

SAFETY AND STABILITY: BEING CONSTANTLY AWARE OF GOD

According to my neurologist, safety should be my number one concern. With my disease I will never be able to walk without an assistive device and it would be foolish of me to try. In the year before I was diagnosed I began to fall, sometimes incurring severe injury. I was so unstable that crossing a street was a frightening experience. I could easily imagine falling in the roadway and being hit by a car. "I wonder if I should use a cane?" I thought. But my doctor, busy trying to locate a cause for my clumsiness, had not suggested a cane. He did prescribe physical therapy to improve my balance. It seemed to be helping – until the day I fell and broke my hip.

That day – February 15, 2003 – was the last I walked without some sort of help. Ironically, I was in a shoe store looking for shoes that would help me walk safely when the accident occurred. I was trying on a pair of sneakers with non-slip soles when my right foot refused to lift. The rest of me kept on going and I fell hard onto the concrete floor. The excruciating pain let me know what had happened. While lying on the floor I practiced resting in God's everlasting arms, which I knew were underneath. A long time ago I had concluded that Bible verses referring to God's not letting our foot slip or his being able to keep us from falling had to do mainly with the spiritual realm, not the physical. Not once did I wonder where God was when I fell, because I knew. My Lord was right there with me in the store.

After my hip surgery I spent a couple of weeks in a rehabilitation hospital, first in a wheelchair and then using a walker. At home physical therapy resumed and I was weaned onto a four-pronged cane. Several more falls and a diagnosis of Primary Lateral Sclerosis put me back on a walker. And that's when I noticed an advertisement for Drum Hill, a senior living community. I liked the safety features they offered: 24-hour emergency response system, railings in the hallways, grab bars in the bathrooms. A year ago we moved into our Drum Hill apartment and indeed I do feel safer here in the company of other people.

Now I ride in a power chair, all for the sake of safety. And I am not alone! At Drum Hill many of us use devices to help us as we become more unsteady on our feet. All sorts of canes and walkers abound, people hold onto each other, and a number of us drive around in power wheelchairs of various kinds. Many of us have aides or friends who come into our homes to help us; some have aides around the clock. We are trying to be safe, yet accidents still happen.

Soon after we moved into this place, I fell trying to get out of bed during the night. I knew I was not hurt, but neither could I get up. I could not reach the emergency pull cord or a telephone. I could not awaken my husband as our intercom system was turned off and out of reach, so I made myself as comfortable as I could and spent the next five hours on the floor. Eventually my husband was able to get me up. No harm was done, but some changes were made. I soon subscribed to Lifeline, which I now wear around my neck at all times; I sleep in a hospital bed with side railings; and the intercom is always kept on.

We do a lot for the sake of physical safety and stability, and rightly so. But what about these issues in the spiritual realm? I see spiritual safety as having to do with God's character (or how we perceive God to be) and spiritual stability as how we live in view of our thoughts of God (or developing to maturity our personal relationship with God). One of the benefits of growing older is that as we become more vulnerable physically, we can become more stable spiritually, having experienced the truth about God's character. There is something special, something believable about an old person saying that God is trustworthy, strong, solid, present, wise, good, loving, etc. Faith that has been tested is beautiful to see.

In his gospel, Matthew devotes three chapters to what we call the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus gave his followers teaching that they had never heard before, teaching that was “different,” that demanded a change in their thinking and behaving. And he spoke with authority! Jesus anticipated two responses to his message, one wise and one foolish, and described them in a story at the end of his sermon:

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash (Matthew 7:24-27).

Two houses, perhaps identical, but what a difference when the storms hit! And all due to the foundations chosen by the builders. The rock, I think, is a solid, mature relationship with God based on knowledge and obedience, with sand representing an immature, stagnant relationship never developed by a working obedience, by a growing knowledge of God. The storms of life come upon everyone. Choose your foundation wisely.

In the third grade reader that we used in my school there was a long story about the various kinds of houses people built around the world. Why were they so different? The story had a refrain that gave the answer: “It depends. It all depends. It all depends on where you live and what you have to build with.” For years I have been thinking that the refrain could be adapted to help us understand why people react so differently to life’s common pressures: “It depends. It all depends. It all depends on who you are and how you think of God.”

