become an excuse for casual murder. Let us not allow society to cheapen our view of human life. Human life remains sacred, even if society has forgotten that. The commandment stands: You shall not murder.

Day 170 High Class Murder

Ezekiel 22:27 Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain.

Augustine, the famous North African church father, tells the story of a pirate who was brought before Alexander the Great, a mighty conqueror of nations in ancient Macedonia. The pirate said to the Emperor: “I who have only one ship, am called a pirate. You, who have many ships, are called Emperor.” Both conquered other people and thus did the same work, but the one did it on a large scale, while the other on a small scale.

So it is even today. There are “petty” murderers. These are the “ordinary” murderers, the small boys, who kill to steal or because someone pays them to do so. They are the ones who often get killed, either in shoot-outs with the police or by official execution.

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Then there are the bigtimers. They are the high officials, who do not need to kill anyone to get what they want. They just do it with the stroke of a pen in a government office. With that one stroke they can sometimes get millions. It is said that there are many such bigtimers in Nigeria.

The result of such bigtime stuff is that people get poor, hungry and sick. Many die, especially children. It leads to poorly equipped hospitals and to roads full of holes – and to more uncounted deaths. Who is the greater murderer? And who deserves capital punishment the most? Answer, please, someone.

Day 171 Varieties of Murder

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

Yesterday we thought about murder by the pen on the part of powerful government officials. That is an ancient form of murder found through the ages. However, there are also many *new* forms of murder today that we should briefly look at.

One of these is easy abortion. In some parts of the world abortion has become as common as birth, if not more common. Though under certain conditions it may be permitted, its wholesale application can only be called murder. We should continue to resist attempts to make it common and easily available.

Then you have the new scourge of AIDS. For people who have the AIDS virus to knowingly expose others is a form of murder. For medical people to give injections with used syringes amounts to murder. We do not need to talk of loose sexual living that spreads AIDS like wildfire. Neither do we have to think long about drug addicts who freely use syringes over and over again.

With modern medicine it has become possible to prolong the life of some people who are suffering immensely and who would have died, except for the new technology. Sometimes the family or even the patient himself wants to be disconnected from the equipment that keeps him alive in order to die to end the suffering. Is that murder or suicide? Sometimes the patient or family requests a

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medical doctor to slip the patient a pill or drink to end the suffering. It goes by various names such as “euthanasia” or “assisted suicide. This is a controversial subject in many countries. When should suffering be relieved in this way? Ever? At all? Never? When does it become murder?

Secular people who think they own themselves and their bodies, argue they should have the right to determine this for themselves. Are they not in charge of their own bodies? However, Christians know that life is a precious gift from God, who alone has the power to give it and terminate it. We are *not* our own but belong to Him. Suicide, assisted or not, is seen as much an attack on God’s image as is murder of another person. That leads Christians to reject all such notions and practices.

But modern technology changes everything. It enables us to keep people alive no matter how much pain they suffer. Previously, they would have died long since. Is it a good idea to prolong such suffering by this artificial means? Should such patients be kept alive regardless or should the equipment be turned off? Does that constitute euthanasia and should it be allowed?

To add weight to this question, at least in countries with socialized medicine, is the fact that a nation’s medical system never has enough money to go around. So, when a terminally ill older person in extreme pain is kept alive by means of this technology, that means there is less money to keep someone else alive, perhaps a younger person in the strength of his life and provider for a family. In effect, keeping such an older patient with extreme pain alive is to *choose* to allow that younger person with a family to die. You may not know such a sick person, but you are still making a choice affecting his life—or death. And, know him or not, by Christ’s definition he *is* your neighbour. You see, the choice has become unavoidable. Societies and individuals are still struggling with such profound situations.

What do you think? Don’t move on without at least some struggle with these questions, perhaps together with family members or friends. The issue could affect your family tomorrow, if it did not yesterday. Money *does* talk—and not always without mercy and compassion.

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Day 172 War and Murder

Exodus 17:8-9 The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites.”

The question of war is another touchy one. Some churches say “No!” to all forms of war. Examples are Church of the Brethren, Mennonites and Quakers. They are called “peace churches” or “pacifists.” In fact, no church favours war. All are against it. But most traditionally allow it under certain circumstances. These hold to what is called the doctrine of “the just war.”

In the OT war was common. In today’s text, Israel defended herself against attack. The rest of the story shows divine approval for their action. At other times, Israel attacked other nations in a form of jihad. We will give some further thought to jihad later.

In the NT we are told that the Government holds the power of the sword. Most churches have interpreted this to include the power to conduct war. Of course, a nation should not enter war until all other ways of solving the problem have been exhausted. And then the problem must be serious enough to warrant war.

Many nations go to war to protect selfish interests. Christian citizens should resist such wars. You should not blindly follow your government into wars for selfish interests. Such wars are no different from killing by armed robbers – except that more people get killed than in an armed robbery.

Christians promote peace, not war and even less, murder by illegitimate war.

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Day 173 Nuclear War

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

It was one thing to talk of the possibility of a “just war” in earlier days. The question is whether we can still talk that way in our nuclear age. Is it possible to look at nuclear war as just?

The “just war” theory holds that only the military may be killed, not civilians. In a nuclear war, people get killed indiscriminately. Thus the concept of “just war” may not hold where nuclear war is waged. And of course, the same holds true for chemical warfare and any other means of indiscriminate mass destruction. If a war is not just, then it becomes murder, something that is unacceptable under all circumstances.

In defense of nuclear stockpiles, people have argued that during the cold war their very existence has scared governments so much that they do not dare start a war. They are afraid of nuclear weapons unleashed on them. In other words, nuclear stockpiles are the reason the cold war did not become hot. Eventually, the cold war petered out – but some say, only because the stockpiles were there. Perhaps.

Nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction are not the products of the Holy Spirit. They are the result of serious spiritual distortions in human society. Let us earnestly pray for and support all efforts by the United Nations as well as by Christian organizations like the World Council of Churches to prevent their spread and stop their production. Mass weapons spell wholesale murder, something no religion condones.

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Day 174 Murder by “Faith”

Ezekiel 34:4 You have not ... bound up the injured. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

There are some “spiritual” people and churches who sound very “pious” and “godly.” They refuse the services of modern medicine. They want to be healed by God alone. They do not want to use the “wisdom of the world,” which is for them represented by modern medicine. They will have nothing to do with hospitals. You find such people especially among marginalized sects and small extremist denominations, even among my own Reformed tradition

An example is the refusal of Jehovah’s Witnesses, a non-Christian sect that feeds on the Christian church, to accept blood transfusions. Parents have been known to allow their children to die rather than accept a transfusion. Another example is the refusal of certain sects to avail themselves of insurance or even the use of lightning rods to divert lightning from striking their houses.

In today’s text, the leaders of Israel are chastised for not binding up the wounded, for not using the means available. They are described as “harsh and brutal.” In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus praises the man for applying commonly available medicine to someone’s wounds (Luke 10:34).

Using medicine that has proven effective and that does not include ungodly rituals does not detract from the glory of God. *Refusing* such means *does* detract from His glory. It not only amounts to despising what He has made available, but it often leads to death. It is a “pious” form of murder.

Day 175 Jihad: Murder in the Name of Allah

Exodus 20:13 You shall not murder.

One controversial issue in Nigeria is the Muslim jihad. Throughout history, many people have been killed in jihad. I also realize that Christians have jihad in their own history in the form of the crusades some 700 and more years ago. It must be

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acknowledged, however, that the Christian church has rejected those crusades as illegitimate expressions of the Christian faith. We have yet to hear such denunciations on the part of Muslims about their jihad.

The jihad in Nigeria is a reality that cannot be denied. It is openly avowed by Muslims in writing and takes many shapes, including political, economic and, especially, spiritual. It also takes the form of murder. I have in my files many stories of Muslims who became Christians. Many of these or members of their families are often killed. This is plain murder in the name of Allah.

Should their murderers be brought to justice through the courts? There would be good Christian reason for doing so, for the government is supposed to protect her citizens and discourage murder.

On the other hand, these new Christians have usually taken the route of forgiving the murderers of their children and other relatives. One result of this approach is that it has often led Muslims to think seriously about our forgiving God and then become Christians themselves. A case of murder leading to life. Jihad turning against itself.

Should such murderers be taken to court or forgiven? Or both? Why?

Day 176 The Positive Point

Leviticus 19:16-18 ... Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life. Do not hate your brother in your heart. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself.

Sometimes the OT can sound kind of legalistic. Today, I am saying that sometimes the OT can also sound kind of negative. Most of the Ten Commandments are prohibitions. They tell you what *not* to do. This negative tone has earned the Decalogue a negative reputation with some people. Is that all there is to the Bible and to Christianity? A bunch of don'ts? You cannot live your life by negatives. You need something positive to go by.

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Today, in this *last* meditation on the Sixth Commandment, you should leave with a positive feeling. In today's text, you read more negatives: don't endanger your neighbour's life; don't hate him (remember: the root of murder?); don't seek revenge or bear a grudge. All of these can lead to murder and, in fact, are a kind of murder.

But then it comes, not only in the NT, but in the OT itself: *Love your neighbour as yourself*. Famous words, these. We hear them often and perhaps their meaning is no longer fresh in your heart. But it is a bombshell under all life's negatives. Jihad, tribalism and tribal killing, armed robbery and pen robbery – this one positive would render them all impossible.

Check your heart. What is it dedicated to: hate or love?

Day 177 Interest, Excuses, Traditions

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

A pastor distributed a brochure explaining the Decalogue among his congregation. To his amazement, he noticed that almost everybody turned first to his explanation of the Seventh Commandment! That commandment interested the people more than any other. So, I can expect that you are going to read the coming meditations on the Seventh Commandment with more than the usual interest. I pray that you and I will not let each other down. You by reading it only once. I by not writing challenging, interesting and, above all, Biblically responsible meditations.

There are few areas in life where we human beings use more excuses and rationalizations than in the money, possessions or sex sectors. We are also more vulnerable to the popular opinions of the day on these subjects than any other. We follow public opinion in these areas more easily, because public opinion usually provides the excuses we are looking for, while it also makes what we do seem respectable. If most people have random sex, then it becomes at least somewhat respectable and the shame attached to it slowly fades away till it

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becomes an acceptable practice. That is exactly what happened throughout the sex sector.

This commandment is also associated with many theological traditions that come not from the Bible but from Pagan Greek thought that seeped into the church during its early history. In addition, we have our own Nigerian traditions that also influence our thinking about this Commandment.

So, be prepared for an interesting and challenging journey through the Seventh Commandment.

Day 178 More Than Adultery

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

Like the other commandments, this one mentions only one core problem in an area of life that is wider than the thing explicitly forbidden. The Sixth Commandment goes beyond forbidding murder and leads to positive protection of your neighbour. So the Seventh goes beyond adultery to encouraging you to a life of chastity and holiness. It explicitly forbids a core sin, in this case adultery, but by implication enjoins you to a positive sexual life within the bonds of marriage.

This approach rests on a solid Christian tradition. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism, from which we have quoted earlier, puts it this way:

Question: What is God's will for us in the Seventh Commandment?

Answer: God condemns all unchastity. We should therefore thoroughly detest it and, married or single, live decent and chaste lives.

Question: Does God, in this Commandment, forbid only such scandalous sins as adultery?

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Answer: We are temples of the Holy Spirit, body and soul, and God wants both to be kept clean and holy. That is why He forbids everything which incites unchastity, whether it be actions, looks, talk, thoughts or desires.

A 16th-century father of the Reformation, Zacharias Ursinus, wrote that whenever God forbids anything, He commands the opposite. By condemning adultery, God demands everything that encourages a healthy sex life.

Day 179 Adultery: What Is It?

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

Yesterday you discovered that the Seventh Commandment mentions adultery as the core sin but is concerned with the whole area of sex and marriage. Therefore we will not limit our meditations to adultery alone. Yet, it is good to begin by giving some thought to that particular sin.

What specifically is adultery? One dictionary defines it as voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone who is not her/his spouse. This “someone” could be single or married to another person. Note that it is “voluntary.” It does not refer to forced intercourse as in rape. Neither does it include the ancient situation where a man lies with an unmarried female slave who has not been promised to someone else (Leviticus 19:20). The OT idea of adultery is well covered by this definition and the two exceptions.

Some people wonder about the difference between adultery and fornication. “Fornication” is not found in the NIV, the Bible translation we are following in these meditations. It is wider in meaning than “adultery,” for it includes all human sexual activity outside of recognized marriage.

Of course, in the NT the meaning of adultery is widened by the Lord Jesus Himself when He says in Matthew 5:27-28, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Of course, it also covers a woman’s lustful glance at a man.

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This is pretty radical stuff. It certainly forbids a situation where one looks at members of the opposite gender lustfully as a matter of habit, but can it be avoided at all times so that you *never* entertain lustful thoughts? Frankly, I find this hard to believe. But that, of course, is just an example of what Paul teaches that all of us are deeply mired in a culture of sin; that without Christ we are *dead in sin*. That's why we need a Saviour: We cannot stand on our own feet.

Day 180 Adultery: What's Wrong With It? (1)

Genesis 2:24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

It is impossible to explain all that is wrong with adultery in one short meditation. We will therefore devote several meditations to this question.

One reason is simply that God has forbidden adultery. That itself should be enough. Obedience to God, together with love, is the greatest of all virtues. It guarantees a rich and satisfying life. But when you do what He forbids, it will surely land you into trouble without exception.

But God never simply imposes arbitrary laws on us. All of His written laws are simply repetitions of the laws He placed in creation. They are verbal expressions of what is natural, of what will work successfully. Disobedience to His written laws is also deviation from nature.

At creation, God arranged that human sexual intercourse be restricted to marriage. Marriage is a complete unity of wife and husband. That is how it is portrayed in the creation story of Genesis 1 and re-affirmed by our Lord in Matthew 19:3-9. That is the natural state of affairs. That is the way to successful marriage and to a healthy society.

In adultery you break that unity. You are no longer one with your spouse. A third party has entered the relationship. Where that happens, experience has shown that everything goes wrong. Why do you think that is so? And what about a third party in the form of polygamy?

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Day 181 Interruption: 2nd Half Year

Luke 13:6-9 ... If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.

A change of pace today. Do you know what happened today? If you started reading these meditations on January 1 and you read one every day, then today or yesterday you entered July, depending on whether this is a leap year or not.

July is the first month of the second half of the year. Six months have just raced by. They have gone so quickly, you may hardly have noticed. It is good, therefore, to pause today by thinking about the meaning of the passing of time. No, not just passing, but the racing or even galloping of time.

In the short parable in Luke 13, the fig tree is in danger of being cut down, because it has been useless for years. It has produced no fruit for its owner to enjoy. Lucky for the tree, the owner was prepared to give it one more year to prove itself. Does that tree look like you? Then you had better do something about it in the extra time given to you.

You can produce fruit for God in several ways. Some people are called to do so in church work or in evangelism. Great. But most people are called to produce fruit for God in their taxis, offices, shops or classrooms. It may be more difficult in these places and *certainly as important*. What fruit do *you* plan to bear today? Have these meditations made any difference in your life? How?

Day 182 Adultery: What's Wrong With It? (2)

Ephesians 5:24-25 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.

Today we resume meditating on adultery. We need to understand the unity of marriage in order to understand the evil of this sin.

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From our general human experience, we know that though male and female have much in common, they also have some profound differences both in body and spirit. We react differently, we relate differently to each other and to the world. Now the Lord created us so that there is a tremendous attraction between the two genders that affects us in all of our relations with each other.

Marriage is the closest relationship possible between one woman and one man. In marriage the two become one in body and spirit. That relationship is like that between Christ and His church: both give of themselves completely to each other. They hide nothing from each other. They do not withhold some secret parts of themselves to be reserved for someone else. Complete unity in body and spirit characterizes these relationships. That, at least, is the goal towards which a healthy married couple works.

In adultery, that relationship is one-dimensional. The adulterating spouse has sex with more than one partner. The relationship with either that partner or the betrayed spouse is now merely physical. The sexual relationship is at animal level, where there is only physical attraction. It is the difference between marriage and mating.

Day 183 Adultery: What's Wrong With It? (3)

Leviticus 20:10 If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.

Adultery is not only wrong in itself, but it also causes tremendous problems for others. Adultery affects all members of the family. It spoils the relationship between husband and wife. It poisons the atmosphere for the other members of the immediate as well as extended family, especially the children.

It often leads to a breakup of the family with perhaps one of the parents leaving with or without the children. Children become worried and insecure. They are confused and anxious. They do not receive normal attention. The result is often

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poor discipline and morals. They cannot pay attention in school and do not do their homework. They tend to get into trouble with the authorities.

The family is the basic building block of society. When many families break down, society itself becomes insecure. You will find many families of children and one parent. In some countries you have many fatherless families that cannot make ends meet. These end up becoming wards of the social welfare department or of the churches. And often it started with adultery.

Thus it is understandable that in a society like Israel without governmental welfare provisions and with many families without fathers, the punishment for adultery was death. It was too serious a threat to society to take it lightly. They had no other effective way of dealing with it. Besides, in distinction from the NT era, in the OT life was cheaper and capital punishment was meted out more readily.

Do you think the government should punish adulterers today? Muslims think so. Explain your answer.

Day 184 Adultery and AIDS

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

Modern people think of sex as their private affair. Apart from your spouse, it is no one else's business. It is not the government's business. Neither is it the business of the community. It is strictly a private affair.

But during the last few days we have seen that adultery has consequences for many other people: for spouse and children, for the community, for the church, for the government. This is even more true since AIDS has come into our lives.

AIDS is causing terrible chaos and suffering in many countries. In some countries an entire generation is being wiped out. Babies inherit the virus from infected mothers. The number of orphans is increasing by leaps and bounds. The required

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medical care is too expensive for those affected and has to be provided by community agencies, government and church.

Adultery is personal, private, you say? No one's business? Not so, my sister, my brother. It never was a purely private affair. It always had serious social consequences. But this is true today more than ever with AIDS around.

When someone warns you, do not tell her to mind her own business. It *is* her business. And when someone else does it, it is *your* business as well. But if you ignore all the warnings and get in trouble, you have no right to expect that government now should pay for your stupidity. It is private, remember?

Who should to *what* to stop it? And *how*?

Day 185 Adultery and Barrenness

1 Samuel 1:6 And because the Lord had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.

Hannah was barren. For this reason, her co-wife ridiculed her. It so happened that husband Elkanah loved her and treated her with special tenderness. The co-wife's reaction was more common than that of the husband. When a woman does not bear children, the cause is often thought to lie with her and she is despised as useless.

This kind of situation often leads to adultery and other marriage problems. Remember what happened in Abraham's family.

Closer to home, I know of a pastor and his wife who had no children. So the pastor began to go to other women, even though it turned out that the problem was with him, not her. The parents and other family members will often come with advice that basically encourages some form of adultery. There must be children *at all cost*. A childless woman is thought to be worthless.

In God's scheme, sex is used to produce children. But that is not the *only* use of sex and having children is not the *only* value of a woman. Marriage is above all a

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union of a woman and man who have committed themselves to each other for better or worse. If there is no offspring, they may seek medical help and pray. Perhaps God has some other calling for such couples.

This calls for prayer, patience and obedience, not adultery.

Day 186 Pornography and You

Philippians 4:8 ... Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

Pornography is the very opposite of today's verse. One dictionary defines it as "the depiction of erotic behavior – intended to cause sexual excitement." It appears in book and magazine, in film and video, in music, in poster and "art." It is readily available in almost every city.

And no one is immune to it. Pastors have been known to be addicted to it. Alhajis have been caught bringing it in from the "holy land." It can grow on you so that you become enslaved to it as others are enslaved to drugs. Eventually you cannot stop using it.

In many cases it leads to adultery. Your thinking, your imagination, your entire being becomes possessed by it. It drives you on to do things you really do not want to do. It pushes you into the most dangerous sex alliances and often ends up with the AIDS tragedy. You know better. You just cannot stop. You don't have the will power.

The Bible's cure is a preventive one. Don't even *begin* looking at or listening to that junk. Instead, think about whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable. Think about anything excellent or praiseworthy. God has created more worthwhile, constructive and beautiful things in this world than you can handle. Let *them* become your obsession.

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That's freedom. That's enjoyment. That's *real* life. Except.... Think about it: Should *anything* in this creation become your obsession?

Day 187 The Pornography Industry

Matthew 18:6 But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

In some countries, the pornography and sex industry has become a billion dollar industry. This means that there are powerful parties supporting and protecting it. It is available along almost every city street in bookshops and video or DVD rentals. We can thank God that the situation is not as bad in Nigeria as in some countries – as yet. However, even in Nigeria blue movies and other pornographic materials are not difficult to obtain.

And all of this is in the name of freedom. Many people regard censorship as restriction on their freedom. If freedom encourages and even creates immorality, then that is the price we have to pay for freedom. The pornography industry is one of the strongest lobbies in some countries for absolute “freedom.” It depicts all those who seek to restrict pornography as narrow-minded conservatives. And public opinion has fallen for it.

In the Bible freedom is not liberty to do anything you like. *Freedom is found only in obedience to God.* Pornography does not lead to freedom but to the vilest form of slavery.

Today's verse holds for all who encourage pornography – industry captains, shareholders, distributors, shopkeepers, politicians and civil servants who protect it and policemen who close their eyes. If you are one of these, I would think again.

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Day 188 Pornography in the Bible?

Song of Songs 4:5 Your breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies.

Some say that the Bible contains pornography. In Canada and the USA there is a bitter struggle going on about whether or not the Bible should be read in government schools. Secularists say, “No!” Some of them argue that the Bible is pornographic and has a bad influence on children!

Others say the same but then use it to defend modern pornography! If God put it in His Word, then why should we oppose it?!

It is true that the Bible contains some very sexual passages. There is the entire Song of Songs. There are the stories of Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19) and about Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) and several others. Unlike Islam with respect to the Qur’an, the Bible does not deny the sins of the people of God, including sexual sins, not even of some very important prophets or kings. The Bible shows life as it really is. The Bible is not about good people but about a good God.

The difference between these passages and pornography lies in their purpose. Pornography encourages free sex without limits and often leads to sexual obsession. The Bible shows both the beauty of sex as in the Song of Songs and the evil of its abuse. It does not turn fornication into virtue or call adultery freedom. When youths read these passages they are edified, not corrupted.

Sex in the Bible? Yes. Pornography? No. There *is* a difference!

Day 189 It Only Takes a Spark

Acts 28:27 For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.

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“It only takes a spark to get the fire going,” so begins the song. It is the spark of the Holy Spirit. But if you have left the door of your heart ajar to Satan, it only takes a spark for his spirit to invade you as well. And you know what happens once a spark strikes. The tiny spark easily becomes a huge blaze that consumes you totally.

You probably know some people whose lives are ruined because of sexual addiction. It can and does ruin individuals and families. History shows it can even destroy entire societies. Especially today, of course, with AIDS.

Such destruction does not happen overnight. Perhaps a long time ago you left the door to your heart ajar. The spark of Satan set off a process that eventually led through addiction to destruction. And so you get the picture as we read it in our text. Ears, eyes and heart closed to what the Lord is saying.

Conclusion? Make sure the spark of Satan does not get an opening. Watch your tongue, your eyes, your ears, your friends. Don't start reading that book. Don't start watching that DVD. It only takes a spark. It all starts so innocently

Day 190 Petty Rules

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

One young man complained about God's sex arrangements. Why should God have arranged sex life so that we have to surround it with so many petty rules of “Don't do this” and “Don't do that?” God does not seem to know what He is doing. Just when the sex drive of young people is at its strongest and blood is pulsating at its hardest, at that very time the law of “Touch not; taste not” is applied with a vengeance.

I am not about to defend God. But I do remind you of the situation in Eden. Husband and wife walked around naked and experienced no shame. Today we immediately associate such situations with perversion, for that is how we now think.

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Our society creates extra difficulties for hot-blooded youth. All this pornography, this emphasis on sex all around us, the way of dress that covers only to entice the more, the easy-going attitude of our society – all these encourage us to just follow the sexual urges they create within us.

In addition, we base many of our major decisions on money, as did Lot. Then we get into unanticipated sexual situations and we blame them on God. But *we* did not think in time. *We* made our decisions without considering the sexual situation. Am I moving into a healthy sexual climate or does the place drip with sex? For some it may be better to move to Saudi than to Hollywood.

Day 191 Teen Sex

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

In some cultures, many people feel that sex between young people is alright. Statistics about Western countries show how open and common this has become. Now these are traditionally Christian countries. These new trends are developing at the same time their Christian traditions are on the wane. The connection between these two developments is not hard to see.

In these situations sex is mostly reduced to a physical act. Of course, sex *is* a deeply physical act, but it is not *only* a physical act. It is meant to be an act of *total* union. It is meant to be a central part of and one of the deepest expressions of a many-sided relationship between woman and man. It is also meant to take place in a stable relationship that will not dissolve tomorrow or next month. *That* is its natural environment where it can blossom.

Loose sex between young people does not include any of these. It is often the result of peer pressure or of just hot blood and thus merely physical. It may be an expression of intense but short-lived emotional teen affection that can dissolve at any time. Not to speak, of course, of unwanted pregnancies and diseases.

The church has consistently discouraged teenage sex. Experience has shown it is not genuine. Psychologists have shown the deep psychological damage it creates

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and the regrets it brings later. It may *seem* natural, but it is not. It is not natural according to the original creation.

Day 192 Teen Sex Again

1 Corinthians 12:26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

Christians together form a unity that the Bible calls the Body of Christ. All members of that Body care for each other. If one suffers, all suffer. If one rejoices, all do so with her. And if one is tempted, all gather around to encourage him to stay on “the straight and narrow.”

How can teenagers be helped in their struggle against sexual temptations? Christians and Muslims are both against such free sex and they can do things together to reduce the temptations. They can together fight against things like pornography. They can teach their people the need for modesty in dress. And of course, they must teach their people the sexual morality found in the Bible and the Qur’an. Teaching, guidance and role modeling in the home are very important.

Christians do not generally prevent mixing of the genders as Muslims insist on doing. However, the practice of a boy and girl spending much time together without others around should be discouraged. Young people, organize *group* activities that include both genders and within which you can enjoy each other’s company and learn about each other. Churches, mosques, schools and other institutions should encourage such group activities.

Above all, young people, *pray!* Pray for modesty when you select your dress for the day. When temptation comes, pray your way through it *and* seek counsel from a parent, pastor, teacher or friend. Face it with God and them, not alone.