Who am I? I am God’s daughter! I have a permanent relationship with God through the new birth and by spiritual adoption. I couldn’t be more safe, more secure than that. And how do I think of God? What gives me stability? That will be the subject of the rest of this essay.

GOD: ETERNAL AND OMNIPRESENT

God as eternal means that God has always existed and always will exist. That might sound simple, but it is so profound and so basic to my spiritual safety and stability. How could I trust a god who had a start somewhere in the distant past? I would think that such a one could just as easily end sometime, and that would cause anxiety, not security. Omnipresent means that God is everywhere, that God is our environment and that God sees everything. It would be terrible if we could hide something from God, wouldn’t it? Think about that!

So many favorite Bible verses address these aspects of God, often intermingled in the Scriptures, each one worthy of much meditation. Here are a few of them:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth or the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God (Psalm 90:1,2).

In [God] we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’ ” (Exodus 3:14).

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8).

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you (Psalm 139:7-12).

"Am I only a God nearby," declares the Lord, "and not a God far away? Who can hide in secret places, so that I can not see them?" declares the Lord. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" declares the Lord (Jeremiah 23:23,24).

I cherish the story of Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maid, as told in Genesis 16. She was pregnant with Abraham's child (this was Sarah's suggestion!). Now she was being mistreated by her mistress, so she ran away. The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarah, where have you come from, and where are you going?" "I'm running away from my mistress Sarah," she answered. Then the angel of the Lord told her to return to Sarah and let her know the son she was carrying would be all right. The child was to be named Ishmael (God hears), because the Lord had heard her misery.

Notice how much personal information God revealed to Hagar in that interchange, besides knowing exactly where she was. Hagar was overwhelmed. She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." How safe, how secure she must have felt as she returned home, for that is what she did. Of course you would obey the One who knew you so well, wouldn't you?

It was a summer evening in the mid-1960s. I wanted to attend a meeting in New York City and saw no reason why I couldn't, though I would have to travel alone. I would simply take the train to Grand Central Terminal, go to street level, and take a taxi to the meeting. I got off the train and went up the stairway that I thought would lead me outdoors. Instead I found myself in a totally isolated place underground; not one person was in sight! I had no idea where I was or what to do.

Just then a taxi drove up. "Do you need a ride?" the driver asked. "I certainly do," I answered as I got into the cab. "I NEVER come down here," the man said, "but I felt so strongly that I must make an exception tonight, that someone needed help." I got to the meeting safely and have never gotten over the awe of that moment. Hagar and I have something in common: We know that God sees us and that gives us safety and stability as we go about our lives. May you find strength from this same truth: God is eternal, God is everywhere and God knows your name, where you are and what your situation is. You can trust the God who sees you.

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GOD: WISE AND POWERFUL

Sometimes on earth wise people do not have the power to put their ideas into action. Likewise, some powerful people do not act wisely. In God both characteristics blend perfectly. How clearly this is seen in the story of creation!

The Bible opens with an astonishing statement: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1)*. And how did he do it? With a word! *And God said, "Let there be light" and there was light (Genesis 1:3)*. How did it turn out? *God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Genesis 1:31)*. Indeed it was! All these years later the universe is still in place, people and animals

are still being born and God in his wisdom still lets people choose whether or not they want to acknowledge him. Isn't that awesome?

When God created the universe and everything in it, there were no materials to build with, no consultants, no prototypes. *By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made of what was visible (Hebrews 11:3).* Also there was no period of trial and error, no building a better model. Our wise and powerful God got it right the first time. Since I am in awe of creation and our Creator, I have no problem believing the miracles recorded in the Bible. Which is harder, to make the sea out of nothing or to walk on it? To form a human being from the ground and breathe life into him or to raise a person from the dead? A virgin birth? No problem! The angel told Mary that nothing is impossible with God. She believed that and so do I.

Much time is spent trying to figure out the details of creation, such as exactly when it happened. I would rather use that energy to admire the Creator. As my mind is more poetic than scientific, I take great pleasure in the sections of the Bible where God and creation are described with poetic license. Many of my favorite images come from Isaiah 40:

– *Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?* (I feel safe in a hand so big it could hold the Pacific Ocean!)

– *Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?* (My God is powerful enough to do that easily, if he wanted to.)

– *Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?* (The answer to all these questions is “Nobody”! God is so “other” than human, way above our category of being! I am proud of my heavenly Father, who is without peer!)

– *He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.* (This verse certainly puts us in our place in relation to God, doesn't it? But then, I wouldn't want my God to be just somewhat “bigger” than I, would you?)

– *Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them all by name. Because of his great power and his mighty strength, not one of them is missing.* (Imagine knowing the names of each star! In contrast, I am delighted if I can locate the Big Dipper! I like to look into the skies and see my Father's handiwork. I love cloud patterns and colors, especially sunsets. I look at the moon and say, “My Father made that!”)

Our house on Mead Street in Yorktown Heights had low stone walls on both sides of the driveway. One day I witnessed a drama being played out on those walls. Two chipmunks (whom I named Mother and Junior, as one was twice as large as the other) were on the more exposed side when I drove up. I sat in the car, enthralled by what I was seeing. Mother, frightened by the car, told Junior to follow her to safety. With that, she jumped off the wall, scampered across the driveway and climbed up the other wall. She turned to see where Junior was. Oh, no! He was nervously peering over the edge of the first wall, too afraid to jump! Mother did not hesitate. She jumped off the second wall and hurried back to Junior. He was so thrilled to see her and so scared that he ran underneath her body, gladly receiving her comforting hug.

But the perceived danger was still there. “Junior, you can do it. Just follow me,” she said. And the same sequence as before took place. Five times Mother returned to Junior, who could not summon enough courage to jump, and each time she gave him a hug. Finally Junior did manage to jump and soon the two were out of sight. I imagined Mother saying, “I knew you could! Good for you!” How would chipmunks and other animals know how to train their young, if their Creator had not designed

them with that instinct?

And then I thought: That is how God treats us – patiently going over and over the same lessons, encouraging, comforting, until we do what he wants us to do. The next logical step is to think how patient and loving we should be with our own children or the young ones around us. And now a new thought: How patient we should be with the old people in our lives who are becoming frightened as they forget how to do things or even where they are as they retreat into a childlike state. Anything in nature, including chipmunks, can teach us and draw our hearts to God, if we will but stop, look, listen and think. That's the way our Creator meant the universe to work!

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GOD: KNOWING AND LOVING
SEEKING AND REDEEMING
MERCIFUL AND GRACIOUS

So much of how I think of God is wrapped up in the story of Adam and Eve. All that I learn in the simplicity of the first chapters of Genesis, before things got complicated by many people and nations, I find foundational for understanding the rest of the Bible and God's dealings with us today. This story is especially meaningful to me since a fresh interpretation during the 1980s helped to free me from the slavery of gender roles into which I had fallen. In my ignorance I had thought God wanted only men to be leaders in churches and homes. I accepted a quiet, secondary place in life because – more than anything – I wanted to please my Lord by doing what I believed to be his will. I do not regret those years and the struggle that ensued as the truth was revealed. It has all worked out for the good of God's kingdom and for me. Obedience to God, however motivated, is never wasted! And now I will tell you how the account of the first people on earth informs my understanding of God.

Seeing God as knowing and loving in his making of people is enough to fill my heart to overflowing with grateful worship for all eternity. God knew how the story would end. He knew Adam and Eve would use their free will to disobey him. He knew that every one of their descendants, including us, would do likewise. He knew that he would have to become incarnate and die to provide a way for people to be redeemed; he would not make us and then leave us without hope! He designed a universe which contains the earth as a backdrop against which the drama of God and human beings would be played out. Why? The only reason that I can figure out is that God is love – incredible love that melts my heart.

I picture our triune God as so full of love that it couldn't be contained within the Godhead. It needed to burst forth, to include billions and billions of people without diminishing the love of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in the least. Of course, the idea was for the people to love God back, hence, free will. What pleasure would there be in being loved by those who had no choice?

How I appreciate the equality that shines out from Genesis 1:26,27: *So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 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."* Adam and Eve were equal in every way: reflecting God's image; receiving God's blessing; responsible for filling the earth and subduing it. Notice that the ruling they were to do was over fish, birds and animals; neither one was told to rule over the other. They were equal, yet different. Eventually, they would be equally guilty in their disobedience as well.