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Day 193 Teenage “Marriage”

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

A formal wedding ceremony does not always mean that the new marriage is legitimate. Okay, it can be legitimate before the law of the country, but that does not make it so before the law of God. During the week I write this meditation, there was a press report about an aged Muslim ruler who had just married two teenage girls. Apparently these girls were given to him by their families, who wanted to create a bond between them and the ruler. Most other rulers in the state indicated their disapproval by not attending the wedding and I honour them for doing so. I believe they were embarrassed by behavior that can only bring dishonour. The ruler’s motive is too clear. The ceremony does not undo the adulterous nature of the arrangement; it is *not* a marriage, at least not from the Christian point of view.

One Patrick Ogbe some time ago warned against the practice of teenage marriage in *Sunday Standard*. He argued that God has instituted a time for everything. Girls who are not yet physically, psychologically and spiritually prepared to give birth or to nurture a child, should not be subjected to marriage until they *are* ready.

It is one thing for families to promise their young people to each other. It is another to consummate a marriage sexually too early. It is totally another when marriage becomes a mere excuse for fornication as in the case of the ruler.

Day 194 Free Sex: Cheap Sex

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

Is there such a thing as free indiscriminate sex? You have a partner for a few weeks or months and you move on to the next. In our largest cities you have discotheques and bars where people, often young adults, gather to find their temporary mates. These people often think of themselves as liberated.

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Recently an article in a popular secular magazine was devoted to such indiscriminate sex. People were interviewed who had been living such lives for some time and who thus knew all about it. They all expressed deep disappointment at the emptiness of this life style. It promised so much: freedom, self-fulfillment, fun, glamour. It yielded nothing like that. Instead, it brought a sense of emptiness, of uselessness, of feeling cheated and used.

This experience should not surprise us. God created us as sexual beings but not to live like animals. Like everything else in this creation, sex has its legitimate purposes and these are beautiful and enriching. They bring joy and fulfillment. But these rewards come only when our sexual behavior is according to the norms embedded in creation. Indiscriminate sex cheapens us. It turns us into little more than animals. And after the initial physical thrills are over and routine has set in, then the emptiness of it all comes to the fore.

Indiscriminate sex is never free. Its price is emptiness and meaninglessness. "Free" seldom comes free. It has its hidden price.

Day 195 The Oldest Profession

Leviticus 19:29 Do not degrade your daughter by making her a prostitute, or the land will turn to prostitution and be filled with wickedness.

The term "the oldest profession", it is often said, refers to prostitution. I doubt the accuracy of it. In Genesis 1 we find that the oldest profession is to rule the world, while in Genesis 2 we learn about farming. At any rate the seventh commandment forbids adultery and that surely includes prostitution. That can include men, as in Deuteronomy 23:17 – "No Israelite man or woman is to become a shrine prostitute."

We find that prostitution seldom comes alone. It usually comes together with many other vices. Proverbs 6:26 says, "The prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life." That is the very opposite of

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how we are to treat each other. Proverbs 23:27 cautions, "A prostitute is a deep pit." In other words, a prostitute is dangerous. Keep away from him/her.

We tend to despise prostitutes. We find that often police will swoop down on them and place them in detention. However, remember that prostitution flourishes only where there are clients. In Nigeria, prostitution usually results from poverty. Often the clients are among the rich who not infrequently have contributed to the poverty that leads to prostitution.

This situation should not lead us to excuse prostitutes, but it should keep us from blaming them exclusively. Remember Jesus' words in John 8:7. But also remember the AIDS factor. After all is said and done, Christ and prostitution do not mix (I Corinthians 6:15ff).

Day 196 Overcoming Prostitution (1)

1 Corinthians 6:16-17 Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with Him in spirit.

Prostitution and drinking are two practices no government has ever been able to erase completely. Most attempts to overcome them fail. Nevertheless, prostitution has no legitimate place anywhere, especially not in the church. The surest method of overcoming it lies not in law but in your relationship with the Lord.

The Apostle Paul suggests that if you are united with the Lord in spirit, then there is no room in your life for unison with a prostitute. These two are opposites; you will not find them in the same place or same heart on a regular basis. Thus it is the task of the church and all of its members to minister to each other, to encourage each other in a close walk with the Lord. This is to be done in the preaching, in pastor and elder visits, in mutual uplifting of each other and where necessary, admonition and discipline.

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Of course, husband and wife have a great responsibility towards each other in this respect as well. They more than anyone else must make sure their sex life is healthy, satisfactory. According to I Corinthians 7:3-5, married couples belong to each other. Both have the duty to give themselves to each other and not to withhold themselves.

And so the medicine lies in good relationships: with God and with each other.

Day 197 Overcoming Prostitution (2)

Deuteronomy 23:18 You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the Lord your God to pay any vow, because the Lord your God detests them both.

Prostitution brings many problems, also public problems. It can destroy families. It is a major AIDS producer. It is often associated with all kinds of crime, including slavery and kidnapping. For that reason, the government and the public in general also have a role in overcoming it.

Though no government has ever been able to erase prostitution completely, it can discourage and reduce it considerably. It can pass laws and apply them seriously. But many of those in a position to pass or apply such laws are themselves involved for personal or business reasons. There is a reason the police often look the other way! The business may be protected by powerful people. Here is where Christians and Muslims can cooperate in influencing public opinion and government. Of course, any law should equally apply also to clients!

I once met a hymn-singing prostitute whose husband had left her with three children. She had no one to help her. Many go into prostitution because of poverty. Again, Christians and Muslims can cooperate in helping desperate women, especially in politics by ensuring greater justice.

Never get used to prostitution. We should never accept it as normal. God detests it and so should we. Help prostitutes spiritually, economically and politically.

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Day 198 It Is In My Blood

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

“It is in my blood.” That’s the excuse people give for sex outside of marriage. In other words, “Don’t blame me. I can’t help it. It is my nature.” People don’t think it possible to be faithful to one partner. Neither do they think it possible to wait till marriage. That’s the same excuse people use for giving in to bribery.

That, of course, is nothing but an excuse. It is saying, “I don’t want to do anything about it. Just leave me do what I want to do. Don’t bother me.”

Remember, the Decalogue is merely a reprint of what God originally put in creation. God did *not* create us for unlimited and free sex. That is *not* a natural way to live. Faithfulness and sex within marriage – that is the natural pattern. *That’s* what’s in your blood.

What you are talking about is not in your blood. It is in your heart and your mind. And deep down you know that yourself. You do not want to be faithful. You *want* free sex anytime. You *want* to do what you want to do and the rest is only excuses. Right? Be honest and say it in your own heart and before the Lord.

Once you’ve admitted that, you are on the way to confessing your sin. But now go all the way and seek strength from the Lord, seriously. He will be there at your side.

Day 199 Regular Sex

1 Corinthians 7:3, 5 The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer

Regular sex means sex with your spouse. Any other form is irregular and not legitimate. Regular sex also means having sex regularly. That is, without long

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periods of withdrawal from your spouse. In the Bible it is normal for married couples to have sex regularly. It is the expected thing for husband and wife to carry out their “marital duty” towards each other on a regular basis. That’s according to nature or creation. That’s how God intended it to be.

My guess is that most couples have sex voluntarily without experiencing the pressure of duty. They have sex because they want to, not because they must. Nevertheless, there is a *must*. They owe it to each other to fulfill their needs. To withhold is to cheat your partner from what you owe him/her.

People can withhold for various reasons. Sometimes there are psychological or physical problems. They could also be bored, but that is often a sign that other things are wrong in their marriage. One author tells of a wife who had decided to give up sex for Lent, but the husband did not discover it until after Easter!

Regular sex is natural, good, enjoyable, holy. Go for it. But in its proper context of marriage. You will be blessed.

Day 200 Masturbation

1 Corinthians 7:9 But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Masturbation is sexual self-stimulation by rubbing your genitals, your sex organs. True sex always involves two persons. Sex is a way of giving yourself to your spouse in the most intimate way people know. But with masturbation we have a perversion involving only yourself. The Bible does not mention masturbation, but the Christian tradition has always warned against it.

It is a subject surrounded with shame and fear. People seldom talk about it. Yet they associate it with many health problems such as damaged sex organs, insanity, paralysis, loss of hair, impotence, ulcers, lack of sleep, weak eyes, etc. None of these are true.

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Still, masturbation is a perversion. It is sex turned in on yourself. It is the very opposite of what real, true, good and beautiful sex is all about. It is centered on yourself rather than another. If it becomes a habit, it may become difficult to have genuine sex. It encourages the use of your own sex organs for your own satisfaction rather than giving yourself to her/him. In addition, it usually goes along with selfish fantasy, which also can become a habit during sex with your spouse. It leads to secrecy, loneliness and to a serious guilt complex.

So, you do well to uphold the Christian tradition. Self-centeredness has never solved anyone's problems.

Nevertheless, some people are prevented from marrying for whatever reason but they do have a normal sex drive that needs an outlet. Rather than find an illegitimate outlet with a random partner, it may be better for them to resort to masturbation. If you have a normal sex drive, total abstinence may be impossible. In such cases, I judge that masturbation is better than physical fornication/adultery, though this is an opinion I have never heard or read about elsewhere, at least, not in Christian literature. Long-term suppressed sexuality can lead to serious problems. Masturbation is better than suppression. It is not a virtuous activity, but it is better than the vice of random sex. For most people, of course, marriage is the real solution

Day 201 Casting Stones

John 8:7, 11 He said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

As we move towards the end of our meditations on the Seventh Commandment, it is good to throw a few glimpses of NT perspectives on these sex questions. Please read the whole story from which today's verses are taken. It is a delightful story and very funny – but also very radical.

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Yes, in the OT the adulterer, not to talk of the prostitute, is to be stoned to death. Jesus knows it. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees who bring up the question in John 8 know it. In keeping with His general attitude, Jesus does not reject the OT provision, but He does shed some new light on it. In effect He is saying, "Yes, the law stands: she should be stoned. So, if you are qualified to judge and punish, proceed. Begin the punishment. Throw the first stone." You know the story: Everyone was embarrassed and sneaked away, leaving Jesus with the woman.

Jesus calls a spade a spade. She *had* sinned, He emphasizes. What she had done *was* evil. The question was: Who was qualified to carry out the sentence? Who had not committed adultery? Either in body or spirit?

Would *you* have cast the first stone?

Day 202 Forgiveness

Matthew 19:9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.

We tend to forget most sermons we hear. But at 76, I remember one sermon preached during my mid-twenties. That sermon was deeply Biblical, evangelical. Its main point was that even the sin of adultery is to be forgiven if the offending partner has repented. Among Christians, adultery should not lead to divorce but to forgiveness.

If you isolate today's verse from the rest of the Bible, it would seem that Jesus favours divorce after adultery. But yesterday we saw what happens when Jesus puts a text into the larger context of life and ethics. Yes, it *is* legitimate that a betrayed spouse should seek divorce, but only under certain circumstances. Jesus is *not* opening the way for a quick excuse to loosen the holy marriage bond.

One of the overarching teachings of the Scripture is forgiveness. Our forgiving each other is so important that in the Lord's Prayer we base our request to God

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for forgiveness on our forgiving each other. God's forgiveness is conditional on our forgiving each other.

The area of marriage and adultery is no exception. If you have experienced God's forgiving grace, there is no way you can refuse to forgive a fellow sinner who confesses. There is no excuse for adultery, but neither is there one for refusing to forgive a repentant spouse.

Day 203 Celebration of Sex

Song of Songs 1:13; 5:10, 14, 16 My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts. My lover is radiant and ruddy. His body is like polished ivory. His mouth is sweetness itself. This is my lover.

As we approach the end of this series on sex, I want to share with you what the Southern Baptist Convention says about it.

What is the best thing about sex on the market today? Magazines like *Passions*, *Hints* or *Lolly*? Not so. The Bible is the best thing around on sex. It tells it like it is. It shows that sex can be both delightful and dangerous! It does not hide anything and contains great truths for anyone wanting to understand sex.

What is sex anyway? It's a tough word to define. No dictionary is big enough to explain it, for sex is as big as life itself. Sex is more than a beautiful body or a boxer's physique. It is more than tingling with excitement in some hotel. It is more than physical intercourse. Nor is it just our genitals. It is entwined in our total personality and affects all our relationships. It is our maleness and femaleness that encompasses our whole being.

If you feel guilty about your sexual feelings, remember that God made our bodies, including sex, and said they are good. Sex within the proper parameters, calls for celebration, not shame. Instead of blaming the devil, let's give God some real credit for it and thank Him for it.

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Day 204 Sexual Kinks and Solution

Proverbs 23:26 My son, give me your heart

We continue with the Southern Baptist statement.

True, sex is God's gift, but look at all the temptations, guilt and tension that often come with it. Is it not hopelessly fouled up? Definitely not! Sex can bring pleasure and fulfillment if rightly understood and expressed.

A major reason for the problems is that people cut themselves off from God. A person makes himself the centre of the universe. That self-centeredness often leads to sexual problems. But it is not sex that is evil; it is the misuse of sex. It is building our lives around our own wants instead of around God that leads to misuse of sex and abuse of people. Problems arise when you choose to live in a dream world of romance or conquest instead of the world of real persons that God has created.

Sex is dynamite. It needs to be controlled. It has to be expressed in the right relationship to bring genuine and lasting happiness. Dynamite brings destruction when carelessly used – and so does sex!

This self-control is available to us, but only if we open our hearts to God and accept His direction for our lives. That's why the son in today's verse is advised to give his heart to God. If God controls your heart, He controls you completely, since your heart is the spiritual centre that controls the rest of you. You want to really enjoy sex? Then give *Him* your heart.

Day 205 Homosexuality

Romans 1:26-27 ...God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. ...The men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another.

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Warning: This meditation is both too long and too short! It is the longest in this bundle. Too long compared to the others; too short to cover the subject.

Homosexuality is given a bad press in the Bible. Just read the entire chapter of Romans 1. Then you have the story of Lot and the angels in Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. The Bible has nothing redemptive to say about this sexual practice. It is described in the basest of terms.

Throughout history, religions and cultures have adamantly rejected homosexuality and surrounded it with shame. People afflicted with this orientation have generally had to hide the truth about themselves and live a life of denial, deceit, secrecy and misery. They were and still are in danger of being killed in many countries.

In our modern world, people with this orientation have increasingly “come out of the closet.” In Western countries especially they are now relatively free to live out their orientation without being molested and the public is increasingly accepting them as they are. The Western Christian church is divided on the issue and is forced to study it anew in order to determine a practical pastoral response to it. Some denominations have split over the issue.

My church, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), some years ago produced a report in which it describes homosexuality as a handicap. This handicap arose due to the Fall that distorted all human relationships, including the sexual. The report recognizes that most gay people do not choose their orientation but are either born with it or become gay due to early negative childhood experiences with their parents. And so the CRCNA advises its members to treat and relate to gays with understanding and compassion. However, the report stops short of accepting them fully, for it expects its gay members to practice abstinence, in effect, to suppress their sexuality. It does not allow sexually active gays to take up leadership positions in the church; only those practicing abstinence.

Currently, that church is once again studying the issue, not in order to revisit those earlier conclusions, but in the light of that earlier report to study more

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seriously its response to and treatment of the gays in its midst. It still holds to the handicap notion and still excludes them from office.

My advice to the study committee is to propose opening up all church offices to gays, whether practicing or not. The rule for gays should be the same as for heteros: no sex outside the bond of marriage. In other words, they should get married.

I have slowly come around to this opinion during my thirteen years of living in Vancouver's West End, where gay culture is so dominant. Admittedly, theirs is a handicap; it was not meant to be at the creation. *But here they are, due to the disorientation of the Fall, but not due to their own sins.* During Biblical times, gays lived horrible lives, but Jesus has promised that His Spirit would come and teach us the truth. He has done so over the centuries, helping us overcome and understand various negative situations such as slavery and the treatment of women. He now seems to be helping us develop further insight into the gay situation. The only way to overcome the chaos of uncommitted sexually charged homosexuals is to allow them to marry and to channel their sexuality into committed relationships, just like heteros.

There is, of course, much more to say, but this is all we have room for. I pray that that CRC committee will draw the natural and logical conclusion out of that earlier report. I advise you readers, to pray earnestly to see which way God is leading you with respect to the homosexual challenge of our day. I encourage gay people not to become discouraged with the slowness with which the church is dealing with this challenge. The Spirit of God is moving and you will eventually be accepted fully in His church.

Day 206 Stealing

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

The Eighth Commandment talks about stealing. Let's begin by once again listening to the Heidelberg Catechism. It asks:

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What does God *forbid* in the Eighth Commandment? It answers:

He forbids not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law. But in God's sight theft also includes cheating, swindling our neighbour by schemes made to appear legitimate, such as: inaccurate measurements of weight, size, or volume; fraudulent merchandising; counterfeit money; excessive interest; or any other means forbidden by God. In addition, He forbids all greed and pointless squandering of His gifts.

Then the Catechism asks a second question:

What does God *require* of you in the Eighth Commandment? Answer:

That I do whatever I can for my neighbour's good, that I treat him as I would like others to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need.

Like most of the other commandments, this one is put negatively. It tells you what you are *not* to do. But as behind every successful man stands a woman, according to the popular expression, so we have learned earlier that behind every negative command stands a positive injunction. We ask what God *forbids* – the negative and what He *requires* – the positive. When we put these two together, we have a commandment that goes into the farthest reaches of our lives. No one and nothing excluded. How or where does it affect you?

Day 207 True or False?

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

Today I am asking you to do a "True or False" test. The purpose is not to see how little or how much you know about stealing or how intelligent you are. The idea is to see where you are today in your thinking about it. At the end of this series on stealing, you will be asked to take the test again to see whether your thinking or your attitudes have changed during the period you are meditating on the subject.

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Record your answers on a separate piece of paper and put it in a safe place so you can find it again later.

1. It is no sin to steal when you are hungry.
2. Stealing is *always* a sin.
3. It is no sin to steal from rich people.
4. If you don't steal, you may starve to death.
5. It's wrong to steal money, but not if you take someone's fruit.
6. If everyone steals, you may do it also.
7. Taking government property is not stealing.
8. Bribery is always stealing.
9. It is good that when a poor man steals a bag of cement he is put in jail, but if a high civil servant takes a bribe, he is merely demoted.
10. Demanding a bribe is worse than giving a bribe when it is demanded from you.
11. A governor who takes large bribes and then uses the money to help his own village people is not a thief.
12. If what you do is not against the law, it is never stealing.

Day 208 John Calvin on Stealing

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

John Calvin is one of the fathers of the Protestant Reformation whom we have met before in these pages. His major book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, was first published in 1536 – about 480 years ago, but it is still being reprinted and even translated into many languages, including Korean and Japanese. He writes:

All methods by which we obtain the possessions and money of our neighbours that are not done from love but from a desire to cheat or to harm in some way, are theft. This is true even if they are acquired in a court. For God sees the complicated deceptions with which crafty men snare the simple minded, until they draw him into their net. God sees the hard laws with which the powerful oppress and crush the weak. He sees the

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lures with which the clever person catches the unwary. Such injustice occurs not only in matters of money, merchandise or land. We also defraud our neighbours if we reject the duties which we owe them. If a steward devours his master's substance or does not attend to the master's business; if he either unjustly spends or wantonly wastes the properties entrusted to him; if he mocks his master, divulges his secrets or betrays his life or goods, he is a thief before God. And so is the master who savagely harasses his servants.

Calvin could have been born today. What's new? What is your method of stealing?

Day 209 What Is Stealing?

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

Most people understand the word "stealing." You may even find the question in the title offensive. I know you know. But the question is whether you know the *full* meaning of stealing.

English dictionaries sometimes give several definitions. One says "to take the property of another." Then it gives various meanings of that definition. Like: "To take without right or permission and with intent to keep or make us of wrongfully;" "To take away by force or unjust means;" "To take secretly or without permission;" "To take from another without right or detection;" "Any secret taking of anything tangible or intangible." Then this dictionary gives the meanings of some related words. "Pilfer" means "to steal repeatedly in small amounts." "Filch" means to "snatch quickly and secretly." "Purloin" adds the idea of "carrying off for one's own use." These definitions are good and you do well to ponder whether you engage in any of these.

The Biblical idea of stealing goes further than that of the dictionaries. You will remember from recent meditations that both the Catechism and Calvin explain the Eighth Commandment much more widely. Arthur Sultz says that "Stealing

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means taking hold of the good stuff of this world and claiming it as my own to do with as I *please*, regardless of the *needs* of my *brother*. Think about how you could improve this definition by paying special attention to the italicized words.

Is it possible to steal your own stuff?

Day 210 Common Stealing

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

Do you think there is anyone in the whole wide world who has never stolen anything? Except for our Saviour Jesus Christ, I doubt it. I am now talking about “common” stealing.

I know I have stolen when I was a child. My father sold cigarettes and sometimes I would steal a package which I would then share with my friends. Of course, my friends thought I was a hero. At another time I wanted my friends to admire me for courage. We would go into a large shop with the three of us. The others would do something to distract the staff, while I would then steal something and leave. My friends admired me. These were cases of petty pilfering. No one was particularly hurt by it, except perhaps myself for what it did to me. You might even dismiss such theft as innocent child’s play. But it was definitely theft and sin. My conscience disturbed me greatly.

A recent young convert told me about his crimes during his Muslim days. Stealing in a 1000 ways. Cars or their contents. Briefcases with thousands of naira – at one time over N80,000! He never did do anything useful with what he stole. It all somehow slipped out of his hands. He was living in constant fear of being caught. There was no gain from it. Well, that’s theft for you. It cannot bring blessing.

The Eighth Commandment is a wise one. It can prevent a lot of foolishness.

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Day 211 But I'm Hungry!

Nehemiah 9:15 In their hunger You gave them bread from heaven

May you steal food from a farm or shop if you are hungry? This is an old question that theologians and writers of ethics have written about for centuries. The greatest Christian theologian of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, the so-called Angelic Doctor, asked that question. His answer is both “yes” and “no.” His answer has served as model ever since by orthodox writers.

First, the “no.” When someone is merely hungry because he has not taken the time or trouble to make normal arrangements for food, the answer is “no.” Same when someone is too lazy to earn a living and he becomes hungry. Or when a person wastes his wealth. When such situations lead to hunger, you have no right to just take someone else’s food. If you do, you are stealing.

And now the “yes.” If someone is hungry for reasons beyond his present control, really hungry, and he has become an extreme case, then, according to the Angelic Doctor, he has the right to “steal” food. When the right to ownership and the danger of death stare each other in the face, then life takes precedence over the right to property. But, insists Aquinas, it must really be an extreme case for which no alternative has been found.

However, in such a case it is no longer theft. It becomes legitimate. A case of life and mercy always coming before property. If you have property, remember that.

Day 212 The Owner

Psalms 24:1-2 The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for He founded it

Yesterday you were simply told that life comes before property. But perhaps you asked yourself, “Who says so?” or “Where did Aquinas get this from?” Good questions that need clear answers. After all, if I have worked hard on my farm or

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developed my business, what right does some lazy good-for-nothing have to eat up my profits?

The answer lies in today's text. The earth and everything in it, in fact the entire world and all who live in it, belong to God. The text also gives the basis for this claim: He created it all. It's as simple as that. You may have worked very hard to build up your farm or business and you rightly have a sense of pride and ownership. But you own it only in a loose kind of way. The real owner of it all is God, the one who made it all. As writers like to put it, God is the absolute owner, while we own things only in a relative sense. Over against my neighbour, I am the owner of my properties. Over against God, I am only a tenant and everything I do with "my" properties must have His approval.

That being the case, God has the right to decide how things should be used. Aquinas said what he did because that's what he heard God say.

Day 213 Limits to God's Ownership

Psalm 22:28 For dominion belongs to the Lord and He rules over the nations.

No Christian will disagree that dominion belongs to the Lord. He owns everything as we saw yesterday and even rules over the nations. You, I'm sure, accept all that. You will never dispute it. At least, not in theory.

But you know, in much of our practice we act as if God's ownership is limited to church, spiritual and private affairs. It is there that we allow Him some authority, but in my business affairs? In our national affairs? In our struggle against the shari'a, many hold that religion is a personal affair that must be kept out of the nation's business. How often don't we say that "Business is business"?

I know a Christian who is leader in both church and government. He told me that when he travels on behalf of the church, he travels on the Lord's money and thus is very careful about how much he spends. But when he travels on behalf of the government, he spends freely, for it is government money!

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Here you have a major reason our hospitals, schools and roads are in bad shape. The government's money is wasted wildly by our so-called *civil servants*. But the point today is that government money and, in fact, all government property, is God's, just like all church property. There is nothing that is not God's. No limits to His ownership.

Day 214 God's Steward

Genesis 1:28 God said to them, "Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule"

The Bible insists that God is Lord of all things and all creatures with no exception. Even over nations, including nations that ignore Him. Both Christian and Muslim theologians call man God's vice-gerent. That's a fancy term that means something like "deputy governor" or "steward." In the Bible this notion goes back to the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1:28, where we are given the mandate to take care of the earth, God's garden.

We usually think of a steward as a low-paying position, a servant without prestige or power. However, the greater the wealth and power of the master, the greater that of the steward. And when you are the steward of El Shaddai, the Lord God Almighty, then you are a powerful steward indeed. And so we are in this world. Sometimes power can go to our head and make us forget that our power is not our own. When that happens, we begin to do as we please with this world and our so-called personal possessions – and we create a mess.

As stewards of El Shaddai we must take care of what He has entrusted to our care. We are to do so in His own way. And when He says that life comes before property or possessions, we have the answer to our question to Dr. Aquinas in Day 211. That is God's priority with which we may not tinker.

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Day 215 The Steward's Possessions

1 Chronicles 29:10-12 David praised the Lord: for everything in heaven and earth is Yours. Wealth and honour come from You

Throughout the Bible we hear the refrain: everything belongs to God. This truth is basic to life itself, basic to individual, economic, political, national and international issues. God's ownership of it all is absolute and without limitations. The moment an individual, company or nation forgets that their possessions are not really their own, chaos sets in, along with injustice and oppression. They begin to do with their possessions as they like. And since possessions tend to take hold of our hearts and lives very easily, we soon begin to make all kinds of excuses for the evil things we do in order to get more. In fact, our possessions begin to possess us. They enslave us and become our masters – our god even. They will drive us to do things our conscience knows are wrong, but we can no longer stop. We have become addicted to the drug of money or other forms of wealth.

What does all this have to do with stealing and the Eighth Commandment? The above situation arises when we steal from God. We have taken the things He put in our charge and now deal with them as if they are our own. We have forgotten the terms under which He handed them to us. We forgot we are merely stewards assigned to use them for His glory and benefit of the community.