From the beginning God had a "walking and talking" relationship with the people he had made. On a stroll in the Garden of Eden one day (it may have been on day one), God pointed out a tree to Adam and told him, *"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 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"* (Genesis 2:16,17).

One forbidden thing: absolutely necessary in order for us to have choice, the essence of free will. How good of God to point out the tree to Adam and clearly let him know that disobedience would bring dire consequences! If anything should go wrong in the Garden, it would not be God's fault. Nothing wrong would ever be God's fault!

The rest of Genesis 2 records God's providing a bride for Adam and part of the wedding ceremony. I picture Eve walking down the "aisle" on the "arm" of God until they came to Adam (verse 22 does say "[the Lord God] brought her to the man"). Part of Adam's vows are given in verse 23: *"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."* Then comes part of God's sermon: *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."* As for the wedding garments, both were beautifully arrayed in innocence: *"The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame."* God had thought of everything!

The honeymoon in Eden went sour the day Eve and then Adam decided to give in to the suggestion of the serpent and their own desires by eating fruit from the forbidden tree. Genesis 3 tells the story. I hang my head in shame here, for I, too, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I have no right to condemn Eve or Adam, and can only imagine the huge loss they suffered as soon as they took their first bite of the fruit. Immediately their innocence was gone and they realized they were naked, in need of a covering. They certainly were creative, intelligent people to come up with the idea of fig leaf clothing. How did they "sew" the leaves together? And how long did the project take? How did they get along with each other as they went shopping in the Garden for supplies? I ask this because their relationship with God was not the only one that was broken that day. Two layers of fig leaves now came between the first couple. Open personal relationships have been difficult ever since; it is easier to hide our true selves. What would we do without the grace of God?

God had told Adam that if he ate from the tree in the middle of the Garden he would immediately die. Did they die? Certainly not physically. If you think of death as separation it is easy to see that Adam and Eve did die right away. Their perfect union with God was severed; they died spiritually. So God was right: they did not avoid death, by any means.

Do you think Adam and Eve deserved to be put to death physically as well? Just how serious was their sin? Your answer to these questions will reveal much about how you think of God. Does God our Creator have the right to give us directives, to expect anything from us in return for our being on earth?

I believe Adam and Eve deserved to be put to death physically for disobeying God and that it was because of God's mercy that they were spared. Here I see the beginning of God as merciful and gracious. I define *mercy* as God's withholding from us the punishment we deserve, and *grace* as God's giving to us good things that we do not deserve, nor can we earn. Faith also shows up for the first time in this story: believing God enough to act – but that comes later on. For now, we see God as merciful in that he spared the lives of Adam and Eve.

And now the story of God as Redeemer unfolds, and it begins with God seeking. I don't know how long God waited, exercising his marvelous patience, while Adam and Eve had time to get used to their new condition as sinners, estranged from God, but at the right time God made his move. It was the same as usual: God just went walking in the Garden, looking for Adam and Eve. But where are they? There they are – cowering behind the trees, afraid of God for the first time. God knows where they are, of course, but he wants to draw them out. *The Lord called to the man, "Where are you?"* Adam, to his credit, blurted out the truth: *"I heard you in the Garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*

And [God] said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man said, "The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

Our seeking God, obviously looking for confession, helped our first parents along with a series of questions. Notice that God dealt directly with both; he did not hold Adam responsible for his wife's sin. For me, as a woman, this truth is dignifying and I would think it freeing for men. What a burden – and what a potential for abuse – to feel accountable to God for your spouse's behavior!

The questioning worked, although both really said, "Guilty, with an explanation." Adam implicated Eve and, indirectly, God, as though he never would have done such a thing had not God given him the woman. Eve said it was the serpent's fault that she ate the fruit. But they had confessed. Were they now redeemed? No! That was the first step in the process of making something new out of a bad situation.

Next came a listing of the consequences of their sin, an all-encompassing list from which we still suffer today. The lessons for us are clear: 1. All sin is serious, for it involves overstepping the bounds that God has set; 2. Sin brings consequences; and 3. Confession does not remove the consequences.

The first one God addressed after the confessions was the serpent (the devil). It is here we find that God was operating under a Plan and the Plan contained a Promise: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel"* (Genesis 3:15). Who was ever the offspring of a woman without the involvement of a man, except the virgin-born Jesus? The devil was put on notice in the Garden of Eden that a struggle was coming in which he would inflict pain, but which would prove fatal to him. I believe the main battle took place on the cross at the crucifixion of Jesus, with skirmishes – some serious – all through the Bible story.