How do you rate *your* stewardship?

Day 216 Stealing Yourself

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

On Day 209 I gave you a dictionary definition of stealing. Some other readings already gave you a strong indication that the meaning of stealing goes much further than the dictionary.

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You have heard of people stealing cars, money or even people. Maybe it has happened to you. Maybe you have even done that yourself as I did in small ways. But have you ever heard of stealing yourself? How can you steal yourself?

It is simple. You belong to God; He owns you. You may remember from earlier months that God has made a covenant with us. He takes care of us. We obey His commands. Those are the terms of this covenant. But many people think they are their own boss. And that is robbing God. You think you are your own master. You can do as you please. You have stolen yourself. Never thought of it that way, did you?

Stealing yourself, taking yourself out of God's control, breaking the covenant with God is *the* basic form of stealing. Other forms of stealing become quite easy after that one. After you have stolen yourself, it is only fear for the consequences that may prevent you from other forms of stealing. More thieves meet on Fridays and Sundays than any other days. That's when millions of people who have stolen themselves get together. That's why it is so easy for them to steal from other people.

Have you stolen yourself? Are you sure? How do you protect yourself from stealing yourself?

Day 217 Doing To Others As

Matthew 7:12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you

The Bible talks against stealing in a thousand ways. It does so by forbidding specific ways of stealing. But there are also certain general teachings that are basic to all human relationships, including stealing. Yesterday you meditated on one of them, namely that we belong to God. If we steal ourselves from God, then stealing from others becomes easy for us.

Today we look briefly at another such general perspective: In *everything* do to others what you want them to do to you. Now chew on that one for a while.

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Think about some things you hope people will never do to you. Some of these things may actually be legal. If someone does them to you, no court will punish him. For example, you buy a bunch of yams from a street vendor. The vendor has knowingly put one or two rotten ones among them. For many it is hard to distinguish between good and bad ones and you do not know the vendor well enough to find him again. The vendor may argue that, after all, that's how they were sold to him. He has no choice but to pass them on if he is going to earn his living.

If you remember you belong to God and you are to do to others What do you think? Honestly. Would you do that kind of thing? Why or why not?

Day 218 Love Your Neighbour

Matthew 22:39 ... Love your neighbour as yourself.

Today's meditation is on another well-known text: the Great Commandment. Actually this is not just another teaching. It is the greatest teaching in the Bible about how we treat each other. Together with the earlier part about loving God more than yourself, this is the entire law of God in a nutshell. If you have that love for your neighbour in your heart, you have no need for further laws about stealing. Then there's no need for a long list of do's and don'ts.

Stealing in any form is unthinkable if you really love your neighbour. From other texts we know that this neighbour is not just the person next door. Your neighbour is anyone and everyone, including people who live in different continents. All of them are your neighbours and you are to love them all.

For most of us it is difficult to steal from a close neighbour, friend, brother or sister. The farther a neighbour is away from me, the easier it becomes for me to steal from her. If you don't know a person at all and perhaps have never met her, it becomes even easier. That's why it is so easy for people in the Federal Civil Service of Nigeria to steal. They do not know the people they steal from. The theft

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is impersonal. But the Messiah says: Know them or not, love them as yourself. That makes stealing impossible. How is your love life?

Day 219 Defending Your Neighbour's Property

Exodus 23:4-5 *If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.*

The Bible's teaching on your neighbour and her property is really radical. It goes far beyond any set of government laws. It reaches down into our deepest motivations. Today we are talking about defending your neighbour's property, promoting his interest, going out of your way to help her. And not just that of your brother, as in Deuteronomy 22:4, but that of your enemy. You owe that enemy your love and active support.

Today's example concerns your enemy's ox that is lost. You are to return it to the owner. If your enemy's donkey collapses under a heavy load, you are to help it rise. In other words, we are to go out of our way to defend or promote his interest. The Eighth Commandment is not only about taking something from someone. It is about defending her. It is not only about the sin of commission, but also of omission. It is not only about not doing something negative but even more about doing something positive. Your brother, your neighbour, even your enemy – they all have the right to your promoting their welfare. The Eighth says: Don't steal that right from them by not exercising it. Promote your neighbour's welfare.

Day 220 Promoting Your Neighbour's Interest

Deuteronomy 22:4 *If you see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it. Help him get it to its feet.*

We want to think a little further about yesterday's topic of promoting and defending your neighbour's welfare, which is the very opposite of stealing. The

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promotion of your neighbour, both far and near, friend and foe, is not only a matter of individuals. It also concerns groups.

There are groups or structures in society in addition to individuals. One such group or structure is the tribe or ethnic group. One of our problems today is that each ethnic group seeks its own advantage at the expense of the others. Though people disapprove of stealing within their own group, they do not object to taking advantage of another tribe. If you want to help Nigeria grow, you have to promote the welfare of all neighbours and citizens in a fair and equal way, paying special attention to the weaker ones.

Then there are the labour unions and their employers, each promoting their own class interests. The way God has made the world, they would both be better off if they saw each other as members of a team, both working for the same goal and promoting their mutual interests together. Stealing from each other in terms of giving poor pay or doing poor work helps no one. The Eighth Commandment makes good worldly, economic and political sense. Let's work at it and see Nigeria grow.

Day 221 More Blessed To Give

Acts 20:35 ... It is more blessed to give than to receive.

Popular wisdom says it is better to receive than to give. In fact, receiving, getting or taking are the main motives by which many of us live and work. It's the way to success and happiness. That's what life is all about. To argue against that is to go against what most people consider common sense. It would be downright foolish and unrealistic.

Think again. Listen to the words of our Saviour in today's text. If the popular philosophy is in your heart and it is your daily guide, you may have received, gotten or taken enough to look very comfortable to your friends. But what about the state of your heart or spirit? Deep down, how happy are you, how satisfied, how free, how peaceful, content? Come on, an honest answer please.

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Chances are that you feel shriveled up in your spirit. You have no joy and are not really content, despite the mask you wear. Your life style may lead to wealth, but not to contentment or peace. It dries up your spirit and shrivels your heart.

Why so? It is a law of life. It is more blessed to give than to receive, not to talk of stealing. As you give, God nourishes your spirit and enlarges your soul. That's how He made us. Stealing goes against real common sense and against reality. In the end, the thief loses more than his victim.

When will we learn this basic law of life? Have you?

Day 222 The Love Of Money

1 Timothy 6:10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

The past few days we have reflected on some laws of life. There are laws that are embedded in creation. God Himself put them there. A society that goes by these laws will be an orderly, safe, progressive and prosperous society. Doing to others as you want them to do to you. Loving your neighbour as yourself. The blessing of giving instead of taking. In spite of what people call common sense, these are the laws that can turn us into a great people. These are realistic laws. They work. It is beyond my imagination why we as individuals and as a nation continue to ignore these laws to our own hurt. It is simply unbelievable how stupid we human beings are. How unrealistic. Even Christians.

The Apostle Paul has said it plainly. Love of money -- the very opposite of these laws of creation -- is a root of all kinds of evil. Not *the* root, for there are many roots to evil, but it is an important one that has brought many people to grief. Some are in prison, suffering because of robbery. Many more "respectable" thieves cannot sleep at night in their mansions, not even with the comfort of the best mattress their stolen money can buy. They have plunged themselves into grief, fear, shame and pangs of conscience. Well, what else would you expect?

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Day 223 Friday and Sunday Dens of Thieves

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

It's been days ago since this text appeared at the top. We have been meditating on a wide range of subjects, but our main subject is still that of stealing. All the others have been brought in to shed light on that one subject.

If asked where you find the most thieves, you might answer, "Silly question. Prison, of course." Hold it. Don't be quite so quick. If theft is caused by people forgetting, ignoring and trespassing the basic creation laws for human society, then you have to look not only for the place where people gather who have been found guilty by the courts. You have to look where you find the most people who forget, ignore and trespass these laws, whether convicted or not. There is no doubt about it: in Nigeria you will find the largest gatherings of such people in mosques on Fridays and in churches on Sundays. My guess is that between them, churches and mosques weekly absorb 80% of such thieves in Nigeria. These are the people who collectively have destroyed Nigeria by stealing from her people in a thousand ways and who seldom get punished.

Understand me well. I am *not* suggesting that 80% of Christians and Muslims are thieves. God forbid! I *am* suggesting that 80% of our thieves attend church and mosque. Of the other 20%, my guess is that half are practicing thieves, while the other half languish in prison. To which group do you belong?

Day 224 The Clever Thief

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

Some people are clever. This means they are resourceful. That is good. But cleverness can be harmful as in the case of the Hausa word "*wayo*." According to one dictionary, "*wayo*" means pretending not to want a thing so that another leaves it and you get it after all. It means "tricky selfishness."

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There are respectable people who cheat others in clever ways so that the victim does not realize he has been duped. Such people are seldom brought in court or before the church's council of elders. A major clever trick these days is the way rich individuals or corporations dupe people from their land in order to create huge farms or large factories. The owners of the land may use "legal" means such as buying the land from its traditional owners with money and promises of other benefits like employment. Many traditional land owners are not used to looking far into the future. The offer sounds good at the moment and they sell. Later, they often find that employment benefits and other promised goodies are few and that the nairas received disappeared fast. The next generations are deprived of the land forever. At best, they are now labourers on their own inheritance.

Such trickery may not be court material, but it tramples on the long-range interest of the neighbour you are to promote. Such trickery may be clever; it is definitely not godly. Can you think of an example in your village?

Day 225 More Than Enough

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

The other day I visited someone in another state. I thought I found myself in a Bata shoe shop – that's how many shoes I saw lined up in his hallway. I did not count them, but I'm sure he could wear a different pair of shoes every day for at least two months. Now why would anyone need that many shoes?

This true story is only a small example of people hoarding the nation's goods in unbelievable quantities. This is done with clothes, with properties and houses, but especially with money. We all read the stories in our national magazines about huge sums of money acquired in questionable ways and stashed in bank accounts by the millions, if not billions. Often in foreign accounts to keep them out of the reach of Nigeria and to ensure their value. One of the most talked-about stories, true or not, was about one Umaru, until recently living in the UK. Similar stories are whispered about some former Heads of State.

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There is nothing wrong with being rich. If God has given you the ability to become rich in a legitimate way, it is no sin to have millions or even billions. The question then becomes whether you merely hoard it or whether you use it to promote your neighbour's interest by creating employment, making products or providing services that lift up the community.

Hoarding is against God's and the nation's law. It is stealing from God, from hungry people and from a community that needs your resources.

Day 226 Cheating the System

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

We all agree that it is sin to steal from individuals. No argument here. But somehow we've gotten the idea that it is alright to steal from the government or company. In fact, doing so is considered by many to be shrewd and clever. If you don't do it while you have the chance, you are considered downright foolish. You ought to have your head examined. It does not seem to make much difference whether your name is Bitrus, Patrick or Buhari.

I had a surprising experience the other day. I was visiting a friend, a prominent businessman and a strong supporter of the church. There was another visitor as well, someone working for the Bauchi State Government. He, too, professed to be an active Christian. But my co-visitor openly and laughingly boasted about the way he and his colleagues are duping the Government. Being somewhat naïve, I could not believe my ears. So I asked him point blank whether he was stealing from the Government. His immediate and unabashed answer was a proud, "*Da kyau kuwa!*" "I sure do!" If you're a Muslim, I'm sure you can tell similar stories about fellow Muslims.

Where does that notion come from? No embarrassment or shame at all? Amazing! Since when is stealing no longer stealing? Whose good are you promoting? Please fill in the blanks: It is more _____ to

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_____ than to _____, especially when the receiving takes the form of stealing. Got it?

Day 227 Pen or Gun?

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

We agreed yesterday: stealing from an individual is sin. We also agree that armed robbery is sin, I'm sure, even when it is done to a large bank.

But what about pen robbery? You know what that means. It takes many forms and the practice is not limited to Heads of State or Secretaries of Federal ministries. You report expenses more than you spent. Someone smashed his car in an accident. He was advised by friends to pretend his backbone was broken just to claim higher insurance. When he protested, they said, "Ah, everybody does this now." The insurance company expects it. They estimate 75% of insurance claims contain fraud. They simply figure it into their rates. This is large-scale theft, nothing short of it. It is theft by everyone from everyone, for everyone has to pay higher insurance rates. It *is* theft by any definition – pen robbery.

Pen robbery does a lot more damage to our country than armed robbery. A Head of State, a Governor, a Commissioner, with the single stroke of a pen can rob us all of millions or even billions. If we can believe the press, this is the reason our hospitals, schools and roads are in such poor shape. Pen thieves have signed away our money into secret accounts.

I suspect there are a lot more thieves in government offices than in prison. Armed robbers go to prison. Pen thieves sit comfortably in our offices. Are *you* one?

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Day 228 Emperor and Pirate

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

You know what a pirate is, I'm sure. A pirate is a thief who steals and robs at sea. He uses a ship to rob other ships. A few years ago, there was a lot of news about pirates in Nigerian coastal waters that were robbing incoming ships.

Augustine of Hippo was a great African Bishop in North Africa during the fourth century. In one of his books he tells the story mentioned before (Day 170) about Alexander the Great, an Emperor of Macedonia many centuries ago. He had a large navy with which he would attack the ships of other nations. One day his navy brought him a pirate who had been captured. When Alexander was about to sentence this pirate for the robberies he had committed at sea, the pirate answered, "You call me a 'pirate' because I have only one ship. But you, because you have many ships, are called 'Emperor'."

So it is even in modern life. We call those who rob with the gun "thieves" and we rightly sentence them to prison – and sometimes to something worse. But to those who rob us by the stroke of a pen, we give official titles. If not "Emperor," we call them "Head of State," "Secretary," of this or that ministry, "General so and so," "Manager," "Director," "Head of Department," etc. Alexander's pirate was right. The Emperor was as much of a thief as was the prisoner. You can steal a lot more by pen than by gun. What is your title?

Day 229 Who is Guilty?

Isaiah 10:1-2 Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed

Somewhere I read the story of an American judge before whom a man was brought who, out of desperation, had stolen food from a shop. There was something special about this case and it had been well publicized. Hence quite a few prominent community leaders attended the court on that day. The man

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pleaded guilty and offered no excuse, except that he did not know how he would feed his family that evening. According to the law, the judge fined the man N50 for stealing, but then he reached into his pocket and gave the man the money for the fine. Then the judge turned to the audience of prominent people and fined them each several hundred naira. "You," he explained to the startled audience, "have written or supported the laws that created the conditions that have made this man poor and drove him to stealing. You are more guilty than he is."

A radical judge, you might say. And perhaps you don't think a Christian should be radical, for we associate being radical with troublemakers. But it is likely that this judge read from Isaiah 10 that morning. The Bible speaks a lot more against those who create or support conditions making people poor than against petty thieves.

You community leader, could Isaiah's woe be directed against you? Think carefully before you answer, "No."

Day 230 Dare to Be a Daniel

Isaiah 3:14-15 The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: "It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?" declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty.

Let's continue a bit with our line of thought from yesterday. The Eighth Commandment is against stealing. When you take the Bible as a whole, you find it has a lot more to say against the leaders in society who create conditions of poverty, which in turn encourage hungry people to steal, than against people who steal out of desperation and who see no way out. In effect, the Eighth Commandment addresses people in politics, government, civil service and business more than the small thieves.

You will find that the prophets dared speak out openly and plainly against all who create such conditions. Our texts for today and yesterday are only two examples. You will find many such texts in a booklet called *Living in God's World*, published

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by the Institute of Church & Society. Its Hausa version is *Kai da Dukiyarka*. Get these books and see how often Scripture speaks this way. Powerful. Ruthless. Hiding nothing and fearing neither Head of State, Governor nor Bishop.

Over the next few days, look up these passages: Jeremiah 22:15; Ezekiel 22:25-29 and 45:9; Daniel 4:27; Amos 5:11-15, 6:1-7 and 8:4-13; Micah 2:1-4 and 3:1-4.

Dare to be a Daniel! Yes, *you!* That's true religion. Whom are you waiting for?

Day 231 419 and Silence

Proverbs 31:8 Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.

One church recently held a year's end meeting of its members. Members were invited to tell about God's blessings to them during the year now past. It became a series of 419 stories. I was amazed at how many people had been trapped into a 419 event. Some had lost considerable wealth, but at least came out alive. Others managed to escape without losing anything of value. Clearly I was in good company when someone tried to 419 me.

There was also something else that amazed me – or perhaps I should say saddened me. Many of the people involved were well educated professionals. Some strong community leaders. But every story ended with escape. No one tried to do something about it. No one went to the police. I know, we tend to be skeptical about the police, if not downright cynical. We have little hope they will do anything useful.

However, I know of one person who did something about it. When two people tried to trap him, he recognized the situation, played along and then, at the end, reported the matter to a Christian police officer known to be just. The two ended up in a police cell for a few days and suffered considerably. Upon their release,

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one of them came to the person he tried to dupe and thanked him for his action. He had come to his senses and has quit 419.

Our silence only encourages 419.

Day 232 Petrol Smuggling

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

For quite a few years our nation has been engulfed in a “petrol problem.” It appeared the government either could not or did not want to do anything about it. What was the problem?

Let’s summarize some of the alleged reasons we heard about. High government officials and generals were profiting from the situation and, in fact, had created it. This would explain why the government seemed so powerless and unable to correct it. To me, it was the only reason that made sense. Then we were told that NNPC had allowed their facilities to fall into disrepair and this had contributed as well. Others claimed it was the tanker owners and drivers who were responsible for diversion. And then, of course, some blamed the pump owners along with soldiers and police. It was one grand 419 that held the whole nation to ransom – and no one did anything about it. At most, we complained. The thing was so unbelievable, that I could explain it to my foreign friends.

Where were the “Christians” and Muslims in all of this? They were the ones responsible for it all. Including the church, but the church refused to take up the challenge of calling in its members involved in the petrol business.

CAN and JNL, *where were you?* Bishops, pastors and imams, in your silence you were aiding and abetting? And you Christians and Muslims in the petrol business? Stealing from the whole nation!

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Day 233 Workers and Stealing

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

One of Nigeria's greatest needs is to create more jobs. Although the purpose of work is more than making money, people need jobs in order to feed, clothe and shelter their families, not to talk of schooling. We thus ought to cheer and encourage any individual or company who creates new jobs. And when you get a job, you should show your thanks to both God and your employer by doing a good and honest job. In fact, you should do all you can to contribute your quota to the advancement of the company. In so doing, you encourage expansion and the creation of more jobs, while you also make your own more secure.

Unfortunately, every employer can tell you sad tales about how workers cheat them in at least two ways. They work as little as possible and they pilfer or steal from the company. This puts the company in danger not only but also your own job! You, workers, don't you realize how foolish and shortsighted this kind of behavior is? You are working against the interest of your employer, of your neighbour who needs a job and even your own. What will you do tomorrow when your employer has to close his doors? You and your co-workers will be unemployed. You have contributed to making Nigeria worse.

The command "You shall not steal" holds also for this situation. Do your job well. Quit pilfering. Help your employer to do well. The commandment makes sense.

Day 234 Employers Also Steal

James 5:4 Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

Workers are not the only ones who steal. Employers often steal from their workers in many ways. Workers get 419-ed by them. This is often true especially when the employer is an individual with some personal workers like gardener, driver, guard or cook. Workers sometimes get paid very low wages. Imagine a

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guard with a family who works 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, but at the end of the month receiving barely enough to make it! That is nothing short of stealing from the worker and his family.

Another way in which employers rob their workers is in delaying payment for their services for days not only, but sometimes for weeks and months. I have met many workers who quit because they lost hope of ever getting paid. The employer never paid them their due. What would you call this, if not stealing?

Apart from the Eighth Commandment against stealing in general, the Bible speaks strongly against this kind of injustice. There's today's text. There's Leviticus 19:13 – "Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight" and Deuteronomy 24:15 – "Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin."

Not much new under the sun, clearly. Anyone crying against you today?

Day 235 Working Together

1 Corinthians 12:26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

Why should workers and employers steal from each other so often? Such practices further the disintegration of our country and destroy our jobs and companies. They create unemployment, poverty, hunger, sickness and many other painful conditions.

Of course, there are some very common reasons for it. Selfishness. Plain dishonesty and greed. Refusal to look ahead beyond your own little interests as you see them. Ordinary stupidity.

An underlying cause is our adversarial relationships. That means workers think that their interests are against the interests of the employer and vice versa. We are *against* each other. Our unions talk of class struggle, something they picked

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up from collapsed Communist regimes and from our own academics. We struggle against each other instead of working together.

We have not been created to work *against* each other but *with* each other. It is against our basic created nature to relate to each other in such a negative way. Today's text is concerned with the Christian community, but the unity of which it speaks is also the unity we need to promote in worker-boss relations.

Until we recognize that my boss' problems are my problems and vice versa and until we work together, we will continue to steal from each other. If you don't help dry the tears of your boss, you will soon be shedding your own. Boss, the same holds for you.

Day 236 Market Trickery

Proverbs 11:1 The Lord abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are His delight.

In a Hausa booklet I wrote, *Kai da Dukiyarka*, I begin with a story of potato sellers in Plateau State. A woman stopped to buy potatoes, but noticed that they had put cardboard on the bottom of the pans in which they displayed the potatoes in order to make them look like more than they really were. The lady asked the women, "Are you not Christians?" They agreed they were. Then she asked, "Did Jesus teach you to cheat your customers in this way?" With genuine surprise on their faces, they countered, "What does Jesus have to do with selling potatoes?" To them, their religion and their business had no relationship with each other.

Of course, petty potato traders are not the only ones to play such tricks. I sometimes buy food produced by large companies and sold in boxes. The weight of the item is properly indicated on the box, but the box is often much bigger than necessary and is seldom more than two-thirds full. They are not lying outrightly and not disobeying any law. Yet, by having such big boxes, they are encouraging people to think they are buying more than they actually are. It is the cleverness, the *wayo*, we have read about before.

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Today's verse says it plainly: the Lord abhors this kind of trickery. He hates, scorns, loathes it. But He *delights* in true measures. How does He feel about *your* business dealings?

Day 237 Buyers and Sellers: A Team

Proverbs 20:14 "It's no good; it's no good!" says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.

A few days ago we thought about workers and employers stealing from each other. The same is true in the marketplace. Yesterday we looked at sellers cheating the buyers. But the customer also tries to outwit or cheat the seller by squeezing the lowest possible price out of her.

We do this by our system of bargaining. The seller quotes a price far too high, for he expects to end up with perhaps only half of his first price. The buyer knows that and so begins with a very low price, often far too low. I once did this in Egypt and the man became very angry at me. He thought I was cheating him. When I explained I was from Nigeria, he angrily replied that if I want to cheat, I should go back to Nigeria and do my cheating there.

Of course, our bargaining is partially a game we enjoy. It is only partially serious. But beneath it lies a mistrust between buyer and seller, each trying to get the best of the other. A clever buyer finally walks away in the spirit of today's verse. Today he won. But tomorrow he will lose and complain of being cheated.

So, give this practice some thought today. How do you think people who are to support each other should buy from and sell to each other?

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Day 238 Wasteful Living

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

A well-known Christian politician said to me the other day that if I knew the amount of money the government and its civil servants are wasting daily, I would be greatly surprised. The amounts wasted, he said, are simply staggering.

Now wasting is always bad, but when some people in power are wasting scarce resources, while our hospitals and schools are in shambles, then wasting becomes downright stealing, stealing from all the people.

Apart from diverting government funds into private accounts, probably one of the most open and flagrant forms of stealing is the constant government use of some of our most expensive hotels in the country. There are some hotels in Abuja that advertise themselves as if they were heaven on earth. They almost are – but at a very high price. Indeed, thousands of naira a day per person. The government uses these hotels constantly for various conferences and other occasions. During the IBB regime our federal legislators were living in such hotels at government expense. Later, Abacha’s Confab people were there. These were the people who promised you that they would bring prosperity to all. Prosperity indeed. For whom? It appears that the “no money” policy for hospitals and schools has yet to catch up with our hotels, politicians and civil servants.

All this wastage may be “legal” as far as the government is concerned, but is it legal before God?

Day 239 Stealing in Church

Exodus 20:15 You shall not steal.

These meditations would not be complete if we bypass church and mosque. Most of the people who do all this stealing belong to either of the two. That being the case, one can only expect that we find the same practices in our religious organizations. It would be nice if we were to be disappointed in our expectations

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in this case, but unfortunately I know more about church than mosque. Thus this meditation concentrates on church, but I'm sure any Muslim can bring up similar stories about the mosque.

The stories of fraud and theft in church are just too many. You can probably tell a tale or two. It happens at the village as well as at the national level. Sometimes church officials will steal money from the local church, from the people themselves. I have attended launchings for church projects that never even were started. At another time, denominational leaders will divert money sent by foreign donors. One large denomination received several million naira to shore up their rural development programme, but there is every indication that a large part has been skimmed off by leaders. And then you have money the government donates to ecumenical bodies. I know a case where many millions were given, but the leaders tried to steal the interest the bank was paying from the deposit.

What do you think you as a member can do about such theft? Think of *one* action that could be taken and discuss it with your friends.

Day 240 What The Church Should Do (1)

1 Samuel 2:29 ... Why do you honour your sons more than Me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by My people?

This chapter tells how the priests cheated by taking the best of the meat given to be sacrificed. The people were complaining, but the leader, Eli, did nothing except to rebuke the priests weakly. Of course, his sons did not change their ways. Weak rebukes cannot stop lucrative theft. It needs more than that.

If Christians and Muslims are to clean up society, they should practice by cleaning up church and mosque first. They should quit covering up. One congregation was duped by their treasurer. The auditor gave excuses why he could not bring a report. The local pastor said that the general superintendent had instructed him to let it pass, since it was too late. But the people refused to accept this ruling and insisted on a proper report. Because of the people's insistence, there is now a

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serious investigation going on. Such an investigation will make the next treasurer think twice before he does any tricks.

Church leaders should insist on clear reports of money spent. Leaders should insist on such amongst each other so that the members have confidence in them and not accuse them of abuse. *Accountability* is the key. It creates trust, encourages giving and makes a church strong. In the long run, it will mean the pastor will be well taken care of. He will not *need* to cover up or steal.

Day 241 What The Church Should Do (2)

Matthew 18:17 If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

The church easily disciplines poor people who commit adultery or polygamy or who resort to traditional religion. But people who steal are usually left free, provided it is pen robbery and not armed robbery or break-in. I remember one "Christian" who openly boasts about how he and his colleagues cheat the people. He knows that his church will not touch him, especially if he gives generously. Same for Muslims.