To Eve God said that her pains in childbearing would increase and then adds: *Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.* If this is a prediction that husbands would be in charge of their wives, it is a consequence of sin, not a directive as to how God wants marital relationships to be. It does not supplant the equality of Genesis chapter 1. At the very least I see this as meaning wives and husbands will have different goals and harmonious relationships will require much effort. With God, though, all things are possible!

It is interesting that the ground was cursed as part of the consequences of Adam's sin. This would result in hard work for Adam to make the earth bring forth food for them. The apostle Paul personifies the earth in Romans 8:19-22:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Occasionally I would think of the earth as groaning when natural disasters occurred or when I saw much decay, but never have I been so stunned by this thought as in the disaster that took place four weeks ago, in December, 2004. As I understand it, there was an earthquake under the sea that resulted in a rupture hundred of miles long between Indonesia and Japan. I learned a new word at that time: *tsunami*. A tsunami is a tidal wave caused by an earthquake or a volcanic eruption. Gigantic tidal waves swept hundreds of thousands of people to their deaths from Indonesia to Africa. What a tragedy! And the persistent picture I have in my mind is of the earth suffering so dreadfully

from its huge rupture that it had to cry out in agony. The tsunamis represent the pain the earth felt, the thrashing screams of pain caused by the earthquake injury. The deaths were not intentional; I almost feel as if the earth would apologize, if it could. Paul says the earth knows it will be set free from its bondage some day and that is its hope.

God also said to Adam, *"Dust you are and to dust you will return."* Physical death is part of the consequences of ... murder? adultery? idol worship? No! Of eating fruit from a tree that God had forbidden! There is no such thing as a small sin, a small offending of God!

God had done the seeking, Adam and Eve had confessed, God had pronounced the consequences, and now the stage was set for the most amazing thing of all: an object lesson that would picture and set in motion God's Plan of Redemption! The key verse is Genesis 3:21 – *The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.* Here is how I imagine the story:

God said to Adam and Eve, "Come over here. I want to show you something." When they were in place, God struck some animals and then began to remove their skins. The animals were so still ... still and quiet. And now they were covered with a red substance. "What happened to them?" Adam and Eve asked. "They died," God said. Adam and Eve looked at each other in horror. "Died?" they gasped. "Is that what it is to die? But you said we would die if we ate from that special tree! Is that what we deserved? Why didn't you do that to us? Those animals didn't do anything wrong!"

And God explained: "Yes, Adam and Eve, this is what death looks like. Life has left these animals and one day it will leave you, too. Meanwhile, I would like to resume the 'walking and talking' relationship that we once had. To make that possible, innocent blood had to be shed. For the time being these animals will do, although I have a permanent sacrifice in mind for later. Now keep watching."

They watched as God took the skins and fashioned them into two sets of clothing. Then God spoke again: "Adam and Eve, I made you so that we could have a relationship with each other. In your disobedience, you declared your independence from me. You must understand that if you would like to be connected with me again, it must be on my terms, not yours. Fig leaves will not do! Now you must make another choice. You may continue to wear fig leaves and remain disconnected from me or you could take them off and let me dress you in these animal skin clothes that I have made. If you do, your sin will be forgiven and our personal relationship will resume."

Adam and Eve wasted no time in getting rid of their fig leaves and letting God dress them, as though they were little children. How relieved they were to be back again in God's favor! And today they are still in relationship with God in Heaven. I look forward to meeting them there!

Oh – one more detail: they did have to change their address. You see, in the Garden of Eden there was another tree, the tree of life, and now God did not want them to eat its fruit and live forever. Would you want to live forever on this earth, in your mortal body, with conditions as they are, unable to die? I think it was good of God to have them move!

I see God as so gracious in this redeeming act. God gave Adam and Eve a gift they did not deserve, proving that God really did care about them and their welfare. For their part, they exercised faith: they believed God enough to act; they received the gift. The passive tense in 3:21 – "he clothed them" – shows that right from the start salvation was all from God. Each animal sacrifice from the Garden of Eden to the gospels depicted Jesus, God's permanent sacrifice. It is awesome to link Genesis 3:21 with John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

What a God! KNOWING and LOVING, SEEKING and REDEEMING, MERCIFUL and GRACIOUS.
No wonder I feel safe and stable in him!

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GOD: FAITHFUL AND TRUE

2 Timothy 2:11-13: Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself. Whenever I read this passage, I have two reactions. For the first three couplets I think: Sounds fair; tit for tat; cause and effect. The fourth one breaks my heart. Faithfulness is part of God's character, so much so that for God to be faithless would be like disowning himself. We can count on God's being faithful to his people. That's safety; that's stability. And to me, it's a huge challenge as well: I want to be faithful to God. I don't want to break God's heart. I would also like to see God's whole faith family (of which I am a part) being faithful and true, bringing joy to God. Wouldn't that be a good "thank offering" for God?

David was faithful and true to God. Certainly he was not perfect; his sins are well known, since they were written down for all to read. But God called him a man after God's own heart. Why? Because David loved the Lord his God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength. He worshiped God extravagantly, passionately, to the point that others, even family members, sometimes criticized his exuberance. Even with his human failings, David never, EVER would have worshiped an idol! God was the center of David's life: his shepherd; his rock; his high tower; his king; his everything.

On the other hand, there are many stories of individuals and nations being unfaithful to God, particularly the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. Exodus 32 records a stunning tale of a faithful individual (Moses) and faithless Israel. God had delivered the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt and was leading them through the desert. At the base of Mt. Sinai they camped while God and Moses held a forty day meeting up the mountain.

Meanwhile, down in the valley people were getting worried. What had happened Moses? They gathered around Aaron, the brother of Moses, who had been left in charge. "Aaron, make us a god who can lead us," they said. Instead of saying, "That's impossible!", Aaron asked that the people bring their jewelry to him. From the jewelry Aaron made an idol in the shape of a calf and said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." Again, wouldn't you think someone would have said, "That's impossible! How could a freshly made image (that isn't even alive!) have brought us out of Egypt?" But no one did.

Instead, Aaron built an altar in front of the calf and the next day the people actually sacrificed burnt offerings to the calf! Then they had a party, with dancing and all kinds of revelry. Well, God saw everything that was happening and he told Moses. Both were very angry. I can see why, can't you? In the end, though the people were faithless, God remained faithful.

In the time of the prophets, God used the picture of himself as a husband and Israel as his wife. What God wanted was fidelity above all; that, and love. Israel continued to bow to other gods until finally God said to his prophet Hosea, "I want you to act out a parable for me, one that the people will understand." God told Hosea to go and marry an adulterous wife and have children by her. Hosea did it! He married Gomer and they had two sons and a daughter. Then she left Hosea and returned to her former life with her lovers

Hosea 3 tells what happened next: *The Lord said to [Hosea], "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin-cakes."* Hosea bought Gomer back. Then he said to her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with

any man, and I will live with you.” Likewise God said the Israelites would eventually return to him – and God would receive them! Amazing! In the New Testament God’s faith family is corporately called the Bride and Jesus Christ is our Bridegroom. As befitting a Bride, let’s keep ourselves pure, clean and faithful to our Bridegroom, for we know he is faithful and devoted to us.

As for being true, I like Numbers 23:19: “God is not human, that he should lie, nor a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” Lying seems to be a human characteristic since sin entered the world. I can remember a lie I told when I was in the first grade. In preparation for a program we would give later, we were all paired with a classmate of the opposite sex. That one was to be our partner until the program was over. I was linked with a boy who sucked his thumb. I did not like holding his wet hand, so the next day when the teacher asked me who my partner was, I named a different boy. “No, he’s my partner,” another girl answered. Somehow the teacher let me get away with my lie. No wet thumbs for me! But even as I write, I am not proud of that lie, nor of any I have told subsequently.

Some people might want to answer “Yes” to the questions in Numbers 23:19. If so, they are taking as promises scriptures that were never meant to be taken as such. An obvious example is “Ask and you will receive.” Sounds like blank check, doesn’t it? Obviously, it’s not. How careful we must be with God’s word! Just remember: God does not lie!

Years ago I wrote a simple song of adoration that I will use to close this section. It is as true now as when I first wrote it.