Our Lord has taught us in Matthew 18 about dealing with people who wrong others. That procedure should be re-instated. We ignore it only to our own hurt. When someone makes off with church money, the leaders should be the first to initiate this procedure and do so openly. If they do not, then members of the church have the perfect right to embark on this road. They can do so as individuals but also as groups.

Yesterday we saw how a congregation resisted the attempts of church authorities to cover up. They are in the process of winning. It can be done. It must be done. And it will clean up church and mosque.

And then we must in the same way call on those who steal from government and the people. The church needs to discipline them without fear or favour if they refuse to listen. It is the only way to heal Nigeria.

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Day 242 The Spirit Of It All

Matthew 22:40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

If you've been following these meditations daily since January 1, then you are now at September 1. We want to move on to the next commandment, but a closing thought about the Eighth is in order. In addition to a lot of specific issues, you have meditated on some underlying ones, such as the Golden Rule, the Great Commandment and the blessing of giving.

These underlying precepts are really more important than the specific issues about corruption, pen theft, etc. There is no end to the specific issues that could be brought up. We did bring up quite a few to sensitize you to the scope of this Commandment. However, if you stop with those, then you will not have real spiritual resistance against the temptation to steal in any one of these myriad ways.

The Great Commandment of Matthew 22 was not new with Jesus. He was quoting from Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:5. Love God above all and your neighbour as yourself. Today's verse says that these two are the entire law. When that love rules your heart, you no longer need to be told not to steal, for stealing simply becomes impossible. Your love will prevent you from doing it. You will want to build up your neighbour, advance her interest, not take advantage of him. The famous quote from St. Augustine is still valid: Love God and do anything you please.

Please do the True & False questions of Day 207 again. Have your opinions changed at all?

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Day 243 Yes to Truth and Neighbour

Exodus 20:16 You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

From stealing, we move on to false witness. To get a comprehensive view of this Ninth Commandment, let us listen once again to that ancient document, the Heidelberg Catechism. It asks:

What is God's will for us in the Ninth Commandment? It answers:

God's will is that I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander nor join in condemning anyone without a hearing or without just cause. Rather, in court and everywhere else, I should avoid lying and deceit of every kind; these are devices the devil himself uses, and they would call down on me God's intense anger. I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it. And I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbour's good name.

The same trend as with the other commandments. It goes far beyond merely forbidding false witness. The Catechism speaks of loving the truth and advancing my neighbour's reputation. This is not just a negative command against one sin, but against many related sins. Like all the others, behind it stands not a mere "No!" but a big "Yes!" to supporting your neighbour and loving her.

Day 244 Welcome to the Hall of Justice

Exodus 20:16 You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

Welcome into the court room. If you've never watched court proceedings, go sometime. Seeing actual witnesses take the oath and give evidence may help you visualize what the Ninth Commandment is all about in its first meaning. Sometimes you can watch court scenes on TV, but they are usually foreign programmes that may not always reflect our own system.

Justice is a major pillar of any society. Where it is weak, the society itself will be weak. Where it is strong, the society will also be strong and growing. The court is

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a major link in our justice system. That's where justice is supposed to be defended. That's where the innocent are declared guiltless and the guilty punished. It is so important that it functions well, that in democratic societies the court is usually insulated from the other two tiers of government, the legislative and the executive arms. No politician or head of state is supposed to be able to manipulate the court.

Again, to ensure the highest level of truth, every witness is called on to swear before God that she will speak nothing but the truth about her neighbour. She will do this before the face of God, with her hands on the Bible or the Qur'an.

The Ninth Commandment demands that we uphold justice in court. It is a major guarantee of our survival. This Commandment touches a raw nerve in our national life – and perhaps in your own?

Day 245 The Sacred Court

Deuteronomy 5:20 You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

Please refresh your memory about what was said about the oath in Days 122-123. The point for today is that the court and judicial system are so important to any society that we must regard them as nothing less than sacred. The court system is holy. It is the place where truth is established, where society is protected and where your name is defended. So many serious things that are basic to society happen there that everyone involved is under oath to speak the truth.

An oath is often done with your hand on the Bible or the Qur'an. That makes it an explicitly religious act. All human acts have a religious basis, even if there are no clear religious symbols like the Bible or Qur'an. But when these books are involved, then no one can deny the religious nature of the act and institution.

Muslims seem to have a greater awareness that the court and judiciary are religious institutions than most of us Christians. They do not understand it when

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Christians argue that the court should be free from religion. “It should be secular,” some of us say. Neither do I, the writer, understand that argument. Judges, lawyers, witnesses – all are under oath before God. All are expected to have the fear of God in their hearts. Is that not religion?

Let judges, witnesses and lawyers remember: They stand before God. Any place before God is a holy place—which, of course, holds for the entire world!

Day 246 Why False Witness

Proverbs 6:16, 19 There are six things the Lord hates: A false witness

Some give false witness because they have respect for neither truth nor God. They want to betray the innocent or cover up the guilty. They may have received a bribe. Such false witness the Lord hates, we are told in our text. When this kind of language applies to you, you are in terrible danger. Make sure you keep out of such situations.

But there are other cases that are less straight forward. Someone may lie in court because he is afraid. He may have been intimidated by someone who threatened his wife and children. When that happens, it is very difficult to look down upon him. Then you have to ask: what would I have done in this situation? Fear is a powerful motive that cannot always be avoided.

There are other motives between these two extremes. Your brother has committed a crime and you testify falsely just to save your brother. The commandment applies to you. But he may have a family with children in school. Who will care for them when your brother is in prison?

The lie, including false witness, can disguise itself in so many different ways and follow so many twists and turns that it is difficult to make a fast and hard rule. It basically comes down to motive or intention.

Remember: God the Compassionate determines the outcome of the case. It is better to put yourself in His hands and speak the truth.

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Day 247 Eye For Eye

Deuteronomy 19:18-21 ... and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (See also Meditation 259.)

Today's text prescribes the OT punishment for false witness. A false witness is to receive the punishment the person against whom he is testifying would have received if the testimony were true. It is a case of the punishment fitting the crime. If a false witness tries to establish that I am a murderer or a robber, then that false witness will receive the punishment due to a murderer or robber. It is the same punishment prescribed in the famous ancient Near Eastern law system known as the Code of Hammurabi.

An eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. Punishment equal to the crime. That was a great and merciful improvement over what obtained in private arguments where the Lamech rule (Genesis 4:23-24; Meditation 44) prevailed. Instead of excessive revenge, the principle of just restitution became the rule of the court.

False witness cannot go unchallenged or unpunished. It is such a serious matter that it was included in the Ten Commandments along with murder and stealing.

Day 248 Like a Club

Proverbs 25:18 Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbour.

Why does the Word of God so strongly condemn false witness? Why is it listed among the worst of crimes like murder? Frankly, because it *is* a form of murder.

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In I Kings 21:13 we read how “two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, ‘Naboth has cursed both God and the king.’ So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death.” The man was innocent, but, because of false witnesses, he was killed.

Of course, the most famous case of all is that of our Lord who was also falsely accused (Matthew 26:59-66 and 27:1-2) False witnesses gave the priests and the elders the excuse they sought to begin the procedure that led to His death. Indeed, false witness has the same effect as weapons: they all lead to death.

Thus the eye-for-eye principle makes sense. If you accuse someone falsely of a crime that calls for execution, they you will be executed. This should make you more careful.

Some Muslim leaders have expressed disagreement with both this principle and Jesus’ comments on it in Matthew 5:38-39. We will comment on the issue more when we get to Exodus 21:24.

Today, perhaps at work, try to find out how false witness is punished in our courts today and compare that with the OT principle.

Day 249 Two or Three Witnesses

Deuteronomy 19:15 One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

The Lord is very realistic in all His laws. He realizes that a single witness, even when under oath by laying his hand on the Bible, can still easily lie. Man can be so wicked that even invoking the holy Name of God may not always deter him from lying. And so our verse demands that no one can be convicted unless there are at least “two or three witnesses.”

Of course, even having two or three witnesses is no hard guarantee. Just remember the stories of Naboth and of the sentencing of our Lord Himself. Since

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human beings are as wicked as they are, there simply is no guarantee. But at least it will be more difficult for two witnesses to give consistent testimony than it is for one. And for three it is practically impossible to be totally consistent in their stories when exhaustively cross examined in court. They will almost certainly be trapped in inconsistencies. The importance of this rule is underscored by the fact that it is repeated twice in the Thora or Attaurat, the five books of Moses (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6). Jesus accepted it as a standard also in private disputes outside the court (Matthew 18:16).

Find out how the truth is established in Nigerian courts, a slightly different assignment from that of yesterday. Does it meet the OT standard?

Day 250 God's Representative

Deuteronomy 19:17 The two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the Lord before the priests and the judges

The Ninth Commandment deals first of all with the testimony of witnesses in the court, but it also includes judges. When one is appointed judge, he takes an oath and that oath is in effect throughout the duration of his appointment.

A couple of days ago, we insisted that the court is a holy place, for God is there and people call upon His Name there. In our verse we are told that when a witness stands before the priest or judge, he stands "in the presence of the Lord." Deuteronomy 1:17 says that judgment really belongs to God. A human judge must be conscious that he is doing the work that properly belongs to God. He represents God.

Psalms 82:6 puts it even stronger. It says, "You are 'gods;' you are all sons of the Most High." This verse refers to judges. They are given the highest possible title of honour and holiness here. Of course, the Bible rejects the idea of more than one God. Note that the word "gods" is not capitalized as we do when we refer to the one and only God. They are "little gods" in the sense that they represent God the

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Real Judge Himself. Both Muslims and Christian theologians of the Reformed tradition would call a judge God's "vicegerent."

Judges are advised to keep their exalted position in mind when they speak.

Day 251 Brothers and Strangers

Deuteronomy 1:16 And I charged your judges at that time: Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether, the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien.

Judges, we have seen, have highly responsible positions. They represent God Himself. They are expected to be objective and not favour one over another. They must hear fairly, says our text, even if the case is between a member of the judge's own tribe and another tribe or between an Israelite and a foreigner.

If a case comes to court today involving a foreigner, the press will immediately play up the fact that one party is a foreigner. Recently a case involving a Lebanese is being reported in the newspaper. Constantly the headings refer to "Lebanese." That may help sell the newspaper but will fuel anti-foreign sentiment. Many people will automatically decide that the Lebanese is guilty. To the judge it is not to make any difference whether the accused is Lebanese or Nigerian, Israelite or foreigner. He must judge fairly between them regardless of tribe or nationality.

Often a judge has a case between people of different religions. A recent cartoon showed a judge sleepily draped over his desk. The first man gave his name, "Abubakar." The judge was silent. The second man said, "David." Immediately the judge said, "Guilty!"

A judge worthy of his position is no newspaper reporter or cartoonist. He is God's vice gerent or representative. His position is holy. He listens fairly. Christian and Muslim judges, are you listening?

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Day 252 Great and Small

Deuteronomy 1:17 Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man

Tribe, race and religion are among the factors that sometimes keep a judge from hearing fairly. There are other factors as well. What happens when a case is between two unequal parties?

Recently two men invested their money into a partnership. The one used his own money; the other had to borrow. The richer of the two outsmarted the other and took all the profits. The one who borrowed could not repay his creditors. It became a court case. The judge ruled in favour of the poorer man and closed the case. However, the next day the case was opened again and the same judge reversed his ruling.

What do you think happened during that night? You can guess that the richer man paid a visit to the judge during the night and used his influence and money. The poorer man would not even get past the gate.

Power, influence, money. All of these can be good, but when they play a role in a judge's work, they become demonic. According to the media, especially the press, these factors are now playing such a dominant role that people have become cynical about the court system.

Judges, God's representatives, the time has come to show yourself.

Day 253 Delayed ... Denied

Habakkuk 1:4 Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails

Many people no longer see the courts as final bastions of truth or as "the last hope of the common man." Mere *dogon Turanci!* Why? Some reasons have already been mentioned. Another reason is the constant delay and postponement of cases. Witnesses, lawyers and even litigants try to delay things when they

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consider it in their favour. But a judge should resist such attempts and aim at prompt processing of cases. As Chris Adah once humorously wrote:

Today a case is for mention. Next month it is for further mention. Four months later, it is for hearing. Nine months it is for definite hearing, because there was no hearing A year later, it is still for definite hearing. And in the course of all these indefinite hearings, if anything occurs, the case is changed to mention, only later to be altered to hearing, definite hearing until the expiration of four years from the date of the initiation of the case.

Allowing for some exaggerations in Adah's words, we all know of cases that are dragged on and on until they expire. Justice is paralyzed. Justice delayed is justice denied. How many languish in detention, waiting for their cases? And for how long?

The excuses used for such delays are often phony artificial technicalities. Secular courts often emphasize technicalities more than truth, let alone justice. I do not blame Muslims for rejecting them.

Representatives of God?!

Day 254 The Most Learned

Exodus 20:16 You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

God bless lawyers. A lawyer friend of mine insists that lawyers are in general the most learned of all groups in society. Since they themselves insist on that, we have the right to expect the most from them as well. And we also have therefore the right to expect high-level thinking from the Christians and Muslims amongst them about the relationship between their profession and their faith.

Being the most learned, lawyers must know not only that their religion cannot be left out of their practice but also how their religion should guide them. If they do not know any of that, one can hardly accept their claim to be "most learned."

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Today's text is once again the Ninth Commandment itself. No false witness. Like the other actors in court, lawyers also are under oath, professional oath, to defend justice and truth. For them, too, the court is a holy place. They, too, stand before God, whether they stand in court or sit in their office. This means that every word they speak in court or write in their office must be true witness. It also means that the strategies they devise to defend a client must reflect the truth.

Like all God's children, lawyers are to reflect the image of their God of whom it is written, "The Lord loves righteousness and justice (Psalms 33:5). In your legal practice as well as private life. Learned friends, God's ball is in your court.

Day 255 Speak Up

Proverbs 31:8-9 Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Our title is "Speak Up." Lawyers are known for speaking up loudly these days. Our political class is dominated by loud lawyers. And lawyers know how to speak up when their class interests are threatened. A few years ago, in one of our states, lawyers threatened to boycott courts until the government agreed to give its retainers, in addition to existing privileges, generous amounts for car loans, generous retainer allowances "as well as inducement, hazard and bar conference allowances." The report mercifully spares us from knowing the total amount involved. Yes, we all know lawyers know how to speak up for themselves.

Today's title does not refer to that kind of speaking up, though, like everyone else, lawyers have certain rights for which they may legitimately speak up. If there is any verse in the Bible that correctly describes a lawyer's task, I would think it is today's. The speaking up the Bible means here is *not* on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of those who for one reason or another cannot speak up, at least, not effectively. On behalf of those who are too weak before a more powerful accuser. On behalf of the oppressed poor.

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Learned friend, for whom will you speak up today?

Day 256 Defend

Exodus 23:7 Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.

For every case in court, there are a guilty and an innocent party. Usually they are both represented by a lawyer. What are the factors that make for acquittal? Of course, the facts of the case itself often speak loud and clear. That is as it should be. However, a very important factor is the way a lawyer represents his client. It is often his skill, ability and strategy that play as much a role as the facts themselves. Sometimes they speak louder even. And that is how a guilty person can be acquitted and an innocent person convicted.

Our text warns all of us, including lawyers, against such situations. Lawyers, or anyone else, may not be instruments for convicting the innocent and freeing the guilty. This text does not stand alone. Exodus 23:1 warns, "Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness."

Secular legal training has made Christians separate their religious and professional lives. If you've been reading these meditations from the beginning, you should know by now that such secular separation is unbiblical. The Christian religion is all pervasive. As you put on your lawyer's wig, you cannot take off your Christian faith or close your Bible.

The Bible tells us not to acquit the guilty or send the innocent to the gallows. That holds for lawyers too.

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Day 257 Popularity

Exodus 23:2 Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd.

Today's verse speaks explicitly to a witness in court, not about lawyers. A witness is warned not to simply side with the crowd with which he identifies. If the case is between a Christian and a Muslim or between one of his own tribe and that of another, it is easy for a witness to give evidence simply to favour the one from his tribe or religion. That is following the crowd. It is also perverting justice, the thing our God of justice hates. If the person from the other religion or tribe is innocent, then give testimony to that effect. Follow God and His truth, not the crowd.

However, lawyers are often hired by people of the same tribe or religion with the expectation that the lawyer will defend their case even when they are wrong. In such cases it may be difficult for a witness to give true witness, for a lawyer to try to draw out the real truth from his witness and for a judge to give an honest verdict.

Today's text tells you not to follow your crowd, not to follow the opinion of the people with whom you associate the most. You are told to be courageous and not to seek cheap popularity. Remember, whether you are a witness, a lawyer or a judge, you are under oath. You stand before God.

Day 258 Delayed Again

Habakkuk 1:4 Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

We used this text a few days ago in connection with delays in the courts because of judges. If you are a lawyer, you probably enthusiastically agreed with the meditation. Yeah, that's how judges do it. Hold it, brother, not too fast. We're now coming to your territory.

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Some time ago, a newspaper printed a cartoon about a judge granting bail to 136 suspects who had been in custody for a whole nine years. All this time they were awaiting trial. No doubt a number of them were innocent. Others may have been guilty of petty crimes that call for a fine or a few months' detention. Nine full years of useless waiting!

The same Chris Adah wrote in the *Standard* that lawyers also prolong the process by making frivolous applications for long adjournments. Sometimes because they have too many outside interests for making money. I know of one simple case involving a landlord and tenant that is constantly adjourned because of one lawyer. I know another simple case of an accident that has been postponed so many times, the witness can no longer remember the details accurately.

What is good for the goose is good for the gander. What holds for the judge also holds for the lawyer. The law is paralyzed and justice undermined.

Oh, God, make our learned friends conscientious. Amen and Amen!

Day 259 Eye for Eye

Deuteronomy 19:18-21 The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar ... then do to him as he intended to do to his brother Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (See also Meditation 247.)

The punishment for giving false witness was a fair one in the OT. The charge had to be proven by thorough investigation. A mere suspicion was not enough. But once proven to be false, the witness was to receive the punishment that the person accused would have received if convicted. If the crime called for restitution, the liar would have to do that. If death, then he would be executed. It was fair: a punishment befitting the crime. No more; no less. It was a vast improvement over the cruel and excessive revenge Lamech practiced in Genesis 4.

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It was also tough. Words, including witness in court, can be cheap. If there were no serious price attached, it would be easy to accuse anyone of anything. That could lead to execution of the innocent.

Though this rule is not applied today, witnesses, lawyers and judges do well to remember Proverbs 19:9 and Psalms 5:6. The Lord will not let a false witness get away free, not even in a secular court. Even there He is present and He listens. Even there He is in charge. Even there we are to obey Him. There is no area in life divorced from Him.

Day 260 Scope of the Ninth

Psalm 5:9 Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with destruction. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongue they speak deceit.

So far we have concentrated our meditations about the Ninth on our judicial system – on the courts, the witnesses, lawyers and judges. There is good reason for that, for strictly speaking, that's the primary reference of the command – but it is not the only reference. In fact, far from that.

Each commandment zeroes in on the main problem in a given general area of life. It concentrates on the worst problem within that general area. In the realm of truth and falsehood, the worst problem, at least in the days of Moses, was apparently giving false witness in a court.

However, like all the other commandments, the actual scope of this one goes far beyond its primary reference. It covers the notion of truth and falsehood in all other areas as well. It is concerned with business and politics, other areas where truth is sometimes scarce. It is also concerned with private, family and church life. In short, with all areas of life where the question of truth arises. Thus, over the next week or so we will apply the Ninth to other situations in our lives.

In the meantime, listen to our text. It is a general description of mankind. That, unfortunately, is what we are like. It is the human condition. Even inside church and mosque.

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What about inside *you*? Give it some thought today.

Day 261 The Virtuous Business Person

Proverbs 31:26 She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

Many people think that there is little or no relationship between religion and business. The one is seen as spiritual; the other, worldly. You do the one for God; you do the other for yourself. In the one you obey God; in the other you simply do what is best to make a profit. In the one you apply the Bible or, if you're a Muslim, the Qur'an; in the other you just use your common business sense. In the one you give; in the other you take. In the one you show love and mercy; in the other you are motivated only by profit. Taking all these differences into consideration, it would seem that the two take place in different worlds and thus have little to do with each other. Keep religion, spirituality and God out of business. That's the popular conception and common practice.

An acquaintance of mine is a pious Christian who some years ago was born again. He is also a contractor. One day I told him that as a pastor and preacher I need to know more about the practical problems of business people. Could I follow him around for a month? He looked at me with amazement. Follow him around? Have a pastor trailing you, overhearing all your business discussions? He laughed and shook his head. "Why," he said, "you will ruin my business!"

What was the reason for this man's reaction? Think about it today.

Day 262 Yes To Business

Proverbs 31:26 She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

Proverbs 31:10-31 talks about a noble or virtuous wife. The entire passage shows that a major reason this woman is praised is her combination of caring for her

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family, extensive business enterprise, wisdom and fear of the Lord. Usually we run our businesses in harsh and devious ways. When we come home we suddenly become loving and tender as if we are someone different altogether. And wisdom and fear of the Lord? No time for that during business hours.

The virtuous woman is a business woman whose life is of one piece. Whether she is in the kitchen, in the living room or in her office, she is just, loving, wise and fears the Lord in all these dimensions of her life. Both families and businesses run in that spirit can expect the blessings of the Lord, for they are run according to His wisdom.

To that kind of business, the Bible says a strong “Yes!” The Lord loves that kind of business. That kind of business is of as much concern to Him as your church and family life. Nowhere does the Bible talk negatively about this sort of business as if Christians should not be there or as if God is not interested in it.

Business people, your work is very important in the Kingdom of God. Hold your head high! It is your religious service to God. Think about that today as you do your business.

Day 263 The Business of Lying

Exodus 20:16 You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

The Bible, we have seen, is very positive about business and encourages it. But business is also an area where the lie abounds. While business evokes great creativity and imagination, it is also the place where the ego, my own self-interest, often serves as the dominant motive. That’s of course the meaning of the popular phrase, “Business is business.”

As one writer put it,

In commerce our ego and the profit motive are the mainsprings. Competition takes the form of highly developed strategies. Basically everyone tries to outsmart or deceive the other for solely egoistic

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purposes. This predominance of cunning and deceit has placed a curse on our economy and society. Lying on a large scale is now considered the proper business thing to do.

For anyone to bring religion and morality into business is considered downright foolish. It's no way to make money, we're told. You'll be left behind. Lying and cheating is the name of the game.

Let's talk some sense. Are things not bad in Nigeria today? Is it not because everyone cheats and lies? And then you still argue that they are the only methods to success? Think again, brother, think clearly. You are definitely not making any rational sense.

The Lord knew what He was doing with this Commandment. He knew a society based on deceit would run stuck as we have. We are close to despair. So, let's try His idea and see.

Day 264 Advertising – Telling the Truth

Ephesians 4:25 Therefore each of you must speak truthfully to his neighbour.

Advertising is a major industry in modern Nigeria. Turn on your radio or TV. See the huge billboards along our highways. Everywhere advertising. The income from it pays for these media. Without it, we would have only a few government media with only government propaganda to swallow. If the truth is hard to get under present conditions, it would be impossible to get without the support of advertising income. Lack of truth means lack of freedom. So, advertising is important.

It is also important in that it gives us information about products. Without it, we would not know about many products on the market, especially new ones. Many products are useful. It would be a shame if you could use them but did not know about them.

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The media supported by advertising also make it possible to make public announcements about social events, religious events, political events, births, marriages, deaths, etc. All of these are either done by advertisers directly or by media made possible by advertising.

Many of us do not pay much attention to advertising or the industry. We merely consume their products. But you *would* think about them if they were to shut down. Then you would realize how much they mean and contribute to our lives.

So today we thank God for our advertisers. We also thank *them*. If you are one, meditate on our verse today.

Day 265 Advertising Truthfully

Proverbs 19:9 A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will perish.

We saw yesterday that the business of advertising is a helpful one in our lives. It is a profession that, if performed well, contributes much to society. Yes, it is a profession.

Many professionals have the idea that professional concerns and religious affairs must be kept separate. If you try to combine them, you will cause confusion and you are unprofessional. So it is said. *Nawa-o!* It is those who *separate* them who cause the confusion and are therefore unprofessional.

Those who make this separation no longer advertise the truth, which officially is their main function. They begin to use all sorts of tricks to dupe people into buying something. Sometimes they will lie outrightly. More often they use a thousand tricks they have learned during their training. They have become skilled at manipulating people through sharp psychological practices. They will pretend beer brings happiness and women, while a Mercedes brings power and sex. They create jealousy and encourage false ambitions. Sometimes they will even speak the truth, but that truth is so embedded in manipulation and suggestions that it is

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no longer truth. And the people who fall for these tricks, usually find out they have been misled and end up disappointed.

The warning in today's text holds for false advertisers as well as anyone else. There are no professional off-limits to the Bible. Even professional pouring out lies will not go unpunished. So says the Lord.

Day 266 Happiness in Advertising

Proverbs 12:19, 22 Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment. The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful.

Three main points today.

Point 1: Everyone who sells, advertises their wares. Advertising takes place not only in the media or on the packaging of a product. Even small business people may put up a sign. The way they arrange their wares is also to attract people and thus advertising. The more sophisticated a business person is, the more she will use sophisticated ways to attract people. So, everything said so far and what will be said today, holds for practically all business people, not only for professional advertisers.

Point 2: The borderline between true and false advertising is difficult to define. The best way is in terms of motive. If your motive to advertise is to truly help people, your advertising is likely to be truthful. If your main motive is to make a profit anyhow, your advertising will likely become manipulative and thus false. Perhaps only God and you will know.

Point 3: If you want God to delight in you, make sure you keep away from false advertising. His delight will bring you happiness and peace. Without His delight, there will be no happiness or peace for you. You may be searching for His peace, but it does not come. You wonder why. It is likely because you are regularly lying or manipulating. That blocks God's peace from your life.

Throw that block away *today* and blossom in the Lord.

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Day 267 Hail to the Media

James 5:10 Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the Name of the Lord.

We have meditated on the Ninth Commandment in connection with the legal profession, with business and with advertising. For the next few days we turn our attention to the world of news, especially to our newspapers and magazines.

Few people have any faith left in government and politics. We constantly suspect governments and politicians to be lying to us. In that context, our newspapers and magazines are trying to do a heroic job of protecting the people by exposing or threatening to expose such falsehood.