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GOD: KIND, GOOD, GENTLE, COMPASSIONATE

All these marvelous qualities are one side of a coin. I am well aware of God’s wrath – the other side of the coin – so powerful that it caused almost the whole earth’s population to be destroyed in a great flood; that incinerated the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; that opened the earth so it could remove whole families who had disobeyed God. I do factor God’s anger into my thinking about God. For balance, I keep this truth in the back of my mind, but I look forward as if through a pair of glasses, the lenses of which are inscribed with all the wonderful attributes of God that I am happily recounting now, plus more.

Years ago, as a valuable teaching aid, I made an oversized pair of “glasses” from lavender poster board. The “frames” were double, so that I could insert different sets of “lenses” made of transparency paper. I would write on the lenses the outlook I was teaching at the time to illustrate my point. With our current topic, for example, one lens might say “God is good” and the other “And what

God does is good" (Psalm 119:68). With those glasses on (looking at life as the Psalmist did), I would never think of accusing God of doing wrong! Just as with our earthly glasses, our spiritual lenses need adjustment periodically, so that our outlook matures as we age. If your spiritual glasses need updating, make an appointment with our Heavenly Oculist now. His office is always open – God will personally give you an examination, and there is no charge!

I like Psalm 2:11 and 12, addressed to kings and rulers of the earth, but applicable to us as well: *Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.* I am so blessed, for I am one who has taken refuge in my God. From the inside, held close to God's heart by his everlasting arms, I see God as kind, good, gentle, compassionate – and there I am protected from God's wrath. What safety, what stability this brings to my life! With pleasure, I now recall some of the Bible verses and passages that I cherish on this subject.

[The Sovereign Lord] tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young (Isaiah 40:11). What could be more tender! I think of "those that have young" as anyone who is responsible for little ones in the physical realm and, in the spiritual realm, those who are nurturing and guiding those young in the faith, no matter what their age. How kind we should be to those in our charge, knowing we ourselves are being gently led by God!

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;... (Isaiah 49:15,16). Every time I read the above question I want to answer "no!" A mother could not possibly forget the baby she has borne and nursed. Isaiah then forces me back to reality. Our newspapers are full of stories of babies that have indeed been abandoned (or worse!) by their mothers. And then the contrast: God would never treat us that way! We have been engraved on the palms of God's hands; our relationship is permanent, eternal.

For I am the Lord your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, "Do not fear; I will help you" (Isaiah 41:13). What is more comforting to a child than being able to hold the hand of Mommy or Daddy? I have gone through many tough situations holding on to the hand of my Heavenly Parent. In fact, sometimes I squeeze my right hand to reassure myself that I am not alone. I don't have to feel something in my hand to know God is there.

The same characteristics as in the above verses are found all through the gospels, as you would expect, since Jesus is God in the flesh. He called himself the good shepherd who looks after the welfare of his sheep, protecting and providing for his flock, seeking those that are lost, carrying them on his shoulders when found, giving them eternal life. He often told people not to be afraid, that he was there to help them.

In his ministry, Jesus gave glimpses of God's wrath in the way he denounced the spiritual leaders as hypocrites and overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. Yet Jesus was concerned about everybody, including people others avoided or overlooked. Women, babies and children, the poor, "sinners," lepers and other outcasts, tax collectors: all were important to him, even the Pharisees whom he often criticized, as his interview with Nicodemus shows. One example will suffice:

People were bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Luke 18:15,16). Matthew records that Jesus did take the time to place his hands on the children. I'm sure this meant as much to the parents as to the little ones, and what a lesson for the disciples! Oh, that we might reflect in our lives the kindness, goodness, gentleness and compassion of God! Our hurting world is sorely in need of these qualities.

I wonder how many people have responded to the marvelous invitation that Matthew records in chapter 11, verses 28-30, where Jesus says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* That invitation is still valid today! We all need rest for our souls at times, just as our bodies need rest. Join me in saying, "Lord Jesus, I come."

* * * * *

GOD: HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

When the children of Israel were traveling through the wilderness, God instituted an elaborate system of worship centered around the tabernacle, a portable structure where sacrifices were offered and priestly duties carried out. Every detail was specified by God. Aaron and his four sons had been set apart as priests and were about to begin their ministry. The people gathered around, wanting to see the glory of the Lord. And they did! *Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell face down (Leviticus 9:24).* Excitement was high! God was good! And then ...

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke of when he said: 'Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored'" (Leviticus 10:1-3).

How we think about this incident and similar ones involving the deaths of Uzzah (1 Chronicles 13) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) reveals how we think about God. Were these deaths justified? Or was God being too severe? Is it ever right to disobey God? Is it possible for God to do wrong? Who has the final say in matters such as these: God or humans? Every time I read these stories I see them through "glasses" that say "God is good and what he does is good. It is impossible for God to make a mistake. God was right in these incidents. What is more, it is only because of God's mercy that we are spared."

I like the story of Isaiah having his vision of God in the temple (Isaiah 6). Above the Lord seraphs were flying and saying, *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."* Isaiah cried, *"Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips ... and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."* God then cleansed Isaiah's lips with a hot coal from the altar, and when God asked who could he send to deliver a message to the people, Isaiah – in awe of God – immediately volunteered to do it. How instructive for us!

Since we are receiving a kingdom that can not be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:28,29).

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, we are told in Proverbs 9:10. We have no business taking God lightly! Our proper response to a holy God, as seen in the above verses and stories, is obedience, confession, service, reverence, awe, worship, thanksgiving and holy living:

Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15,16).

In 1960 we moved into a rented house in Yorktown Heights, New York near the Taconic State

Parkway. In the first week of April, 1962 two important events occurred: our daughter MaryBeth was born, joining brothers George and David, making us a family of five, and a project was started to realign the Taconic Parkway, including the building of an exit ramp immediately adjacent to our property. To accomplish this much drilling and blasting would have to be done. Someone came to our door to explain: drilling would go on all day, Monday through Friday until 4:00. Then we were to go indoors, and stand back from the windows. A whistle would blow and then there would be a dynamite blast. And that would be it until the next day.

One day the children and I gathered in an upstairs bedroom at 4:00 awaiting the daily blast. Even though we were not close to the windows, we were still able to see what was going on through them. Suddenly there was a TREMENDOUS noise, much louder than usual. And then a stream of heavy boulders flew past our house to their destinations down the road. The company had tried to get away with an illegal blast that day! There was property damage where the rocks landed, but no injuries (probably because we were all obeying the orders to be indoors at the time).

What astonished me was the fact that our house did not shake during the incident, not even a little bit! Why not? I took a good look at the foundation. The man who built the house as his own residence had used huge stones to form the foundation. What an effort it must have been to get those stones into place! Was it worth the trouble? I'm sure he would say yes, and so do I. As he built the rest of the house, he knew it was being constructed on a solid base meant to withstand various kinds of storms. And it has.

In 1957, as a newly married couple living in Huntsville, Alabama, Leo and I used to travel to Shelbyville, Tennessee to go to church. There we met Mrs. Shearin, an elderly widow who took us to her apartment for dinner one day. During the meal she told us about her situation. Not only had her husband died, but so had her only child, a son who died in middle age. I was so impressed by her demeanor as she told her story! She was serene, just stating the facts. She had built her life on her Lord Jesus Christ and when the storms came, they did not destroy her.

I have tried to do the same. I remember my early attempts in this area. I practiced and taught a technique I called "Pin It To Jesus." No matter what happens, I said, let your thoughts run immediately to Jesus. If someone treats you badly, for example, say to yourself, "My Lord would never treat me that way," and be comforted. If the incident is a happy one, find double enjoyment by saying, "That is so much like Jesus!" I had no idea that I was really practicing putting God at the center of my life, but that is what it was. For more than fifty years I have been strengthening the foundation of my spiritual life, working on knowing God personally, meditating on God and the scriptures. What a delightful task it has been! It is so rewarding to find my "house" holding firm in my old age and increasing physical infirmity. It's good to know, too, that there is still more work to be done. Through all eternity I expect to be learning more about my wonderful Lord.

What about you? Is your life built on God the Solid Rock? Are you secure in your relationship with God? Does your growing faith provide serenity during stormy times? There is a difference between being safe and feeling safe. God is dependable, faithful and true. We really are safe in our Lord. As for feeling safe, a lot of that is up to us:

"It depends. It all depends. It all depends on who you are and how you think of God."