While doing their job of protecting the people, many reporters and editors throughout the world, including Nigeria, get harassed, beaten, imprisoned and even killed. Nigeria remembers Dele Giwa. Even with Christians in charge of media, we have seen magazines closed down and editors placed in detention.

Our verse encourages media people to be courageous and not cave in. They are encouraged to be patient in the face of such harassment and reminded of the OT prophets. They, too, spoke up fearlessly before kings and priests. They, too, were harassed. But they had the blessings of God and His peace in their hearts. That's what happens when you speak or do the truth.

Today, we take our hats or shoes off for our news people and remind them of their high and holy calling of speaking the truth. May God bless them. Thank you.

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Day 268 Sensation or Truth?

Colossians 3:9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices.

Professionals, including media people, often think that the standards of their profession are objective and universal. They are independent of religion and God. Well, let's see.

One expert in media explains that modern news reporting leans heavily on conflict and character, which it has borrowed from the world of drama. Ever since the 1830s when newspapers first came on the market, publishers were driven by the need to sell as many papers as possible. To achieve this they printed highly sensational reports of frightening or humorous tales about murder, rape, drunkenness. They filled their pages by blasting public officials for corruption and bad government. Though some standards of objectivity and fairness were eventually developed, news continues to be organized around juicy conflict and dubious characters. Reporters are often like sharks. When they smell bloody conflict, they all swim around it and report it in most sensational ways. Today reporting practices are still full of tension between the need for objectivity and truth on the one hand and for selling on the other.

In this context, news people who have the fear of God in their hearts, are encouraged by today's verse not to be misled by so-called professional practices. God's call for truth holds for them as well as anyone else. We repeat: Truth does not stop at the professional threshold. Report so that we continue to see God's image of truth in you.

Day 269 Lift Up the People

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

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Today, we, the people of Nigeria, are downcast. All we read in our papers and magazines is either propaganda or negative news. Corruption. Scandals. Oppression. Not to speak of violence and murder, especially at the hands of Boko Haram.

True, a major function of the press is to serve as our watchdog, to expose all these in order to turn things around. But it sometimes seems that the *only* interest of the press has become to push the entire nation into a depression by publishing nothing but propaganda and negative news. It's not only the press. Only yesterday I received a letter from a well educated Muslim friend, a writer and businessman that was full of diatribe about the Nigerian condition. If I as a Bature had written it, Nigerians would have accused me of hating Africa and destroying Nigeria. Well, this friend was not doing either of these. His was a lament about the state of the country he loves. *We do need to be aware of all these negatives in order to overcome them.*

But is there really nothing in our country and in this world but negatives? Is everyone totally corrupt? Does the Spirit of God have no effect whatsoever in Nigeria? Have we been totally abandoned to the claws of Satan? Media people, do you ever ask such questions or do you simply follow the one-sided "professional" demand for sensation? Do you ever ask what the total effect of your industry is on the psyche of the people?

Apostle Paul wrote our verse in prison to a persecuted people who had every reason to be downcast. In the midst of that, he encouraged them to lift up their hearts and minds to the things that are noble, excellent, praiseworthy. Media people, use as much energy looking for elevating news as for negative things. Look for signs of God among us, not only of Satan. Lift up our spirits.

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Day 270 What Is Truth?

John 18:38 “What is truth?” Pilate asked

The real concern of the Ninth Commandment is truth. It is time we ask what truth really is.

You may remember our meditations on the midwives of Exodus 1 in Meditations 70-71. We talked about white lies. Were they really lies or did they speak the truth? We have referred to advertising that can *say* the truth, but say it in such a way that it is distorted and thus becomes a lie. The last few days we have mentioned how the negatives in our lives receive so much one-sided attention in the press that its total impact is at best only a partial truth, even though these negatives are very real. So Pilate’s question is valid for us as well.

Truth and falsehood are not a matter of words alone. They also have to do with our relationships to God and our neighbours. If truth is only a matter of words, then the midwives lied. But they wanted to save the children and they feared God. In that context the “lies” they spoke were not really lies. They were the truth. They brought life and glorified God. They prevented evil and death.

Truth and lies therefore also depend on motives. You can use “truth” to destroy people. Such is not truth: it is falsehood, even though the words are true to fact. Jesus said He is the truth. Anything you say or do in His name is truth as in the case of the midwives.

Pilate, there’s your answer.

Day 271 Truth and Voters

Exodus 20:16 You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

For many years Christians in Nigeria have avoided politics. They inherited an interpretation of the Gospel that discouraged political involvement. Many thought that when you enter politics, you have left the Christian faith and you

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have entered an area where at best God has no interest and, at worst, Satan is in control. In other words, the lie has the upper hand.

A combination of the Bible and circumstances made Christians realize that their voice must be heard. So, during the last few elections many Christians were voted into office at all levels. Was that not a wonderful victory?

Well, perhaps. Experience has now taught us that it is not a matter of just having Christians in politics. They must be a certain kind of Christian. They must be courageous and dare to speak the truth. They must be devoted and not simply go for the money. And that's where the problems have been. Not all Christians in politics have stood for the truth. Some say that the legislators dismissed with the Abacha coup some years ago deserved to be sacked, but I have heard no one say this holds for Muslims only!

We have learned that truth is very scarce in politics. It is partly so because we voters vote for money rather than truth. So, what can you expect? Begin looking at yourself, not at the politicians. A better Nigeria starts with truth – and the truth starts with Christ and *you*!

Day 272 Political Temptation

1 Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Many of us subscribe to the notion that no person can stand up to temptation in the areas of sex, money and power. If you're in politics and such temptations come your way, you're likely to give in. Your colleagues expect you to give in. So does your constituency. And you yourself subscribe to the idea. With all these expectations around you and *within* you, of course you will give in.

Look, my friend, before God this is all nonsense. Your temptations, writes Paul, are ordinary temptations. Yours are no different from those of anyone else.

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Besides, God will provide you a way out. The temptation is not beyond you to bear, provided you are close to Him. So, why do we buy into these false ideas and expectations?

Nigeria will never improve unless we believe the promises of God to give us strength in temptations. Some 80 million Nigerians calling Christ Lord! And we are helpless in the face of constant lies and deceit? When in the name of Christ are we going to lift that blanket of lies that seems to cover all of Nigeria?

Choose people who reject that popular idea. Then bathe them in prayers of truth.

Day 273 Stalin vs Pope

James 3:4-5 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

The story has it that Stalin, a former cruel dictator of the former Soviet Union, once said about the Pope, "How many divisions does he have?" The "divisions" refer to soldiers and armies. Stalin thought the Pope was powerless, because he had no armies.

But, you know, the Soviet Union is no more. Communism, that doctrine of materialism and hate (class struggle), is now restricted to a few countries. But the Pope and the entire Church are still here! That Pope has been credited with having set in motion some of the powerful forces that undermined a regime based on armies. The Church has only the Word, but that Word helped towards the downfall of army power. And so it has been through many centuries. One writer said that the course of world events is governed more by word than by sword.

If the word is that powerful in the politics of the entire world, then it is crucial that *true* words be spoken, not lying words. If Nigeria is to survive, we must turn

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the ship's rudder and speak the truth. No other strategy, no conference, no re-organization, will do the trick. Things have moved beyond that.

Day 274 The King's Advisors

1 Kings 22:8 The king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat: "There is still one man through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad."

Before going to war, King Ahab called his 400 prophets for advice. Should he or should he not go to war? "Yes," they said. But the king knew that these prophets told him what he wanted to hear, not what God was saying. Flattering the king was more profitable than speaking the truth and so the king was surrounded by a large corps of lying men of God, professional religionists. The king knew what they were doing, but he did not sack them, for he liked their flattery, even though he knew their deceit.

But this time, under pressure of his colleague, he called for Micaiah, one prophet who would tell the truth of God. Chapter 22 shows that the other prophets tried to persuade him to give a positive prophecy. When he told the bitter truth, he was slapped by a prophet and put in prison by the very king who asked for the truth! The king rejected both false and true advice. People in power can be trapped in their own foolishness.

Speaking the truth in government can be dangerous. It needs courage. Christians in high government and church leaders, what advice do you give the government? Many of us wonder what kind of prophets you are. Are you speaking God's truth?

Day 275 Foolishness in Royal Robes

1 Kings 22:10 Dressed in their royal robes, the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, were sitting on their thrones ... with all the prophets prophesying before them.

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A son of a chief told me that after he became a Christian, he recognized how his father used his position to oppress the people. Only a couple of days ago, a member of my staff argued passionately that all chiefs should be deposed, for they oppress and help no one, except themselves. He was exaggerating, but not altogether wrong. There are chiefs like that, as well as governors and presidents.

The two kings, dressed in royal robes, sat on their thrones, surrounded by their people. They looked impressive, powerful, authoritative. They also looked like citadels of truth and wisdom. Surely the people could rely on kings surrounded by such splendor! It is a trick used by all authority the world over. The sound of the siren is the most obvious modern expression. Chiefs, emperors, presidents, generals – they all use that trick. And the world over, people fall for it and bow.

But how much foolishness was hidden under those splendid robes. King Ahab could handle neither truth nor lie, so caught up was he in his own power plays. Robes, thrones and splendour are no guarantee of truth. They may impress. They may look beautiful, but often they hide more evil than reveal truth. They often serve to stifle our critical faculties and instead, put us in a mood of admiration. Let's be careful not to be taken in.

Day 276 Truth is Dangerous

1 Kings 22:27 ... Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water

1 Kings 22 is a very tragic but also funny chapter. It brings out the foolishness of powerful people who can handle neither truth nor lie. It is very relevant for us in this century. I hope you have read the whole chapter by now.

Two days ago we talked about Micaiah, the one prophet who dared to speak the truth of God, pleasing or otherwise. We also met the 400 false prophets, who exchanged the truth of God for lies and money. Though Micaiah did the right thing, the story does not hide the fact that it resulted in his getting beat up by his colleagues and imprisoned by the king.

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Sometimes we wonder what Christians advising our rulers are telling them. Are they telling them the truth or are they merely flattering? Or, worse, are they helping them to oppress? If they give godly advice, you can be sure some of their colleagues will oppose them and try to push them aside. And there's no telling what the chief, governor or president will do. So, the godly among them need much courage. Fear will undermine their truth. That's the reason Yohanna Madaki, former governor of the defunct Gongola State and hero of the people, once said he fears nothing except fear itself.

Such Christians need the support of their fellow believers. They need advice and much prayer. Have you prayed for them today?

Day 277 Students and Truth

Exodus 20:16 You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

"32 exam cheats suspended." So reads the caption of a newspaper article some time ago. Of course, we all know that the number 32 is small when it comes to exam cheating. Why do exam results take so long to be published? Why do so many security measures surround exams? A major reason is the generality of cheating against which education institutions have to guard, cheating by students as well as administrators.

Students as a group often pretend to oppose the general climate of oppression and dishonesty in society, especially in government and universities. And so they go on rampages in protesting dishonesty. However, students themselves widely participate in the very culture to which they object, especially in exam cheating.

Students, I love your idealism. I admire your insistence on the truth in others. I weep along with you over how badly our country is degenerating. However, I suggest to you that your protests sound hollow unless you yourself stop participating in the culture of corruption. I also want you to realize that the protests of succeeding generations of students sound hypocritical, when so many of you join that culture of dishonesty as soon as you graduate. A former student

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protest leader in the USA now middle aged, is often ridiculed in the press for having joined the corrupt forces he used to battle. Don't let that disgrace overtake you! Falsehood has brought us to the brink. In the long run Truth gets you further than you may have thought.

Day 278 Clean Your Own House First

Matthew 23:13 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!

If there is any institution from which you are entitled to expect the truth, it is the church. It is the bride of Christ; the apple of God's eye. It represents Christ, who called Himself "the Truth."

But not only is the church the representative of "the Truth," it is also a very human organization. It finds itself in a world that is ruled by God but that is also deeply influenced by evil. At our present stage of Kingdom development, you cannot expect any human organization to be perfect and without sin. That holds for the church as well.

However, the above is no excuse for the church to simply play the games of the world and participate in all of its evil. Though you can expect sin in the church, you should not expect to find a wicked church or wicked church leaders. You should not expect it to be full of corruption and lies.

Unfortunately, sometimes the church gives in. In Jesus' day, religious leaders had become thoroughly corrupt. Jesus publicly chastised them in our verse. Thorough corruption was also the reason for the Reformation. Later, the Western church needed cleansing from the corruption again and the Lord brought about widespread revivals.

That there is corruption in our Nigerian church is well known. Leaders, until you clean it up with the broom of Truth, you have no right to reprimand anyone else. Remember today's verse.

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Day 279 Following the Prophets

James 5:10 Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

We all love to complain about how bad things are, but no one dares to lift a finger to bring improvement or to turn things around. We are all waiting for someone else to do it. Why don't we speak the Truth where it counts? Because we are afraid. And that includes church leaders.

In James 5, Christians are urged to be patient in the face of trials. However, this is not meant to be a patient waiting without doing anything. We are told to follow the example of the prophets.

The prophets? Yes, remember Elijah and Elisha, who would stand before the king and tell them the real truth? And remember Isaiah, Amos and all the others? Though they may have been trembling with fear, they obeyed God by telling the Truth and they often suffered for it. In prison. In wells. In exile. In death.

Every Christian today is meant to be a prophet who speaks the Truth of God, but especially Christian leaders. If they do not dare speak up for fear of consequences, then the church has sunk low indeed. Then the time has come for a revival.

You, pastor! You, evangelist! You, Christian professor, politician, professional, businessman: Listen carefully. Could the Lord be calling you to start a revival of the Truth in your town, parish or denomination?

Don't say "No" too quickly!

Day 280 The Church and Her Liars

Proverbs 31:8-9 Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

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Truth can be defended in different ways. But the typical way of the church through issuing communiqués is not one of them. The “communiqué church” is like a toothless bulldog. It snarls, but gives little or no useful information and does not bite. And after it has been published, the church goes about its normal business, while the liars can rest assured that nothing will be done.

When the church speaks through communiqués, it always talks about “them,” about other people whose evil actions are camouflaged in “*dogon Turanci*.” It tells “those” people, or the government or the civil service that this or that is wrong.

But it is not others who lie, it is the members and leaders of the same church who publish the communiqués. It is *their* members. It is *we*, the church, who do the things we condemn, not some outsiders. Why does the church pretend it is others who do them?

Once we realize that we ourselves, our members and leaders, are the guilty ones, then we have no choice but do something about it. It is not possible that liars and oppressors come to the same communion altar along with their victims. If the church knows a member to be a liar, he should be kept from communion and put under discipline if he does not repent.

Day 281 Proverbs and Aphorisms

Deuteronomy 5:20 You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

The need to tell the truth has penetrated most cultures, even those that have not benefitted directly from the Gospel. Thus various cultures have produced proverbs and sayings called “aphorisms” about the subject. Some of these are not good. For example, the Hausa proverb you see on back of many lorries, “*So Mai Sonka*” (“Love the one who loves you”) is very unbiblical. Why do you think it is unbiblical? But many of them are very good as they come out of the wisdom of the ages, wisdom based on the experience of living in God’s creation.

Today think about the meaning of some aphorisms you will find below. You may find some difficult to understand. Pick one or two that particularly strike you and

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meditate on them through the day. Ask how they might influence your own speech today.

1. He who throws mud loses ground.
2. No one raises his own reputation by lowering others.
3. Nothing ruins the truth like stretching it.
4. Jumping to conclusions can be bad exercise.
5. Kindness – a language the deaf can hear and the blind can see.
6. One thing you can give and still keep is your word.
7. Having a sharp tongue can cut your own throat.
8. Speech is silver; silence is gold.

Day 282 Jesus the Truth

John 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life."

At one level, truth is simply speaking or doing the truth. At a deeper level, as you have already seen, Truth is a relationship. At the very deepest level Christ Jesus Himself *is* the Truth.

The above claim means that you cannot really do or speak the Truth unless you are "in Christ." That's a biblical way of expressing a kind of mystical union in which the believer becomes one with Christ, a union so deep and profound that you are "in Him." You no longer live a life separate from Him. You no longer do things on your own, but God works in and through you, according to Philippians 2:13 – "it is God who [works] in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." *You* will and act, but it is really *He* who wills and acts through you. At that level, lying becomes unthinkable.

Though these meditations have shown many ways in which you have to watch out for falsehood, you are not asked simply not to do this or that evil thing. Instead, you are invited to believe in Christ, to be "in Him." For once you are "in Him," you will be able to free yourself from the bonds of falsehood. It will no longer be you yourself, but He who works through you. And He works only Truth.

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We do not need new constitutions. We need to be “in Him.”

Day 283 Guarding Your Mouth

Psalm 141:3 Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.

Our closing meditation on this commandment is a prayer. Lord, guard my mouth; watch over my lips. It may seem like a copout. If God does not guard my mouth, then it is not my fault if I lie. If He does not seal the door of my lips, then I am not responsible for whatever comes out. It all becomes His fault and His responsibility.

Not quite. We have been created to serve God in all our ways, including speaking only the Truth. *That is the created natural thing for us to do.* That is also what God made us responsible for. *We* make choices and are responsible for our choices.

After our fall into sin, it became basically impossible to speak the Truth, for we were no longer “in Christ.” Yes, we can speak “truth” but not “Truth.” We gave ourselves and our allegiance over to the reign of another power, Satan. Through Christ’s work of salvation, the way to be “in Him” was opened up once again. If you are “in Him,” then He can empower you to speak the Truth, the *real* Truth, for He will ward off all temptations to falsehood.

It is not Him; it is not you. It is a mysterious intertwining of Him and you that enables you. But definitely not you by yourself. So, be “in Him,” believe in Him and He will be in you to keep watch over your lips.

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Day 284 Coveting

Exodus 20:17 You shall not covet your neighbour's house.

It is time to move on to a new subject. We have reached the last of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet..." We will again introduce the subject by quoting from the Heidelberg Catechism. It asks:

What is God's will for us in the 10th commandment.

The answer goes:

That not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any one of God's commandments should ever arise in my heart. Rather, with all my heart I should always hate sin and take pleasure in whatever is right.

This answer emphasizes two thoughts. First, it shows there is a connection between this and all the other commandments. It is a kind of conclusion that has retroactive effect on the nine earlier ones.

Second, it encourages enjoying life. Like all other commands, it is expressed in the negative, but it has in view something very positive. The positive in this case is pleasure. We have seen earlier why these commandments are mostly in the negative. If God had to write down everything He wants us to do, He would have to hand us an unending book of laws. It is much easier to be told of the few things in life that are prohibited. But the actual business of life is a positive one. It is to enjoy life. And that is what this last command is all about.

Day 285 House or Wife?

Exodus 20:17 You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife

Deuteronomy 5:21 You shall not covet your neighbour's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbour's house

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When you compare the two versions of this law, you find a difference. The one starts with the neighbour's house; the other, with his wife. Some people fall over such differences, while others find them of no consequence. A friend of mine, the now late Mr. Suleiman Jakanda of RURCON fame, belonged to the latter group. He explained that it is only people who analyze the Bible with rigid scientific standards, who have to explain the reasons for such differences. We in Africa, he asserts, are not bothered by such questions. If someone tells or writes the same story twice, it is only natural that differences of language crop up or things are told in a different sequence. No big deal.

One writer put it more theologically. If you tie the Holy Spirit, the original author, to scientific preciseness, such differences will puzzle you, he wrote. But if you understand something of the free expression of the Spirit, then you will not insist on exact agreement in the words but on the meaning. The unity of these two statements is found in their identical meaning.

The basic aim is that we are not to covet. Would you say that this is a correct interpretation? Think about it. *Are we not to covet anything? Desire nothing? Really?* Give it some thought today.

Day 286 With or Without the Object

Exodus 20:17 You shall not covet

What difference does it make whether or not this command has an object? Whether it says, "You shall not covet" or "You shall not covet your neighbour's ...? When you think about it, if you remove the object from the command – and we're not just talking grammar now! – you change the meaning altogether.

God does not demand that you do not covet anything at all. We will see in due time that He has in fact made us to covet. It is part of our created nature to covet, to desire things. Abraham Kuyper wrote some 110 years ago that a heart without desire is a dead heart, dull, dried and shriveled up. A heart without desire, he went on, does not pray, for prayer is seeking something from God. We bring all our desires to God, at least the approved desires! From Him come all the good gifts.

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And we do not only desire spiritual blessings from Him, but also material and physical ones to further our life on earth so as to make it reasonably comfortable. Proverbs 30:8 reads, "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread." Even Christ teaches us to pray for our daily bread. When there is a drought, the farmer is fully justified to covet and pray for rain.

So, the commandment does not tell us not to covet at all, but not to covet the wrong thing. What do you covet today? Be honest.

Day 287 The Heart of the Matter

Deuteronomy 5:21 You shall not covet ... anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Some see little need for this command. They say its concern is already covered by the others. Kuyper compares this command to the rudder of a ship that determines its direction. It gives new colour to all the others. He sees it as the spiritual key to the whole Decalogue. The others refer to external acts, to things you do that can be seen by your neighbours. When you have idols, people can see it. When you kill, it can be observed. But no one can see covetousness, for it is an internal attitude in the heart that cannot be seen.

Well, it can be seen once it expresses itself in a deed. But then, according to Kuyper, it becomes a matter of one of the other commandments.

The Tenth, writes John Calvin, covers the same ground as all the others. However, here God emphasizes that these others must not merely be obeyed in a legalistic fashion. Obedience must come from the heart, from the deepest you. Not only may you not steal, but the very thought of it should not be found in your heart. This command goes to the real root of sin, to the place where sin is first born in us. That's where you need to nip it in the bud. The heart rules the hand. The hand will not steal if the heart is not covetous. Neither will you covet a man or woman wrongly.

Day 288 Out of the Heart

Psalms 16:7 ... my [heart] instructs me.

The referee knew it was going to be a tough and close football match. And so he warned all the players that any abusive action or language directed to him would be severely dealt with. Twice he made a judgement that Bitrus, one of the players, thought wrong. Bitrus said nothing in

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either case, but with the second time he gave the referee a dirty look. The referee blew his whistle and sent Bitrus out of the game. Bitrus protested that he had neither done nor said anything. The referee responded, “No, but I could tell from your face what you were thinking.” In the Hausa language we say, “*Labarin zuciya a tambayi fuska.*” That is, if you want to know someone’s heart, read his face. The referee read Bitrus’ anger from his face.

Covetousness is in your heart. It cannot be detected until you give it a chance through some external deed. For this reason, no government will legislate against it and no one can take you to court for being covetous. It was highly unusual for the referee to send Bitrus out of the game for something that was only in his heart. But don’t let that lead you to think of covetousness as a light thing. The government and courts may not judge you, but surely the Lord, who sees your heart, will. In fact, in the Decalogue He has classified it along with murder, stealing and other serious offenses. Struggle against it today.

Day 289 What Is Coveting?

Exodus 20:17 You shall not covet ... anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Not all coveting or desire is wrong. God has created a good and desirable world. That is a major point of Genesis 1-2. Even after the fall, coveting righteousness is commanded in the Bible. Christ teaches us to pray for daily bread. So what is the coveting that is forbidden here? Obviously not all coveting.

Edgar Park in *The Interpreter’s Bible* suggests that forbidden coveting is to indulge in thoughts which tend to lead to the actions forbidden in the earlier commandments. It is “to set one’s heart upon a thing.” The command “prohibits grasping thoughts that lead to grasping deeds.”

Robert Ingram says that “while it expresses an attitude that is dangerous,” the word “does not describe something which of itself is bad.” To “covet” simply means having an inordinate desire for something. It is dangerous because we are so prone to desire the wrong thing. Kuyper writes that all coveting, every form of yearning, and all longing in our hearts that does not conform to either righteousness or the other nine commandments is wrong.

The customers of a busy restaurant constantly blocked the driveway of a neighbour with their cars. So the neighbour put up a sign: “Don’t even think of parking here.” He did not simply forbid parking there, but suggested people should not even think of it. Not to covet means not to entertain any thought that, when turned into action, would be damaging to your neighbour.

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Day 290 Coveting — Road to Destruction

James 1:15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

The act of coveting takes place in the secret recesses of your heart. No one can see it. Therefore, it does not seem like a dangerous act. Does the heading of today not seem like a gross exaggeration? Lead to Death? Come on, lighten up. Don't take things too seriously and don't make such things seem so heavy. It's alright to warn against excessive envy, but it's going too far when you call it "road to destruction" or when James claims it leads to death.

But let's look at it carefully in a practical way. Right now, at the time of writing, Nigeria is suffering from no petrol, no cooking gas, no kerosene. Hospitals are now called morgues. Our primary school classes are conducted sitting on the floor, if not under a mango tree. Our youth are despairing over their future. It is a picture of destruction and of death.

Now what has caused this awful situation? Is it not the collective selfishness of the people in control? As well as the collective selfishness of the ordinary people who will do the same things when they get in power? Is it not the collective selfishness of politicians, soldiers, police, customs, business people, civil servants – all of them, high and low? No, I should not say "all of *them*." I should say, "all of *us*." The power of coveting!

Day 291 Coveting Land

1 Kings 21:2 Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden In exchange I will give you"

Ahab coveted Naboth's land. According to the laws of Moses, he had no right to that land, not even to buy it. But he wanted it so badly that he allowed his wife to set an evil trap for Naboth in which he died. Eventually both king and queen also met ignoble deaths.

You see how coveting led to death of the person coveting (Ahab), his accomplice (Jezebel) and his victim (Naboth). At least three deaths. Clearly yesterday's heading was no exaggeration.

And lest you think this was true only in former times, not in Nigeria, think back to the 1980s. During Shagari's civilian regime, over 300 farmers in Bakalori, in Shagari's own Sokoto State, were killed when they refused to move off their farms for so-called development purposes. Here you cannot blame soldiers, for they were not in power. A case of coveting leading to many deaths in our own day and country, by our own politicians. Some time ago, a newspaper

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published a report about how generals are creating huge farms in former Gongola State by forcing the traditional farmers off their ancestral lands. They may have paid them some compensation, but what will succeeding generations do without their land?

Coveting. God had the welfare of the powerless in mind when He said “No!” to it. The Tenth Commandment is good for us. Beware of coveting. It leads to death.

Day 292 Enticing Advertising

Matthew 18:6 But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Advertising is a very technical matter that requires a high level of professional know-how in today’s increasingly sophisticated Nigeria. Somewhere along the line, Christians in our country have gotten the notion that professional and religious concerns must be kept separate. Thus, most Christians in advertising go about their profession without giving Christ and His commandments any thought. After office hours, they may go to a prayer meeting or other service. That’s when they turn on their religion.

And so it happens that Christians and other advertisers do not blink an eye at enticing the people with all kinds of goodies. In effect, their work is often an attempt at creating a covetous spirit in people. They know that once people covet something, they are likely to take action: they buy. When you see ads on TV of men drinking beer, surrounded by beautiful women and very comfortable surroundings, then someone is trying to create a covetous spirit in you. Often jealousy as well, for most of us cannot afford the beer and all that is advertised along with it.

If you are a Christian, know that even in advertising you are expected to go by the teachings and commandments in the Bible. The Christian religion refuses to be divorced from your profession.

Day 293 Parable of the Fool

Luke 12:20 But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

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Be sure to read the entire parable from which our text is taken. The man in this story was a very foolish man, but also a man typical of some rich people. He was just piling and piling it up. And when the silos became too small, he arranged for bigger ones. He looked at it all with a great sense of pride, satisfaction and security. Now he could relax and enjoy the fruit of his labours.

Alas, in God's eyes he was a mere fool, though he probably was highly respected in his community for his industry and wisdom. "So that's how he wants it?" God said to Himself. "Let me show him." That night the man died. All his hard labour had been in vain. He was not given the time to enjoy the wealth he had gathered.

What had gone wrong? The man coveted. He set his heart on possessions for his happiness. His wealth could have made him happy if he had used it for building the community, but he was just piling it all up uselessly.

There is nothing wrong with wealth, provided it is gained honestly and used for the good of all. A person who merely piles it up uselessly for its own sake displays a coveting heart.

Jesus called him a fool! We have many of them in our country today. Might *you* be one of them?

Day 294 Neither Poverty Nor Riches

Proverbs 30:8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.

I first wanted to eliminate the first part of this verse and reproduce only from "Give me" on. I felt these were two different subjects. On second thought, I realized how closely they are related.

How often does poverty not lead to lying? I know a young Christian who, because he does not know where his next meal will come from, often takes to lying. It sometimes helps him get some food.

But when you watch the rich, it is clear that most of them never seem satisfied. Their wealth is never enough. The more some of them have, the more they covet. Wealth easily becomes an obsession. You want more and more and more Just like a poor man looking for food, once it becomes his obsession, a wealthy man will often lie in a thousand ways to get even more.

Poverty is not usually a good thing. Wealth is not bad, if you know how to use it for the benefit of your community. But when it has turned you into a scrooge, who piles up more and more,

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then the prayer in our text is proper. Then your wealth has become your god – the ultimate in covetousness.

For most people, truth and either wealth or poverty do not travel together. Choose truth and you may be surprised where God will take you.

Day 295 Sexual Coveting

Matthew 5:28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Jesus here deepens the meaning of the Tenth Commandment. You already commit adultery when you only look at a man/woman in a covetous spirit. Note that it is not just any look that is adultery. It is the lustful look.

We human beings are part of the good creation and we are good to look at. Some of us are very beautiful or handsome. As we may appreciate a beautiful flower, so we may enjoy looking at a beautiful woman or handsome man. Christians have been too negative about that. The church should help us appreciate such in a positive way and lose some of her fear.

However, we also must realize that a beautiful woman or handsome man has a powerful sexual effect on most of us that a flower does not have. In our present state of sinfulness, it is a constant struggle to find the right balance in this respect. Western people pretend that women and men can relate to each other without sexual undertones. Islam and Africa both tend to prohibit any meaningful social relations between the sexes. Nigerian Christians should seek a middle way that recognizes both beauty and danger. We must avoid lust, but not be blind to beauty created by God. Did God create sexual tensions between men and women only to tempt you, not to enjoy? That would not be like Him. He did not create traps for us, but beauty to enjoy and praise Him.

Day 296 Pluck it Out!

Matthew 5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

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This verse throws further light on yesterday's. Your eyes are part of God's good gifts to us. We treasure them and protect them. We use them to enjoy God's creation. Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, writes:

"No sacrifice is too great if it enables us to conquer lust which separates us from Christ. Our eyes are less than Him. When they are used as instruments of lust, then they must be sacrificed. The gain of lust is trivial compared with the loss of Christ."

We must take Jesus' interpretation very seriously. Being in touch with God is far more important than momentary sexual pleasure. If we have to make that choice, we better pluck out the offending eye.

However, Jesus is not really encouraging us to disfigure our bodies. Neither is He preventing us from looking at each other and appreciating what God has created. Instead, He is inviting us to cast our eyes on God. If our main interest is God, then our gaze will be pure and we shall see Him, even when we look upon a man/woman.

So, look, at the opposite sex through God and you can enjoy God, your eye and the complementary gender! All three! What a great and wise God we have. Halleluiah!

Day 297 Godly Coveting

Matthew 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Matthew 5:10 -- Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 6:33 – But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

We humans are a coveting race. We always covet something. That's how we were created. That's one of the factors that spurs us on, motivates us. The trouble comes not from coveting, but from coveting what belongs to your neighbour.

You cannot overcome sinful coveting by simply not coveting. You can only overcome it by coveting the right things. That can include physical things like food as in the Lord's Prayer. But the sure way of overcoming it is to covet what God covets, namely righteousness. If you have a passion for righteousness then you will be filled and other needful things will be given as well.

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Why do we continue to ignore the elementary lessons from the Bible? Blessedness comes not from hoarding and oppressing and stealing. It comes from coveting righteousness. We've seen where hoarding, oppression and stealing lead to. Why do we continue to practice them when they lead us into a dark tunnel? Let's try God's recipe for blessedness and covet what He covets.

Isaiah 26:8 is another Biblical example of true coveting: "Lord, walking in the way of Your laws, Your name and renown are the desire of our hearts." That kind of coveting will build Nigeria.

Day 298 Trustworthy and Sweet

Psalm 19:7-10 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than ... pure gold; they are sweeter than honey ... from the comb

We have come to the end of a long road by which we meditated our way through the Decalogue. I hope you have learned much from these short meditations. I trust that you now realize that the law of God and the Christian religion cannot be confined to a small religious corner of your life. The Christian religion is a total way of life. God's law touches every aspect of our lives, including our professional lives. For reasons that cannot be explained here, too much Christian theology and too much preaching have left the impression that Christianity is merely a spiritual religion without guidance for nation building or professional concerns. That is how Muslims have come to understand our religion. I do not blame them. But let it be known from here on that such impressions are false, unbiblical.

The law of God is not an unbearable burden. It is perfect; it revives the soul; it gives joy to the heart and light to the eyes. It is the best guide for Nigeria.

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Day 299 New Testament Yes To the Law

Romans 7:12 So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Today's meditation is a repetition and thus reminder of some issues concerning the law in the NT. There are some Christians who believe that NT Christians don't have to be concerned about the law, for they follow the Spirit. In the Reformed tradition, we do not so take it.

We see Jesus rejecting legalistic observance of the law, but also deepening its meaning and affirming that it holds. Again, we see Paul rejecting the law as a way to obtain salvation, but also calling it good and righteous.

What then is the use of the law of God? Well, it teaches us how sinful we are. It does this when we compare our lives to the law. Negatively, observing it does not bring us salvation. However, it *is* meant as a guide in our lives that is trustworthy, sweet and enlightens us. Through our faith in Christ and in the power of the Spirit of God, we are enabled, empowered to follow that law, however imperfectly at our present stage.

And that law is not some foreign imposition on us that does not really suit either us or the world. The Decalogue and other laws written in the Bible are nothing but what God placed in creation to begin with. Disobeying the law amounts to going against our created nature. It is unnatural. That's why disobedience always leads to trouble for both person and people.

Day 300 Starting All Over

1 John 1:8-9 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If you're at all honest with yourself, you will have recognized yourself in many meditations. You cannot escape the conclusion that you have often disobeyed these commandments. We should not deceive ourselves.

However, that is not the final word. These meditations are not meant primarily to give you a feeling of hopelessness. To the contrary, they have a positive goal. They show you a better way in every sector of your life. They point the way to a healthy Nigeria.

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The good news for today is that no matter how badly you have botched things up, you can start all over again. You can come to the Lord to confess how you have failed and disobeyed. How you have cheated and oppressed. How you have separated your faith in Him from your life. And He will forgive not only, but also purify you from all unrighteousness. That means, He will clean you up and take all that rot out of your life. He will empower you to do works of righteousness and build Nigeria instead of destroying it. You can start all over again. Now, is that not good news?

Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." That's for *you!*

Day 301 Law and Covenant

Exodus 34:27 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel."

Remember the covenant that God first established with Abraham in Genesis 15:18? If you forgot what it was all about, take some time to read it again. That covenant was an arrangement of grace and promise to the people of Israel. God promised to be their God, protect them, give them the land of Canaan, make them a great nation that would become a blessing to all the peoples of the world.

But that covenant was a two-way affair. Not only did God obligate Himself to Israel, but He also obligated them to obey and serve Him. But how do you obey God? Our original ancestors knew how to serve Him naturally. It was inborn with them. They were in tune with both God and His creation. But after the fall, that knowledge slowly faded away. Apparently, Abraham still had some knowledge about it, for he was not provided with any detailed instructions

By the time of Moses, this knowledge had become very vague among Israel. Thus God gave them this Decalogue and called it "the words of the covenant" (Exodus 34:28). How were they to keep their side of the agreement? Primarily by keeping those commandments.

God's covenant promise still holds for you. So does the Decalogue as a major guide for you today – and for Nigeria as a whole.

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Day 302 Enough Is Not Enough

Deuteronomy 5:31 But you stay here with Me so that I may give you all the commands, decrees and laws you are to teach them to follow in the land I am giving them to possess.

Actually, the law of God embedded in creation should have been enough. If sin had not entered, we would not have needed anything else. Unfortunately, sin did come and we did need something to be reminded of what God's law is all about. Under that situation, the Decalogue should have been enough. It is short and very basic, but in our meditations we saw how wide its scope is. It truly does cover all of life.

Nigeria's constitution is backed up by many specific bylaws. Likewise, after He had already given the Decalogue, the Lord decided that there was need for some laws that concretely apply that general document to the specific problems of life. And so you find many specific laws throughout the rest of Exodus through the end of Deuteronomy. We are going to look at some of these bylaws and see how they apply to our situation today.

These bylaws often address situations and problems that no longer exist. So, we need to discover the basic perspective or concern in these laws and see how they affect us today. They are examples of how God's people were to be a light among the Gentiles in those days as well as in our day. That's our programme for the rest of these meditations.

Hope you will enjoy the rest of our journey.

Day 303 High Tech In Religion

Exodus 20:25 If you make an altar of stones for Me, do not built it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. (Deuteronomy 27:5)

We have here a strange kind of command. The normal architecture for altars was to make them from plain earth. They were allowed to make them of stone as well, but only of rough stone that had not been touched by human tools. Using tools on them would defile them.

Now what can this mean? Could it mean that God prefers things as we find them in nature? Does technology defile the world? That can hardly be. In Exodus 31:1-11 God's Spirit enables craftsmen to make beautiful ornaments for the tabernacle, the tent where the people would worship God. Later we find that the highest technology of the day went into the building of the

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temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, there is the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1, of which technology is a major expression.

Such instructions must be understood in terms of the times. Israel was very young and inexperienced in her new religion. She would constantly be tempted to make graven images of God. Their altars were not to bear such images as did the altars of their pagan neighbours (See also Leviticus 26:1). Want to use rock? Fine, but keep it plain. No divine images. It is somewhat similar to the Muslim prohibition of human representations.

In other words, this prohibition is a specific application of the Second Commandment at a time such images tempted Israel much. It is not a rejection of technology.

Day 304 Slavery

Exodus 21:2 If you buy a Hebrew servant

Slavery in the Bible? Does the Bible approve slavery? Does God? All along we have emphasized that the Bible stands for liberation. How then can it condone slavery?

The Bible says a lot about slavery. Major passages are Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 14, Jeremiah 34, Ephesians 6 and Philemon. You may find them interesting, if not shocking, reading.

The Bible is indeed a book of liberation. However, its method is not to advocate violent and bloody revolutions that suddenly destroy old societies and then build new ones from scratch. Where such revolutions have taken place, they have never accomplished what they set out to do. Instead, they have usually ended up replacing one form of oppression with another, often worse.

God's method is not to overthrow but to undermine the old. This undermining is done by the work of His Spirit in the hearts of individuals and entire societies. He begins by tolerating a condition of injustice and then proceeds to hedge it in, soften it and regulate it. Eventually, very slowly, the Spirit creates new thoughts and insights that slowly destroy the injustice.

People no longer accept it. Today, slavery is condemned the world over. That is a tremendous liberation and a radical change from only a few decades ago.

As we look at slavery, we will learn something about social revolution God style.

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Day 305 Slavery = Liberation!

Leviticus 25:39 If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave.

Does our title for today make sense to you? How can you equate slavery with liberation as if they were the same? They are the very opposite to each other. If you are a slave, you have no freedom!

Today's verse helps us understand yesterday's. Yesterday's talks about a Hebrew buying a Hebrew slave. That situation could not really arise. A Hebrew was not to capture or buy another Hebrew and turn him into a slave. However, if a Hebrew became so poor that he had become desperate, he could sell himself to another Hebrew. He would work for him and, in turn, have his needs taken care of. He had become a slave by contract, voluntarily, though forced by circumstances. But he was not free to just walk away from the one to whom he sold himself.

It was a form of social welfare, of caring for the destitute who had no other place to go. In fact, it was a form of liberation from hunger and other wants.

The person was indeed a slave. He had sold his freedom in exchange for other needs like food, clothing and shelter. But he was not to be treated as some treat slaves, like mere properties or things. He was to be treated like a hired worker, as if he were free to leave anytime.

Day 306 Starting Afresh

Exodus 21:2-3 If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him.

In most societies different classes have developed, a few rich and many poor. Economic conditions can be such that people become poorer and poorer and a few people become richer and richer. Eventually, you have a situation where just a few people control all the others through the power of their wealth. It looks as if Nigeria is moving into that direction. Some societies are built on slave labour, where a large number of workers support a lifestyle of leisure and ease on the part of a small group of rich.

The Lord hates oppression and does not want such situations to develop. So, even though the poor were allowed to sell themselves if they were desperate, God ruled that their slavery would

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last no more than six years. In the seventh they would be allowed to go free without paying anything and with all the dependants they came with. In fact, they were to be released with plenty of provisions in hand (Deuteronomy 15:13-14).

The point is that no large class of slaves would develop to serve a few masters. The dynamic of growing exploitation was broken. The vicious cycle of increasing poverty was interrupted. The poor start afresh. What will you do today to reduce Nigeria's cycle of increasing poverty?

Day 307 God's Concession

Exodus 21:4 If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free.

Concession is tolerating something you do not like. Compromise. Sometimes we think of God as putting absolute rules on us that must be adhered to no matter the difficulties they may bring. But our God is a realistic God. He knows how we personally and collectively sometimes get involved in situations where one has to temporarily tolerate conditions no one likes. Jesus said in Matthew 19:8, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning." That was a concession, a compromise with a bad situation that should not have arisen.

By the time God started His covenantal relationship with Israel they were already part of a slavery situation that eventually had to go. In the meantime, while His Spirit was working gradually to undermine the institution, God softened and regulated it to make it less harsh. But He also protected slave owners from untimely total economic disruption of their affairs. Such sudden disruptions would cause more pain for everyone, even the slaves who had entered temporary slavery for their own protection.

Thus a Hebrew slave must be released in the seventh year along with whom he came and with liberal gifts. However, the wife given him by his master and her children would remain. A concession to reality.

Day 308 Voluntary Slavery

Exodus 21:5 But if the servant declares, "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free"

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Imagine, a man wanting to remain a slave. Rejecting his chance for freedom. He had no economic problems that would force him to continue. Yet he chooses lifelong slavery.

The fact that this situation was even thought about may seem strange to us. When we hear the word “slavery,” we think of the ultimate oppression and cruelty. We think of the long lines of chained Black captives driven by Arab slavers across the Sahara. We think of the slaves in the Americas sold and worked like chattels. We cannot imagine anyone choosing slavery.

Slavery in those days was often different and much better. Slaves were included in the covenant (Genesis 17:9ff). Read Genesis 24 and I Samuel 9:6-8 to see what relationships existed between master and slave. The slave even offered his own money to his master. In our verse the slave loves his master. Besides he wants to stay with his family. Finally, he may feel that he will even be better off financially (Deuteronomy 15:16).

However, if he wanted to stay, it had to be made public before the judges and it would be final. No more going back. For life. No one would be able to accuse the master of preventing him his freedom. The pierced ear was the sign.

It was allowed not because slavery is good, but because for some it was better than freedom in a distorted world.

Day 309 Women Slaves

Exodus 21:7 If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as menservants do

A couple of points need to be noted here. When it comes to women in general, wives together with their male and female children were basically treated like properties of the husband and as such they were protected. This was true for free women and children as much as slave women and children.

Secondly, Deuteronomy 15:12 tells us that Hebrew women slaves were to be released in the seventh year as much as men. There was no discrimination in this respect.

Today’s and succeeding verses (:7-11) talk about daughters, not about women slaves in general. A man might sell his daughter, but the buyer could not just treat her anyhow. These verses put some very strict control over her treatment. If she did not please him, the family could buy her back. He may not sell her to a foreigner. He may give her to his son, but then she comes like a daughter. If he marries another woman, she continues to have rights to food, clothing and “marital rights.” If he fails to provide these three, she may leave without paying a kobo.

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Now that is a pretty liberal setup for daughters sold into slavery. Compared to slavery in other situations, cultures and times, this was “progressive” slavery. Good treatment was built into the system. But, of course, it was still slavery. A divine concession to a bad situation. Making the best of it.

Day 310 Premeditated and Other Murder

Exodus 21:12 Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death.

Moving from issues of slavery to crimes attracting capital punishment, with verse 12 on we have a short series of serious crimes, beginning with murder, both premeditated and otherwise. Like other sections, this section is not well systematized according to modern logic. Verses 15 and 17 both deal with parents, while verse 16 deals with kidnapping. Well, that’s just the style used. Not very systematic. As you read on, you will find that various subjects are started, then dropped and later picked up again. There’s no nice, smooth and logical flow to it.

Secondly, most of the laws refer only to men – again, in the style of the day. However, women are assumed to be included in these matters and they would receive similar punishment. That, my dear sisters, happened to be the way things have been done and said over the centuries. However, smile: a new day is dawning for you. Of that I am sure. From here on you will be counted.

The punishment for planned murder is death, which was usually by stoning. In many modern countries people have contempt for the death penalty and regard it as barbaric. However, their “modern” ways have not been able to stem increase in murder. Please re-read our earlier discussions on capital punishment.

The reason for such sharp punishment is that murder is a fundamental attack not only on an individual, but on society in general. It cannot be tolerated. Here God has no room for concessions.

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Day 311 Accidental Killing

Exodus 21:13 However, if he does not do it intentionally, ... he is to flee to a place I will designate.

God is not unreasonable. He knows that in our distorted world things can happen accidentally without anyone's intention. You can kill someone unintentionally. When that happens, there is no call for excessive punishment or revenge.

In such cases, the person who killed someone accidentally is to "flee to a place I (God) will designate." The "place I will designate" refers to so-called "cities of refuge" to which a person who had killed someone unintentionally may flee. As long as he stayed in one of those six cities, no one was allowed to kill him for the unintentional killing. His banishment was to last till the death of the high priest and then he could go free. See Numbers 35:10-15, 22-28; Deuteronomy 4:42-43, 19:2-7 for further details.

Israel was a young nation without wide experience in the matter of justice and social order. So the Lord helped them to develop objective and neutral standards that would eliminate personal revenge, random killing, etc. Our way of dealing with such problems is different, but they must be undergirded by the same objectivity, fairness, mercy and justice.

The perspective given here contains all of these. The provision held for everyone, no exception. The killing being accidental, the method was fair. The provision was merciful: there was an end to it; not for life. And it was just in that there still was a serious punishment for carelessness: exile.

Day 312 No Legal Tricks

Exodus 21:14 But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from My altar and put him to death.

If there is one thing that spoils our legal system, it is legalism. Legalism is exploiting the letter of the law to avoid or even subvert its spirit, its real intention. Many lawyers, when they have a difficult case, try to divert the court by presenting procedural and other obstacles that prevent consideration of the real issue. The police did not follow the right procedure, they may say. Or they find reasons to postpone the case or to declare certain items improper as evidence.

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In the OT God made two provisions for unintentional killing. We read of one yesterday. The other was to go to the altar in either the tabernacle or, later, in the temple, and hold on to its horns. See Deuteronomy 19:11-12; I Kings 1:50-53, 2:28-31.

While the cities of refuge gave long-term safety, holding onto the altar was only for short-term problems. Sometimes people would use these places of refuge even when they had murdered someone intentionally, but God said: "No way."

God does not like legal trickery. Governments often provide for social welfare in order to help the troubled and weak. There are always some who by legalistic means exploit the institutions of mercy for their own selfish aims and thus destroy them. God says "Yes!" to mercy, but a strong "No!" to all attempts to use provisions for mercy for unjust purposes.

Day 313 Attacking Parents

***Exodus 21:15, 17* Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death. Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.**

We read of two evils here that attract the same death penalty – to attack or kill your parents and to curse them. The passage reminds you of the commandment to honour your parents. You will do well to review our meditations on that commandment.

In the Hammurabi Code, the punishment for killing your father is to cut off your hand. In our verse it is death. In Deuteronomy 21:18-21, such a son is to be stoned to death. Why so terribly severe a punishment?

For one thing, my guess is that it was a rather common offence at the time that needed to be contained before it grew out of control. Secondly, respect for parents lies at the bottom of respect for all other authority. In a society where there is no respect for parents, you will find that respect for all authority is waning, including that for government. Such a situation is dangerous for it leads to lawlessness and weakness. Just look at Nigeria today.

Lack of respect is one thing, but when you harm or kill or even curse your parents, then you have reached the uttermost limits. A stop must be put to it. And so, a person having committed such a heinous offence was to be killed.

Remember our meditations on capital punishment. Should or should we not apply it today? Why or why not? This is sort of a mini-test to see whether you remember earlier meditations on a similar topic.

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Day 314 Mama's Status

Deuteronomy 27:16 Cursed is the man who dishonors his father or his mother.

Throughout these meditations you find several that deal with the status of women. At the beginning, you saw that the place of women was equal to that of men. Both were created in God's image. The Cultural Mandate is for both. As you move on, you find hints of their deteriorating status. This we attributed to the effect of sin as in Genesis 3:16.

In yesterday's and today's verses we find insistence on the honour of your mother, exactly as in the Decalogue. If you attack or curse your mother, you die. In the Code of Hammurabi, we read only about the father: "If a son has struck his father, they shall cut off his hand." Nothing about the mother.

The feminist movement is often accused of going to the extreme in their defence of women. The accusation is sometimes correct. No wonder that the movement often causes frictions and divisions in various social groups, including churches and church leaders. But surely, that movement did not arise for nothing. It arose because women in many societies and religions *are* put down in various ways.

We find that the Bible insists on the honour of women. And in the case of today's and yesterday's verses, on the honour of your mother. You attack the honour of mother, you deserve the worst, says the Bible. You have opened yourself up to the worst of attitudes and acts. One can expect anything from you and not be surprised.

Day 315 Kidnapping

Exodus 21:16 Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death.

Some of the laws you read about in Moses' books deal with topics strange to us. For example, Exodus 20:25, where Israel is forbidden to build altars of dressed stones. Unless someone carefully explains such a law to you, it leaves you puzzled.

Kidnapping is not such a strange subject to us. A few years ago, *The Nigeria Standard* even had an editorial on the ninth ritual kidnapping during the year in Jos.

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The reasons for kidnapping differ. In the distant pre-colonial past, northern Muslims would kidnap Middle Belt people to enslave them. In the more recent past, Nigerian people were usually kidnapped for ritual purposes, but currently people are also kidnapped for reasons of money, politics or even religion. In Israel it was often for slavery. Though this verse does not specifically say so, this law was especially to protect fellow Israelis from kidnapping and enslavement (Deuteronomy 24:7).

But for whatever reasons people kidnap others, it is a grave attack on human life and liberty. The editorial in *Standard* described kidnapping (for ritualistic purposes) as “bloody and inhuman.” It also claimed that the purpose was usually connected with money and wealth – not so different thus from slavery.

Now, if in those days kidnapping for slavery called for death, then what about today’s kidnapping for ritual murder? Or for money or politics? Which is worse? But I hear of known kidnapers who freely go about their “business”! Who is responsible for that? Will no one speak up or stop it? The church? The police? The politician? Why such silence and inaction?

Day 316 Quarrelers

Exodus 21:18 If men quarrel and one hits the other ...

Please read :18-19 completely. This passage has to do with taking responsibility for your actions. Two people quarrel. One attacks the other physically with whatever weapon at hand. He hurts the other enough that he needs to stay in bed for some time. If the victim gets up in due time and is able to walk around, even if with a cane (staff), the attacker “will not be held responsible.” That is, he will not be punished.

However, he is responsible for the loss of time the victim suffered while resting as well as medical expenses. During this time, he is not able to work. Perhaps he has to pay someone to do his work for him. At any rate, the attacker is held responsible for the loss of time and related expenses, including medical – “until he is completely healed.”

Time is important. It is important to spend time with each other socially. It is also an important factor in making a living. When you take someone’s time away from his work, that is very serious. You are pushing him into poverty.

We tend to shy away from taking responsibility for our actions, especially when it takes money. We shrug it off by saying, “A yi *hakuri*.” “Have patience.” Though patience or *hakuri* are

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admirable virtues, they should not be abused to escape responsibility for another's financial hardship you have caused.

Responsibility for another's hardship caused by you – that's the name of the game.

Day 317 Striking Your Slave

Exodus 21:20-21 If a man beats his male or female slave

One purpose of these meditations is to help you know how to read or understand the Bible. That's why understanding what it says about slavery is helpful, even though we no longer have slavery.

NOTE: Please remember that these meditations were written some decades ago. Situations have changed since then, especially the increase in traffic in women and children. I challenge you to create an anti-traffic campaign that responds to the concerns in the Bible as expressed in these meditations. That's an assignment. Share yours with others also reading these meditations.

The issue of slavery, along with that of the status of women, helps us understand not only how things were in the past, but also the direction of things the Bible encourages. Passages about slavery and women help us understand how the Spirit of God was working in the hearts of men. How that Spirit, in the context of another time and place, was pushing people forward in the direction of liberation.

Be sure to read all the verses in our text. Note again how the rules in this passage applied equally to men and women. Female slaves were no more to be mistreated than males. If they were mistreated, the punishment of the master was the same as for males. Also, the compensation for loss of eye or tooth was the same for both – freedom.

The slave was the master's property, yes, but not in the way of Arab and Atlantic slavery where slaves were destroyed at will. If a slave was killed, the master was to be punished, though the punishment is not spelled out here.

These rules were radical advances over common practices of the day. If God had gone any farther at that time, they probably could not have been comprehended but disregarded.

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Day 318 Hurting a Pregnant Woman

Exodus 21:22-25 If men ... hit a pregnant woman

The picture is of two fighting men and a pregnant wife trying to rescue her husband (Deuteronomy 25:11). The other man hits the woman and she delivers her baby prematurely. "If there is no serious injury ...," that is, if both the woman and the baby come out of the ordeal in reasonable health, the one who hit her is to pay a fine. The amount of the fine is to be set by the husband together with the court. The court is to be involved to ensure that the husband's demand is adequate, reasonable and fair.

We are living in an age when people easily sue each other for huge sums of money. A big man, for example, may try to sue a newspaper because an article about him he dislikes. It can run into the millions of naira. Or a man may have been sacked from his job and sues his employer for hundreds of thousands of naira. The sums demanded are often ridiculously high. Of course, we are all aware that the demanded sums are highly inflated so that, after the bargaining, there is still something worthwhile left.

However, Christians should not make or encourage outrageous demands for damages, whether as complainant, lawyer or judge. The provision here in our verse is to ensure that compensation be paid. The assailant must be held responsible for his action, an important principle throughout these laws. But it should be no more than fair to the situation, not just plain unveiled revenge. This, too, is a matter of religion.

Day 319 Protecting the Unborn

Exodus 21:23 But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life

There is another important issue here we cannot overlook in our day of widespread abortion – protecting the woman and her baby. The man who hurts the two must pay a fine, if they recover fully. But if there is no recovery for either, if either suffers from permanent disability or even dies, then the assailant must pay for his assault. Life for life, eye for eye, etc.

This perspective is a long way from the blatant and wholesale murder of unborn children that is legally taking place in so-called "civilized countries." It is called abortion. This entire passage stands for protection of the unborn and thus is strictly against the easy abortion practiced in some places. Whereas American hospitals receive government grants for doing abortions, that is, for doing "serious injury," today's passage demands "life for life." An unborn baby is a life that must be protected.

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Apart from a few exceptional circumstances, the Christian church has always condemned abortion. It is only today that some Christians, guided by secularism rather than Scripture, defend easy abortion.

Nigeria takes over many things from the West. May we never accept the West's easy abortion. May we continue to uphold the sanctity of all life, including that of the unborn. If pregnancy results from having sex, then take the appropriate responsibility for it. You have a choice, but it must be made *before* you have sex, not after.

Day 320 The Law of Retaliation

Exodus 21:23-25 But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

Matthew 5:38-39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Our OT passage is the classic statement of the Law of Retaliation. We have discussed this law earlier in this book. You may want to read it again. Not only is it found in other places in the Bible (Leviticus 24:19-20; Deuteronomy 19:21), but it was also a common law in other ancient countries around Israel. Common experiences had led to a widespread acceptance of this law. Today's passage shows that God approved of it also for His people Israel.

The point of it as explained earlier: to resist undue revenge as we find it in Genesis 4:23-24. Punishment is to fit the crime and be in proportion to it.

Moreover, this rule was not meant to serve as guideline for personal revenge. It was meant to serve as guide for the courts. And that is the reason Jesus seems to have canceled it in Matthew 5 with His talk of turning the other cheek. Apparently, the Jews were using it as a personal guide for taking revenge. In personal affairs, the "cheek rule" is to apply, according to our Saviour Himself. He did not cancel it; He merely corrected a misunderstanding.

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Day 321 Taking Responsibility

Exodus 21:28-32 If a bull gores a man or a woman to death

This passage again emphasizes responsibility, this time for your animals. If your animal kills someone, but you were not aware of its dangerous character, you are not held responsible. But the animal is to be stoned. Its carcass becomes unclean and may not be eaten (Numbers 35:33). You lose your animal. So you at least suffer that loss for your carelessness.

If you knew the animal was dangerous but did not pen it up, then you *are* held responsible if it kills someone. Both you and the animal are to be killed. The same applies if a child is killed. However, you may be saved if the relatives of the victim agree to accept a ransom, the amount of which is not stated (Psalms 49:8).

If a slave is killed, the animal owner is to pay for the slave and the animal is to be stoned, for it has killed a human being, even if a slave. Similar provisions are found in the Code of Hammurabi.

What is at stake here is your responsibility for animals. People tend to be careless about their animals and let them roam about freely. Then, when the animal does damage to someone else, the owners do not take responsibility and refuse to pay for the damages.

The Bible is full of the need to take responsibility for your animals. Time for Christians to take this seriously. Pastors, do you preach about this?

Day 322 Responsibility Continued

Exodus 21:33 If a man uncovers a pit or digs one and fails to cover it

I once served as principal of a Leadership Training Centre. Many of the students were married and brought their families, including small children. There were several wells on the campus and they were all uncovered. One of the first things I did was to put covers on all the wells. Would you believe it? The mothers of the small children constantly left the wells open! Then I put a device on the cover which made it almost impossible to leave it open. The mothers then put stakes in the ground and tied the covers so they could not be closed at all. I have never seen such carelessness in my whole life!

Our text does not talk about children falling into an uncovered hole, but about animals. The owner of the uncovered pit is held responsible for anything that happens to the animal. He has to pay the owner for damage or death.

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There are dangerous uncovered holes everywhere. Just look at the sidewalks in downtown Jos. Numerous uncovered holes. If anyone gets hurt, the authorities should be held responsible and perhaps taken to court for negligence. For many months a terrible hole was developing along Lugard Road in Jos. Drivers and pedestrians could easily have gotten killed there. The authorities should have been held accountable for any accident there.

The name of the game is *responsibility* for our sins of omission and commission both. Authorities and owners of holes, wake up to your responsibilities!

Day 323 Bitrus' Roaming Animals

Exodus 21:35-36 If a man's bull injures the bull of another

James lives somewhere in Jos. He has built himself a house there and planted a few bushes. However, his bushes have been uprooted many times by Bitrus' pigs. James has talked to Bitrus to no avail. Other people have talked to him. They have even involved the authorities. But Bitrus refuses to pen his pigs. They continue to do damage to everyone's property.

Bitrus should read today's passage. In fact, I will advise James to bring him a copy of this meditation. Bitrus, are you listening? Read our text carefully. It says that you are responsible for all the damages your pigs cause in your neighbourhood. Your neighbours have the right to demand payment from you. What are you going to do about it?

If you are going to do nothing, I will encourage James to follow the method of Matthew 18:15-17 with you. That could mean that your church will soon bar you from communion. Would you like your pigs to keep you from communion with your Lord? Would you like your pigs to prevent you from full participation in the church of Christ? Wake up, Bitrus!

This matter of responsibility for your animals is also serious for Fulani. I should think that in so far as they are either Christian or Muslim, they should also have a sense of responsibility and not destroy other people's farms. Of course, farmers should not obstruct trails and routes used by Fulani for generations; they must not make life impossible for the herdsman. Responsibility cuts both ways.

Day 324 Restitution

Exodus 22:3 A thief must certainly make restitution

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Remember that we are still dealing with the laws that God told Moses to “set before” the people (Exodus 21:1). All the laws were written in what is called the “Book of the Covenant” (Exodus 24:7). If they obeyed, their nation would be blessed by God Himself. That was His sure promise.

The heading over Exodus 22:1-15 in the NIV is “Protection of Property.” Marxists and their armchair disciples in our universities scoff at the idea of private property. The Bible, however, upholds it as legitimate. And so in this section we read about some ways of protecting your property.

Restitution is an important principle of justice and punishment both. It means that you have to take responsibility for the damage you have inflicted on someone else by paying for all of it. Mashood Abiola calls it “reparation.” It may include an element of punishment by making the restitution more than the actual damage done. Bitrus of yesterday should be made to pay restitution to all the people his pigs did damage to. Those who are careless about their animals throughout chapter 21 owe restitution to their neighbours.

Our verse says everyone must pay restitution. If someone has nothing with which to pay, he is to be sold into slavery. Nothing is said about the rich, probably because at this point there were none among these ex-slaves. But the entire Bible makes it plain that those who have looted our government coffers ought to pay restitution. Why do we not insist on it?

Day 325 Restitution – How Much?

Exodus 22:1 If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.

Yesterday’s verse insists on everyone paying restitution for damages. It does not say how much. That is the issue today. Today’s text gives some examples of restitution for stealing. The examples were ways of stealing that were common in those days. The examples are agricultural, for that was the main occupation of the people. If Moses were living in contemporary Nigeria, he might have included some examples of modern business or of government.

The amount of restitution depended on the extent of the crime. A smaller theft called for less than a larger. An ox was to be repaid by five; a sheep by four.

The amount also depended on the situation. If the thief had not yet slaughtered or sold the animal, he had to pay back only double (:4). Apparently, the one who still had the stolen

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animals in his possession was considered less of a hardened and dangerous thief than one who immediately disposed of it. It is interesting that no prison sentence was given. Only restitution. Christ said that nothing from the OT laws has been withdrawn. So, the law of restitution still stands. Should the people or the church demand restitution from public officers who steal? Why not? How much for those who have stolen not merely one ox but billions of naira? Why don't *you* call for it?

Day 326 Killing a Thief

Exodus 22:2-3 If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; but if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed.

Stealing is always a serious offence. And since it often is accompanied by potential violence, the victim could end up killing the thief. If this happens at night, says our verse, then the man killing the thief is not guilty. The thief came under the cover of darkness. It was not clear whether he came with a deadly weapon with the intent to kill or not. And so the owner of the house defends himself by killing the thief. This is exactly what a friend of mine did a few years ago. No one held him guilty.

Yes, stealing is very serious. However, since life is worth more than property, the Bible does not allow killing anyone breaking in during daylight. At that time it is easier to see whether or not the thief came with intent to kill if necessary. It is better for you to lose some property than for the thief to lose his life. Life is more sacred than property. Hopefully, after a while you will replace your property, but a life cannot be replaced or regained. It is better to give the thief a chance to repent.

Of course, this does not prevent you from defending yourself in other ways. As you do so, remember the relative value of life and property.

Day 327 Rights and Obligations (1)

Exodus 22:5-6 If a man grazes his livestock in a field or vineyard and lets them stray and they graze in another man's field, he must make restitution from the best of his own field or vineyard

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We have here some more illustrations of people like Bitrus (Day 323). The examples are all too common and hardly need any further explanations. When we talk of livestock grazing in someone else's farm, we immediately think of Fulani herdsmen. Many farmers can tell you horror stories about how their crop has been destroyed by wandering Fulani cattle.

Here Christians are in kind of a dilemma. On the one hand, you have the God-given right to demand restitution for the damage done. On the other hand, you also want them to know the Gospel of Christ – at least, if you are a serious Christian. It is not likely that people will listen to your witness if you are demanding restitution from them. Here we must tread wisely and prayerfully. The other part of the dilemma is that the herdsmen also have their historic rights to historic routes that are often blocked by Christian farmers.

We are also accustomed to dry season bush fires that destroy crops or homes because someone has been careless. When this happens between Christians, the guilty party must volunteer to pay. If he refuses, you can follow the route of Matthew 18 as with Bitrus.

Christians should know of their obligations and their rights. They are not written in the Bible for nothing. Above all, realize that these verses are only examples of what pertains to many other situations as well. Think of some other examples and how to solve them.

Day 328 Rights and Obligations (2)

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave us.

Please re-read yesterday's Exodus 22:5-6. I gave that and today's meditations both the heading of "Rights and Obligations." Yesterday we emphasized the OT attitude. That has not been withdrawn – but it has been partially softened.

Your obligation to be responsible has not been softened. NT Christians have that obligation. Carelessness that leads to another's harm is a grave sin.

However, when it comes to your rights for restitution, you have to balance that with mercy and forgiveness. Here you have to remember that Christ forgave you *your* wickedness. You are expected to be like Him in forgiving others.

So, if you are the offended party, then you have the right to demand restitution, but you must not do so harshly. You must take into consideration the economic status of the offender as well as your own. There will be occasions when it is better to forgive, especially if you are the stronger party.

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But if you forgive, the offender must come away with a strong sense of the wrong he did. He must have learned his lesson so that he will never hurt others with his carelessness again. If he has not learned that lesson and he repeats his mistake, the next victim might well insist on full compensation. That might be the only language the offender understands and through which he will change.

It's not simply a matter of yes or no, is it?

Day 329 Modern Grazers

Exodus 22:5 If a man grazes his livestock in a field or vineyard and lets them stray and they graze in another man's field, he must make restitution from the best of his own field or vineyard.

Grazing cattle. If you are a Middle Belt farmer, you know all about this subject, what with the Fulani cattle stomping all over your crops. If you have not obstructed their traditional ancient routes or otherwise prevented them from their traditional grazing grounds, then, according to the Old Testament, they owe you restitution for destroying your crops. That has not changed due to New Testament insights. The issue is really quite simple.

However, you may think that this obligation does not concern you if you live in the city. But there is a modern counterpart – the business grazer. This is the businessman or corporation that grazes where others have planted and sweat.

Business is a necessary part of society. Doing business is part of the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1:26-28. Organizing business into corporations is also legitimate and often encourages business on a wider scale, national and even international. But when business people or corporations find ways to force the people off their land so as to leave the owners and their descendants vulnerable, then they are grazing in someone else's field. In such cases our verse applies. The corporation may have followed legal channels, but not moral. If challenged in court, they may win, since they have followed the law. But before the court of God they would lose, for they have grazed in another's field.

Of course, business can also graze in another's field in other ways. They can find clever ways in which they undercut the established business of another by offering cheaper prices temporarily. Once they are sure of their market, they then increase their price.

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Businessman or woman, are you grazing? Undermining another business? Capitalism may call it competition and promote it as a virtue. But it's not a virtue; it's the opposite of the Bible's demand to promote your neighbour's welfare and well being.

Day 330 Fire!

Exodus 22:6 If a fire breaks out and spreads into thornbushes so that it burns shocks of grain or standing grain or the whole field, the one who started the fire must make restitution.

If you live in the village, you are familiar with bushfires. Sometimes they are lit by accident. Often on purpose, especially during the dry season. But even when they start by accident, investigation will usually show that the "accident" was the result of someone's carelessness.

The so-called "carelessness" that leads to fire can take many forms. Someone threw a burning cigarette away. Someone lit a small fire without making sure that it cannot spread. Someone left a container of kerosene close to the kitchen fire. These are not cases of mere carelessness. These amount to criminal negligence. Even the basic precautions have not been taken.

So, whether a fire is lit on purpose or by "accident," the person causing it is responsible for all the damage, according to our verse. He must make restitution, for he has deprived his neighbour of the fruit of his labour, of his food and living. There is no provision here for refuge as in case of murder. No exceptions provided. For even an "accident" is not really an accident. It is the result of negligence and irresponsibility. For that no excuse will do. And no call for false "hakuri" will do either.

Of course, the frequent market fires in our cities call for the same. Responsibility and restitution – key Christian words even today.

Day 331 The Poor and Restitution

Exodus 22:6 ... he must make restitution.

In the passages we have meditated on, there are many calls for restitution. In some cases four or five times the value of that which is stolen (22:1). Sometimes double (22:4,7,9). Sometimes equal value (22:5,6). In the other books of Moses, we read of restitution for other offenses that call for more limited restitution such as full value plus one-fifth (Leviticus 5:16, 6:5, 22:14, 24:18; Numbers 5:6). Clearly, restitution is an important Biblical concept, basic to a godly life

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and community. It represents fairness and justice and punishes not only crime but also carelessness and negligence. Behind it lies an attitude God always encourages – concern for your neighbour’s welfare.

Poverty is no excuse for carelessness or negligence. When a car owner uses poverty as an excuse for not maintaining his car and causes an accident, you should not merely excuse him. He is endangering lives. If you are richer than him, show mercy, but also make sure that your mercy does not cover up the need for responsibility. Even if you make him do some work for you, he will learn something about responsibility.

Poverty is not an excuse for theft either. If a thief was too poor to pay restitution, he was to serve as a slave. That was both merciful and just. Merciful, because slavery, as we have seen earlier, would put him on the road to economic recovery. So, combine justice with mercy when dealing with a poor thief. But no revenge.

Day 332 A Banker’s Responsibility

Exodus 22:7-8 If a man gives his neighbor silver or goods for safekeeping

The picture is of a primitive banking system. A man entrusts his money to his neighbour for safekeeping. It seems ancient Israel did not have the same legal instruments for such situations as you find in the Code of Hammurabi. In that Code there is provision for witnesses and official contracts.

The point here is that if something happens to the goods in safekeeping, the keeper is responsible. If the money or goods are stolen and the thief is found, he is to repay double. If theft cannot be proven, the matter is settled either in court or in the temple (the translation is not clear) by an oath. If the keeper swears he has not removed the items, the matter is finished.

That procedure was apparently sufficient in those days. People had respect for oaths and curses. They feared the consequences of false oaths. Today such a procedure is not sufficient, for who still fears telling a lie under oath? Words and oaths have become cheap.

In addition, today’s impersonal banking system is badly affected by the general dishonesty that has arisen. Newspapers are full of stories of bank fraud. Only a couple of days ago, a Christian bank manager told me without embarrassment how he and his staff cheat the bank.

Today’s Christian bankers need to emphasize proper accountability and honesty in handling the wealth entrusted to them. A healthy walk with God includes that responsibility.

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Day 333 Seduction of a Virgin

Exodus 22:16 If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife.

Throughout these meditations, I intended not to concentrate or spend much time on issues relating to sex and marriage. The reason for this decision was not that these are not important issues. They are very important. The reason was that many books are available that deal with this subject. Enough is enough. Of course, I did treat the seventh commandment. But since we meet these verses along our pathway, let's look at them briefly.

A much longer discussion on the subject is found in Deuteronomy 22:13-29. Read it, especially :28-29. You will find it interesting reading.

For our purpose, a main concern here is the strong connection between sex and marriage. The Bible strongly opposes loose sexual living. Deuteronomy 22 demands the death penalty for loose sex. However, that is usually sex involving people who are already married. In this passage the concern is not punishment but completing that which has been started. It appears that neither of the two are married. Since they've had sex together, they must follow the rest of normal marriage procedures, including the bride price.

Having sex must be in the context of marriage. That is the proper place for it. Individuals or even entire societies that ignore that tie will be in deep trouble. Societies, families and marriages will fall apart. Not to speak of disease and the chaos of children who have no stable family in which they are to be nourished and trained for contributing to the community. And then the challenges faced by single mothers who often become drags on the economy.

I am editing these meditations almost twenty years after they were first published and now live in Vancouver, Canada. Let me tell you, the broken lives that ignoring our verse creates are all around me. The poverty of single mothers and the diseases and suffering brought about by random sex are constantly given coverage by the media. We in Nigeria know all about the HIV tragedy—also the result of random sex, either directly or indirectly. The provision of today's text makes ultimate sense. It may represent ancient wisdom, but not old-fashioned. Ignoring it does as much damage today as it did then.

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Day 334 Forced Marriage

Exodus 22:17 If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins.

Yesterday's point was that marriage is the proper context for having sex. Any individual or society that ignores that basic fact of life will end up in serious problems, including diseases. We do not need to look far for evidence of this basic fact of life. That's how it was designed at creation. Wholesale ignoring of this connection will bring wholesale problems.

As strong and vital as this connection is, it is not automatic, according to today's verse. That's the normal route. However, there may be reasons that would render a particular marriage troublesome. Perhaps the man is unstable or untrustworthy or lazy or harsh or sick. If such problems exist, then the father may refuse to have her marry the man.

In other words, no forced marriage, not even according to the tough rules in the OT. An unwanted forced marriage usually leads to such unhappiness that it is better to forego it altogether. The wise course is to seek what will be best for all the parties concerned, including the girl, the fellow and the potential child. It is not *only* the parents' embarrassment that should be considered.

But the man must still pay the bride price for virgins. He still must bear responsibility for having deprived her of her virginity. A precious possession has been lost.

Day 335 Sex in the Single Twenties

Exodus 22:16 If a man seduces a virgin ... she shall be his wife.

There is a problem for many single young people who are in the prime of their strength. A young man put it this way: Why did God create us to have the greatest sexual urge in our 20s while most of us are not married? Why did He make things so difficult for us?

I am not sure I have an answer that will satisfy everyone. I would suggest, though, that it is not a problem of creation so much as one of a broken society. There is so much in society that keep young people from marrying at the right time. The quest for education can lead to postponement. Economic conditions may force postponement, especially high bride price. Some want to remain free until later in order to fulfill some ambition. Perhaps build a business. Or travel.

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If you have such sexual tension, you should think seriously about marrying earlier than you may have planned. You cannot have your cake and eat it too. You are better off to solve the tension by marrying and slow down your ambition than constantly to be tempted. Instead of five years, it may take you ten to reach your goal. You will not be the first one to face postponement. Do what is creationally natural at this point: Marry and keep sex within the marriage bond for the sake of a stable society.

Secondly, government and church should co-operate on reducing the bride price. The amount demanded in some states is ridiculously high. Start in your own church!

Day 336 Death to Sorcery

Exodus 22:18 Do not allow a sorceress to live.

Sorcery is something we do not often talk about openly in church. Many of us pretend sorcery does not exist. But deep in our hearts we do believe in its existence not only, but we fear anyone thought to be a sorcerer.

The Bible does not argue that sorcery is real. It assumes so. And it warns against it very strongly. Sorcery is put in a category of things detestable to the Lord along with child sacrifice, divination and witchcraft (Deuteronomy 18:10), adultery and prostitution (Isaiah 57:3).

The prophet Isaiah mocks the people who practice any of these dark and secret arts. "Go ahead and use them," he mocks. "Perhaps you will succeed." But then he compares them to useless stubble that will be burnt by fire. They cannot even save themselves from the fire, he taunts (Isaiah 47:12-14).

Clearly, the Bible thinks of sorcery as useless not only, but also as false. It is identified with the works of darkness that the Pagan peoples around Israel practice. They are works that ought not to be associated with the people of God, the Children of Light.

They are among the evils to be rooted out from Israel by death penalty for all who practiced it. Sorcery was a constant temptation to Israel, since it was so common among the Pagan nations around them. We should not tolerate it as merely something cultural or African. It is not that innocent. God detests it. So should you.

Would or should we still apply the death penalty for its practitioners? I refer you back to the meditations on capital punishment for forming your response to this question.

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Day 337 Sorcerer vs Prophet

Deuteronomy 18:10-11,15 Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.

Through the Prophet Moses, the Lord did not simply forbid the whole gamut of practices associated with sorcery. He put something in its place – prophecy.

What is the problem with sorcery? It means people put their confidence in the words of deceivers. It is seeking to know the future, but not from God. It is seeking for security in the wrong place. It provides at best a false security that will not stand the test of time. It defiles the people in that it puts a wedge between them and God and unites them with Pagans.

So, in Deuteronomy 18, the Lord provides them with an alternative. Instead of listening to a sorcerer, He will give them a prophet and they should listen to him. This prophet will come from among them, not from the Pagan neighbours around them. That is to say, he will be part of the covenant community. He will come from the seed of Abraham.

Moses says, “A prophet like me.” Many prophets arose after Moses, but the major prophet whom God provided was the last one – Jesus Christ, as in Hebrews 1:1-2. He is the one we must listen to when we need a word or counsel.

Next time you are in need of a word, turn to Him, not to a sorcerer. Have you ever seen a pious sorcerer who lives close to Christ? Of course not! You never will.

Day 338 Bestiality

Exodus 22:19 Anyone who has sexual relations with an animal must be put to death.

Can you imagine someone having sex with an animal? It is called bestiality. The term comes from the word “beast.” Bestiality puts you on the same level with a beast. Makes you shudder, doesn't it? I bet you don't know anyone who does such a thing. At least, I hope you don't. In my almost 30 years in Nigeria, I have never heard about anyone having such sex.

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Still it is not unheard of. In my home village, it was whispered of a certain strange person that he practiced bestiality. Recently, I read a report in a Canadian magazine about video tapes that show people having sex with animals. I am happy to report it was against the law.

Apparently, bestiality was common enough among Israel and her neighbours that it warranted this law. It is even repeated several times (Leviticus 18:23-24, 20:15; Deuteronomy 27:21). In Leviticus 18:23 there is even mention of a woman “presenting herself” to an animal for sexual purposes! The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* reports that it “was considered loathsome and abhorrent, partly because of its associations with certain pagan rites and mythology.” Thus it was apparently a part of pagan religious rites!

“That is a perversion,” says Leviticus 18:23. Indeed, perversion of both sex and religion. And to think this is now available on video to tempt those already open to perversion. Let’s keep such perversion out of Nigeria and out of our lives. We don’t need it.

Day 339 No Compartmentalized Christianity

Exodus 22:20 Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the Lord must be destroyed.

There you have it again. Mixing religion with “secular” affairs. We have just meditated on sorcery and bestiality. The next few verses deal with aliens and widows. So why have just one religious verse mixed in with all this secular stuff? Especially moving from bestiality to religion is to move from the ridiculous to the sublime. Why can’t the Bible keep these things apart a little more neatly?

Sorry-o. As I have repeated many times before, the Bible does not compartmentalize religion from so-called “secular” life. It is against the Christian religion to do so. Christians who so compartmentalize have given in to secularism, which is simply another religion. They live by two religions, the Christian and the secular. These two religions oppose each other. People who adhere to both are weak both in their spiritual lives as well as in their witness. They often seek to overcome this weakness and contradiction by screaming and yelling in their religious gatherings. Screaming supposedly covers up the powerlessness in their lives and gives them a fake sense of spiritual power. That, at least, is how I see and understand the situation.

So, we have here an example of the centrality of religion in human life. Your entire life is influenced and, indeed, directed, by the force, ideal or idol to which you sacrifice or dedicate your life. You better know to whom or what you dedicate your life. Let it be the Jehovah God whom we know from the Bible and from nature.

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Day 340 Idols and Wholesale Murder

Psalm 106:36-38 They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons. They shed innocent blood ... and the land was desecrated by their blood.

Only jealousy? Was that the only reason God demanded death for sacrificing to idols? God *is* jealous and expects single-minded service to Himself. He has no tolerance for any other god.

But there is a *reason* for His jealousy. He has made us to serve Him and Him alone. He knows the implications and results of choosing other gods and living by the worldview associated with those gods. He knows the social, economic and political havoc and paralysis worshipping idols can produce.

Sacrificing to gods other than the Lord in that context meant, among other things, sacrificing their children, shedding innocent blood. Throughout the OT Israel was tempted to make such sacrifices. Our text shows it caused at times terrible bloodshed. "The land was desecrated" Blood soaked, apparently. Wholesale murder leading to social dislocation and, as we shall see tomorrow, political chaos.

Sacrificing to idols involved wholesale murder. The call for death penalty should therefore not surprise us. This was a practice that had to be stopped forthwith. The call is repeated many times in the OT (Leviticus 27:29) and also practiced (I Kings 18:40; II Kings 23:20).

We see it clearly in Nigeria. Our sacrifices to and worship of the gods of money and power cause much bloodshed and dislocation. It has brought us to our present national malaise.

Day 341 Idols and Politics

Psalm 106:40-42 Therefore the Lord was angry with His people and abhorred His inheritance. He handed them over to the nations, and their foes ruled over them. Their enemies oppressed them and subjected them to their power.

We're still on sacrificing to idols as in Exodus 22:20. Yesterday we saw the bloodshed and social upheavals devoting your life to an idol can produce in a community. Today we look at political problems caused by it.

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Today's verse is a continuation of yesterday's. The "therefore" with which it begins refers to the child sacrifices Israel made to pagan idols. Therefore, because of their devotion to those false gods, the Lord was angry and handed them over to the nations. Their enemies oppressed them. Israel became a nobody among the nations. They were even taken into exile. Eventually, ten tribes disappeared altogether from the world scene. Political chaos. The result of worshipping false gods.

False ideals, ambitions and goals, when followed by the majority of people, would without fail lead them into problems from which there was no exit. Following those idols led to such false ideals, ambitions and goals in all of life. Those in turn weakened Israel's internal and external politics and led to their demise. Naturally. Inevitably. Automatically. It's almost as if God can just stand by and let it happen.

Following Jehovah God faithfully leads to strength in all of life, including the political. It brings stability. Following idols – well, Nigeria, what do you have to say for yourself? Your mess has its reasons. Idolatry leads to political death.

Day 342 Aliens

Exodus 22:21 Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.

The worship of the idols of Pagan nations led to soaking the ground with the blood of innocent children. In contrast, Israel had a God who liberates from oppression. Our verse talks of the need to protect aliens.

The aliens referred to here were people who had settled in an area but who had no blood ties with the local people. Yet they had lived in a place long enough to be associated with the local people. They could no longer be called "strangers." They may well have been born in the place. Nigerian equivalents would be a Tiv man living long among the Ibo or a Jukun family among the Jarawa. They were like our modern settlers.

In Nigeria, sometimes settlers have taken over control. The situation envisioned in our text is that of a weak minority that needed legal protection. Local people often discriminate against them. They may deprive them of any rights. They may keep them from jobs or out of schools.

God is a merciful God. He reminds His people that they were oppressed aliens at one time. They should remember how God freed them from oppression and then do the same for the

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aliens among them. This reminder is repeated several times (Exodus 23:8; Deut. 10:19) and is thus apparently important to God.

Many Nigerians are “aliens” in their own country, since they live among other ethnic groups. How do you treat them?

Day 343 How to Treat an Alien

Leviticus 24:22 You are to have the same law for the alien and the native-born.

This is not the first time in these meditations we think about aliens and their rights. The issue of tribalism or ethnocentrism is close to the concern for aliens. Many Nigerian aliens in Nigeria complain of discrimination against them. The local state laws do not openly discriminate against them. Yet these aliens feel the force of discrimination, especially in terms of jobs and educational opportunities for their children.

We may pretend to be a modern nation, but the God of Israel was far ahead of many of us in His insistence on having the same law for the alien as for the local. Not only the same law in the book but also the same law in practice. In Deuteronomy 1:16, judges are told to “hear the disputes...and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien.” And then you have Deut. 27:19 – “Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien...” This is clear language that leaves no room for excuses. This strictly forbids thinking in terms of “My brother is always right.” Your brother may be wrong and you had better recognize it when he is.

Being an alien myself, I am reminded of my status whenever traders try to charge me higher prices. This goes against Lev. 19:33, but even more against Deut. 10:19 – “And you are to love those who are aliens.” Which aliens do you love? Why?

Day 344 Role of Alien

Leviticus 18:26 But you must keep My decrees and My laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things.

Aliens have certain rights, according to the Bible, but also obligations. Living in the Middle Belt of Nigeria as I have since 1966, I am only too familiar with the ugly picture of the dominant settler communities who have taken over from the locals. While the Bible calls for the

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acceptance of settlers or aliens, it also provides guidelines for them to follow. The basic guideline is that they follow all the commandments God gave His people. That's what our text says today.

Sometimes local people have exploded with long-developing resentment against settler communities that have taken over local power and despise the locals, their customs, their religions and their rights. These situations often go back to colonial times, when such areas were put under Hausa or Fulani emirs and who then encouraged their own people to come and dominate.

Our verse and others like it (Ex. 12:49; Lev. 16:29; 17:8-9; Num. 15:14, 29) expect the alien settler to recognize the same laws by which the people of God conduct themselves. If he puts himself above them, despises them and tramples on them, he can only expect resentment and discrimination. Worse, if he tries to force his own stamp on the host community, the community may resist him. He is no longer an alien protected by God's laws. He has become an invader.

Not surprising that some locals rise up.

Day 345 Widows

Exodus 22:22 Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.

Exodus 22:21-22 speaks on behalf of the alien, widow and orphan. This is a trio that occurs often in the OT as representative of the most vulnerable groups of people (Deut. 24:17; Zech 7:10; Mal. 3:5). We have dealt with the alien. Let's now turn to the widow.

There is an interesting difference between the way the OT talks of aliens and of widows. The alien is to be protected, but he also has obligations to the community. The OT does not say much about the social obligations of widows, only about their protection. The reason for this difference is, of course, that an alien group can sometimes dominate the locals, but there is no way that a widow or even a group of widows will grow into a threatening social force. Widows are generally a vulnerable group dependent on the goodwill of everyone else.

In our traditional societies widows have generally had a raw deal. Not only have they lost their husbands, but often their children are taken away from them by the in-laws. The in-laws often help themselves to the possessions of the bereaved family. If the in-laws are not Christians, the children of Christian parents can end up in another religion. Many widows can tell you heartbreaking stories.

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Because of their special problems, we will spend some days meditating on God's Word to and about widows. Stay with me.

Day 346 Levirate Marriage

Deuteronomy 25:5-6 If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

I thought you would enjoy reading about what is called "levirate marriage," marriage of a widow to her late husband's brother. Some other nations had similar customs. God's interest here was protection of the widow as well as continuation of the late husband's name. It is possible that your own ethnic tradition knows of some arrangement like this.

We are living under different socio-economic conditions today, while the Holy Spirit has moved us beyond polygamy. The arrangement is thus no longer suitable. But our obligation to protect a widow stands. What would be an appropriate modern Christian alternative? Try to think of something today. Discuss it with your friends.

Day 347 Ladi and her In-laws

Isaiah 10:1-2 Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.

Ladi's husband fell into the wrong company after they moved to the city and became a drunkard. In time he married a second wife and for a while even had a third. Ladi did all she could to keep her five children fed and clothed. Her Christian friends helped her get a job with a Christian organization who cared for her. Her husband eventually died from damaged liver.

Then the real troubles started. Her in-laws in the village wanted her and the children to return to the village. They also wanted to take their possessions. They were not Christian and there was no school in the village. She had a relatively well-paying job in the city.

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What was Ladi to do? Their particular equivalent of levirate marriage would land her in a heap of troubles. No job or income to care for the children. No school for them. Christian upbringing would become difficult. And become someone's second wife?

A true example of how a good ancient custom had become outdated. It now became a vehicle for oppression instead of protection. With the advice and support of friends, Ladi decided to stay in the city with her children and take care of them.

She was successful, though not without difficulties. Did she do the right thing?

Day 348 Social Legislation for Widows

Deuteronomy 24:19 When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. (Read also the next verses.)

Yesterday's verse and story was about laws and customs that were good at one time but have now been overtaken by developments. They have become oppressive. Those who insist on still using such customary laws had their ears pulled by the prophet Isaiah: "Woe to those who make unjust laws ..., making widows their prey." "Woe!" "*Kun shiga uku!*" "*Kaito!*" These are expressions of wrath and punishment.

Today's verse is an example of social legislation on behalf of the poor and weak, including the widow. In essence it was a call to the harvester not to glean every last straw he could from his farm. He was to leave a generous portion for the weak to collect for themselves. It was good legislation by God Himself, but effective only in a farming community, not in the large modern city. Many people have no access to a farm.

The town and city widows' need is for new provisions to protect them on the part of the government, the church and even society at large. In some communities, widows and their supporters are setting up centres to provide them social and economic support. You should support these measures. Perhaps even start one.

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Day 349 Pure Religion

James 1:26-27 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

For most people, good religion is what you do in church or when you have your quiet time. It is easy to deceive yourself and think you are truly religious in the Biblical sense. But religion that God accepts as faultless is to take care of the poor, including widows.

Often people feel that a Christian should not enjoy himself, or “ji dadi.” Not so God. In Deut. 16:10-11 He wants us to give freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you. And rejoice before the LORD your God—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you.

Even the widows have the right to rejoice before God, but you must help them do so by your freewill offerings.

So you desire to be truly religious? You really wish to please God? Then do not first of all go to church or attend the next prayer meeting. Go to the home of a widow.

Some people will not immediately show you they are in difficulty. They will act cheerfully. Some widows may be like that too. However, if you are dealing with a widow, especially one with children, you do not need to ask her whether she has any need. You know she does. Just go ahead and do something for her like paying the school fees for one of her children. That’s pure religion, says God.

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Day 350 Widows, God Hears You

Exodus 22:22-24 Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to Me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

Widows, so far I've been talking *about* you. Today I want to talk *to* you. Read especially :23 over a few times. Does that not encourage you? If you cry to God, He will *certainly* hear you, it says. That's God Himself guaranteeing you that He will hear your cry. How wonderful to have such assurance. Anyone can guarantee anything, but when the crunch comes, they can back away. But this is God Himself promising to hear your cry. I am almost jealous of you. What a guarantee! What a promise!

As for those who do take advantage of you, I would not like to be in their place. It is better to be a widow, I believe, than be one who oppresses widows, for God has the most terrible things in store for him. He makes God angry. God will kill him with the sword. In other words, he will die a violent and painful death. *His* wife will become a widow just like you and *his* children orphans. Deut. 27:19 says, "Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the ... fatherless or the widow."

Be comforted also by Deut. 10:18 – "He (God) defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, giving them food and clothing." That's His promise to you and your children. He defends you and sees you through.

Day 351 A Loan to the Poor

Deuteronomy 15:7-8 If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.

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Our next subject is determined by what should be our next verse, Exodus 22:25. That verse deals with the question of interest you charge on a loan. But there is a prior question: why give a loan to begin with? I have chosen the present passage to get us going on that subject.

Why lend money? Because both Jesus and Moses said that there will always be poor in the land (Deuteronomy 15:11; Matthew 26:11). “Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward the poor and needy in your land.” It is not a question whether or not there are people needing help. There are without question. Always. And when such a person approaches you for help and it is within your means to help, then the Lord wants you to be liberal and generous, not tightfisted or hardhearted.

This command comes from the Lord. That means you have no option but to give the loan when asked. It means the poor have a right to that loan and you do not have the right to refuse it. It is not a matter of doing him a favour or of charity. It is a basic economic and human right of the poor to have access to loans. The Lord Himself says so.

Day 352 A Loan Again

Leviticus 25:35 If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you.

Today’s verse says the same thing as yesterday’s. We are still talking about a loan to a poor man. We discovered that he has a basic God-given right to such a loan. However, not every loan is helpful.

A young man in his 20s, a new convert from Islam, was disowned by his family. I helped him generously for many months, while trying to get him a steady job. However, he began to depend on me to such an extent that he did not have enough motivation to hold on to a job. Upon the advice of friends, I cut off my financial aid to the fellow. It was not the end to mercy, but the end to his right to such help. He wasted it and did not use it to build himself up. It did not help him in the long run.

In such a case, common sense will tell you that he has forfeited his right to financial help. Of course, compassion dictated that I continue to help in other ways that would encourage growth towards responsibility and development on his part.

The point: Yes, the poor have a right to your loan. But be sure the loan will build up, not destroy. The young man is now doing better.

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Day 353 Charging Interest to the Needy

Exodus 22:25 If you lend money to one of My people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.

In a modern capitalistic economy the injunction not to charge interest for a loan sounds very strange. It may well strike you as nonsense. You have worked hard to make some extra money and you are expected to loan it out to some poor fellow without getting a reasonable profit? That's unreasonable, you may think.

You should realize that this is by no means the only verse that forbids charging the needy interest. For example:

Leviticus 25:36-37 – Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit.

Deuteronomy 23:19 – Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest.

Proverbs 28:8 – He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor.

Proverbs 19:17 – He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will reward him for what he has done.

Psalms 15:5 -- ... who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.

Clearly it is a common notion in the Bible, not something isolated. What does this mean for us today?

Day 354 Calling the Rich to Account

Nehemiah 5:7 I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them

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The law forbidding charging interest to the needy was not always obeyed. Please read all of Nehemiah 5:1-13. The rich were charging the poor interest during a famine. It must have been at a high rate, for the people were crying in despair. They had lost their money, their land and even their children to the profiteers.

But there was one just man among the leadership, Nehemiah himself. When he heard the outcry of the poor, he became very angry. But being angry is not enough. Even today many people are angry with the exploitation of almost everyone in Nigeria – but we never get beyond our anger and frustration. We talk about it a great deal in our conversations with friends, but we do nothing about it.

Nehemiah went beyond anger. He took action. As a member of the elite, he called his fellow big men and challenged them not simply to change their way in the future, but even to undo the past. He demanded reparation. They had to return what they had pressed from the poor.

God worked a miracle: The elite agreed! You think this could never happen in Nigeria? Ah, have you forgotten the power of Nehemiah's God? Has His power waned? It *can* happen again! Work at it.

Day 355 The Exploiters Repent

Nehemiah 5:12 “We will give back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.”

It is hard to imagine that in Nigeria the exploiters would voluntarily return all they have pressed out of the poor. But it happened in Nehemiah's day and I see no reason it could not happen in Nigeria.

As I see the exploiting class from the outside, sometimes I feel sorry for them. Some of them act like really pious Christians or Muslims. However, from the beginning of their careers in the armed forces, in banking and business, etc., they have been taught that in those areas rules other than those of religion apply. In these areas you have to work together to advance the interests of all the members of the team. If you do not play the game, you will be worked out of the system and bypassed. So, you feel forced to play the game. As the years roll by you get used to it and your conscience becomes stunted. It no longer bothers you. You're all afraid of each other and don't dare to break the rules. No doubt it was that way in Nehemiah's day.

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But Nehemiah was big enough that he did not fear anyone. We need a few saintly big men and women in Nigeria to call the others together and challenge them as did Nehemiah. Don't tell me we don't even have one righteous retired general or politician or banker.

Day 356 Cancellation of Debts

Deuteronomy 15:1 At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts.

Some time ago, we learnt about the Jubilee. Every 50 years all properties sold were to be returned to their original owners. It was a way of breaking the cycle of oppression that otherwise would get worse and worse.

There was a similar arrangement with respect to debts, but every *seventh* year. Today's verse introduces the subject and the next verses show how it was to be done. During the seventh year the remaining balance of all debts was to be forgotten. No more payment required, at least, not from fellow Israelites.

The purpose of this sabbatical arrangement is easy to see. It was to give an exhausted family a way of starting over again. Otherwise, the family could go into debt deeper and deeper without ever getting on top of things. It was an arrangement of mercy that reflects the mercy of God Himself.

In a pluralistic country like Nigeria with several religions it may be impossible to establish this sabbatical practice on a national or even local level. However, the Christian community could agree to individual Sabbaths. When a loan reaches its seventh year, it would be canceled. Finish, no more payments.

Tell me, why could we Christians not agree on such an arrangement? Spiritually we are much richer than OT Israel. If they could do it, then there is no reason we cannot today. If you have debtors, think about it. If you're a preacher, preach on it.

Day 357 Wicked Arithmetic

Deuteronomy 15:9 Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin.

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The sabbatical cancellation of debts was meant to help the weak. But everything in life can be twisted and distorted. It could theoretically prevent a poor man from getting the help he needs. If someone needed N50,000 only one year before cancellation, it would be “natural” for the person asked to refuse giving it.

God knew that some would think that way. Hence He warns against “this wicked thought.” To a modern businessman or bank, such a thought would be considered “reasonable” and even expected. Well, it may have been expected and it may be reasonable in the capitalist scheme of things. Nevertheless, the Bible dismisses such a thought as “wicked.”

Not everything reasonable is good. Some reasonable acts are wicked, because even our minds are affected by our sinfulness. What seems “natural” or “reasonable” may be so only to the sin-affected mind.

This “reasonable” thought is also described in our verse as showing “ill will to a needy brother.” If he accuses you before God, you will surely be found guilty. So much for our natural reason. Allow the love and Spirit of God to infuse it so that our wicked arithmetic be turned into godly arithmetic.

Day 358 No Pledge From the Poor

Exodus 22:26-27 If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? (See also Deuteronomy 24:17.)

People are not always trustworthy. So the device of pledge was invented. Fine, no problem. The problem arises when you take in pledge from a poor person something that is basic to her life. Our verse used the example of a cloak that is needed to keep warm. If the woman had more cloaks, it would be no problem, but she doesn’t. If you take her only one, she will likely get sick from the cold. In Deuteronomy 24:6 the example is “a pair of millstones.” If you take any of such absolutely necessary items as pledge, return it by evening. That’s another way of saying you should not take it at all.

This is a tough world. People take out loans and fail to repay. It makes good sense to insist on a pledge. But as tough as this world is, God remains merciful and expects the same from you. Whether or not it makes economic sense, He wants you to loan to the poor even when they have nothing to pledge. He wants you to take the risk and demonstrate the same mercy He has shown you.

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Your real religion is demonstrated more in your economic mercy than in your church attendance.

Day 359 The Mother of All Pledges

Proverbs 19:17 He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will reward him for what he has done.

Yesterday we talked about pledges and risks involved in giving out loans to the poor. But you know, those risks are blown out of all proportion. Even when the poor cannot give you anything in pledge, God has given His pledge. That pledge is His Word, His promise. Cloaks and millstones are far less secure than His Word.

God's promise is that He will reward you for your loan. In Psalms 15:5 we are promised that "He who does these things" – like giving loans to the poor without pledge – "will never be shaken." In Deuteronomy 15:10 we are promised "because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to." Cloaks can be burnt and millstones can be stolen or cracked, but the Word of God is sure. It cannot be taken away. There is no condition on earth that can shake it or make it unstable.

So, you have the mother of all pledges: the sure promise of God's Word. That you can count on under all circumstances.

Therefore, if you have the wherewithal, give that poor family the lift they need. Demonstrate God's mercy to them. Agree on some form of repayment, if that seems feasible at all, but don't let that agreement, its certainty or otherwise, become the decisive factor. Practice God's mercy and let His pledge be the decisive factor.

Day 360 No Interest At All?

Deuteronomy 23:20 You may charge a foreigner interest

The second largest religion in the world, Islam, forbids the taking of interest. Is the same true for the way of Christ? Jesus promised us in the Gospel of John that He will send His Spirit who will lead us into His truth. I have referred to that promise before. It means, among other things, that the Christian community can count on the Holy Spirit to lead it on its journey through an uncertain and rapidly changing world. This is the reason that the Church of Christ occasionally changes its mind on certain issues. Interest is one of these.

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During the Middle Ages the church opposed the charging of interest as evil *per se*. The Reformation brought about a change of mind. There are several economic and theological factors behind that change that we cannot go into here. Through these changes the Spirit of God led the church to an acceptance of the device of interest to stimulate business.

Even in the OT the prohibition was not absolute. It is against charging the poor, but not everyone else. For example, they were allowed to charge interest to the stranger, that is, those whose stake in the country was basically commercial. But in the OT even the stranger was to be protected and treated well. So, “yes” to interest, but “no” to interest from the poor. And others only at a level not simply to be determined by market forces. The Bible is pro-business but not just anyhow.

Day 361 What of Banks?

Exodus 22:25 If you lend money to one of My people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.

So far I may have given the impression that all Biblical thinking about loans, pledges, Sabbaths and mercy deals with loans between individuals only. That these laws and prohibitions have nothing to do with banks.

I want to correct that today. Banks are human organizations and the humans in these banks are as much subject to God’s laws as are individuals. Groups of people have to be merciful as well as individuals. The concern for the poor does not stop at the bank door.

Unfortunately, our banks are shaped by a capitalistic system that has been developed largely with purely economic purposes as their goals. That is, economic purposes separated from the Christian religion. They are professional and “technical” institutions. Most Christians have bought into the idea that professional and technical issues have nothing religious or spiritual about them.

Today, I am calling on our bankers to read through these meditations from Day 353 on from the point of view of your bank. How can such divine instructions be embodied in your bank? You need your colleagues to think and pray your way through this challenge. Write me, if you like. But don’t go on as you have. God is the God of banking as well as of bankers. Both individuals and the institutions they establish are subject to His laws, His punishments – and His blessings!

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Day 362 Nigeria's External Debt

Exodus 22:25 If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.

The subject of today is very huge and complicated. Some years ago the debt stood at around N30 billion. That debt was negotiated between Nigerian leaders and foreign banks. According to the Nigerian media, often the money was not used for their official purpose. It is said often by those who know that much of it has ended up in the private accounts of these leaders. But the Nigerian people are now expected to pay for these debts. These debts are part of the reason for our present poverty.

The clamour for relief of these debts is increasing. And Christians the world over are beginning to insist that the Biblical perspectives on loans for the poor in these pages must be applied to these international debts as well. Order our book on the subject from the Institute of Church & Society, Jos.

Again, we insist that these ancient Biblical perspectives are valid and practical. Those who have created these problems and those who have to solve them are all subject to God's laws just like yesterday's bankers. Biblical concepts of justice, mercy, Sabbath and prohibition of interest to the poor must be applied here as well.

Tomorrow we will present an example for discussion that will illustrate all these Biblical concepts with respect to the debt question.

Day 363 Nigeria's Jubilee

Deuteronomy 15:1 At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts.

Nigeria's Jubilee refers to our future freedom from debt. We submit the following considerations:

1. The Sabbath and jubilee principles both demand that we put an end to the oppressive burden of the debt. The present cycle of poverty must be broken and that can only be done by ending that debt burden.
2. The Biblical law against imposing interest charges on a poor people applies to the horrendous interest charges Nigeria pays for these debts. Those who impose those interest charges will be brought to book by God Himself, who has promised to hear our cries of despair.

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3. Justice demands that those who have made away with large sums of these debts do not get away with it.

For those reasons one highly esteemed professor suggested that Nigeria tell her creditors that most of the money is already or still in their banks. Let them find it, take it and leave us alone! We owe them nothing!

In addition to being funny, this is a responsible and radical way of dealing with the debt problem. Justice demands that the secret accounts in which these moneys are hidden be identified and confiscated and the thieves brought to justice in Nigeria.

Christians should pray their way to a solution true to the Bible. Could the above suggestions be the way? Then let's go for it and liberate Nigeria in the name of Christ.

Day 364 Pledges From the Poor

Exodus 22:26 If you take your neighbour's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset.

Our verse forbids taking your neighbour's cloak or gown as a pledge. The verse is not talking about just anyone who takes a loan from you. This is a poor neighbour. A man or woman who is in great need.

In our modern banking system, the poor can hardly get a loan for they have nothing to pledge. That is to say, they can give the bank no pledge or collateral that would guarantee repayment. Therefore banks do not give loans to poor people, only to the rich. Except for People's Bank, banks are out to make a profit, not to help the poor. That's the way it is in our modern day.

It may be the modern way. It is *not* God's way. Not only does God want us to give a loan to a needy person, but He also says that whatever it is we take in pledge, it should be returned by evening. Since he is poor, the little he has, whether clothes or grinding stone, he needs every day. Do not take from him what is necessary to his life. The text could just as well have said that we simply should not take a pledge.

You, Christians in our banks, should seriously think about how your bank can meet God's demand. While the verse talks to all of us as individuals, it certainly also talks to the banks.

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Day 365 God the Compassionate

Exodus 22:27 When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

The crying person in our text is the poor one to whom you were lending money without a pledge.

The text warns you against refusing that person the loan he needs and against taking in pledge from him what he needs simply to live. If you refuse the loan or take that pledge or collateral, that poor man or woman will likely cry out to God. He has tried everyone for help and no one heard him. So now he cries to God.

God is wonderful. He is totally different from most of us. He is not hardhearted. His heart never gets used to the cries of the needy. He never shuts His heart against them, even though He hears them day in and day out.

“I will hear,” He promises, “for I am compassionate.” What a wonderful promise: I will hear. That means He will, for He does not lie. We are almost to the end of these meditations. And thus I want every needy reader to complete his reading with this hope in God the Compassionate.

But if you are rich and have refused the cry of the poor, then do not think that this compassion is for you. It is not. For you He reserves nothing but anger and judgement. Unless, of course, you repent and you still give the loan without the pledge. Bankers, are you listening? And what of the rest of us?

Day 366 No More; No Less

Revelation 22:18-19 I warn everyone: ... If anyone adds anything to (this book), God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book ..., God will take away from him his share in the tree of life

It is fitting that our closing meditation be based on the Bible’s closing chapter.

My attempt has not been to add to or subtract from the Bible and I pray that I may not have done so in any way. My attempt has rather been to add more of the Bible to the lives of Christians – to *your* life. We Christians cheat ourselves by what amounts to taking entire sections and perspectives out of the Bible. We do this by either ignoring them or by restricting

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their application to limited areas of life. Before this round of meditations, how often had you read these Mosaic laws? Even if you did read them, did you take them seriously for your life, for your bank, business, university or civil service position? We may not have torn any pages out of the Bible, but we may just as well have done so. The effect is the same.

My parting words to you are from Deuteronomy 15:4-5: There should be no poor among you He will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.

And all the people of God said, "Amen and Amen!"