

JOEL 3:16 MATT 5:16

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The Christian's Response

Philadelphia

Sadness

GST Hike

Satisfaction in God

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What does the Bible Say About the GST Rate Hike?



Paul Liu

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The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Rate Hike

On 1 January 2023, a small change was effected, forever changing the lives of Singaporeans. And what was this monumental change? Why, it was the 1% GST rate hike. As Singaporeans, our values, purposes, lifestyles, and very lives are shaped by consumerism—defined as a social and economic order that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts. We think and act in terms of dollars and cents, with common sense increasingly becoming nothing but just an afterthought.

What is more, the 1% GST increase is not just an isolated event, it comes amidst the backdrop of a slowing Singapore economy, a growing global recession, increased energy prices, and rising inflation across the board. It is also just the first twin 1% GST hikes, with a further 1% increase slated for the beginning of 2024. Businesses may take advantage of the 1% GST increase and unjustifiably raise prices to increase profit margins at the expense of their customers. To calm the negative swirl, the Singapore government has continued to hand out GST and Community Development Council (CDC) Vouchers to Singaporeans to cushion the impact of all these rising costs. Put all these into a blender and what do we get? A life-changing event where so much of our attention, focus, effort, and emotions are blanketed, occupied and consumed by money and our thoughts about it.

To give, or not to give...

As Christians who through weakness are often affected by and worried about money, we need to look into God's Word for calm, correction, and comfort as we approach the matter. In the first place, has the government any right to lay a claim to more of our hard-earned money, even if it is just 1% of our expenditure? Jesus was faced with a similar question too, as recorded in Mark 12, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not? Shall we give, or shall we not give?"

But he [Jesus], knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, "Why tempt ye me? bring me a penny, that I may see it." And they brought it. And he saith unto them, "Whose is this image and superscription?" And they said unto him, "Caesar's." And

Jesus answering said unto them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marvelled at him. Mark 12:15-17

The short answer is, "Yes". Whether the amount is large or small does not make a difference. This can be seen from Jesus' reference to a penny in for His answer. Whether your tribute be a large sum of money, or just a single penny, the principle for paying tax as required by the government remains the same. The key principle we notice from Jesus' answer on paying tax is that money belongs to the authority of the land. We call money "legal tender" because the law of the land recognises that the money has a certain value to be used as payment for things you buy. If there is no lawful recognition of money, the dollar note in your hand is but a small piece of paper worth close to nothing.

One aspect of this principle is that if you are living in the land with the God-ordained government in authority working to maintain law and order as well as the many functions of government, then you are experiencing God's goodness as ministered by the government, however, strong or weak they may be. And in this case, the tax monies required belong to the authority in the sense that it is due to them in return for their work of governance. We see this in Romans 13:1,4a,6-7, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. ... For he is the minister of God to thee for good... For for this cause, pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing., Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour." In this sense, as Christians who live under the rule of the Singapore government, we should be ready to pay our dues in taxes as far as is required by the government.

Another aspect of the principle that money belongs to the government is the sense that the rightful place of money and all its concerns is with the earthly authority—it belongs there. This can be seen in the second part of Jesus' answer as He did not just stop at "Render to Caesar

the things that are Caesar's", but with true godly wisdom He added, "and to God the things that are God's." With that, Jesus had given a green light to freely give up anything of earthly value to the government if they so require, since these things are their rightful concern; but in the same stroke, He turned the question to questioners to us, are you surrendering to God the things that are God's? Thus, we see that Christians should willingly pay our taxes—and increase in taxes—because we are not overly concerned about the dollars and cents of our taxes or how much less we would have in our bank accounts; our main concern is spiritual—what God requires of us, and if we have surrendered what is rightfully His.

While we have heard clearly what Jesus said, it is not an easy thing for us earthly creatures to trust and obey. The problem is that the old man of sin in us is very concerned when his earthly possessions are taken, and he is very concerned about how much is in his bank account. In faithlessness, we lay up treasures here—as much as we can—hoping that our hearts will find peace without being trapped. We worry about our lives, our food, our drink, our bodies, and our clothes; we worry about our grades, our studies, our jobs, and our future. There are simply too many earthly things that we worry about that we are overwhelmed to the point of choking and can hardly take it anymore.

If that is a description of you and me, then God's Word comes in to calm our troubled souls. We read in Matthew 6:25-33, "Therefore, I say unto you, Take no thought, for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold, the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall

...God requires of us our submission.

do we hear the Gospel of the Cross and how we need Jesus, who turns our sorrow into joy?

he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

The Things That Are God's

Rather than being worried about the 1% GST rate hike, have we taken the time recently to consider our rightful priority of rendering to God what is His?

In the first place, God requires of us our hearts. Our weak hearts, the one with its many wayward desires and wrongly-placed affections; the one with its endless worries and of itself unable to look to God in faith. Yes, God wants this heart that He has chosen in love from eternity. However broken and torn it may be, our covenant God calls us to surrender and entrust it to Him. How is your heart doing? Is it hanging on to earthly treasures with all its might while harbouring a growing discontent with the government for raising the GST by 1%? Is it rotting and decaying in the snares of darling sins while distracting itself with minor concerns of monetary loss? Is it hopelessly lost in the pleasures of this world and caught up in earthly battles of little consequence? Does the owner of this heart miss his heavenly Father and long to be in His embrace? Jesus' answer should snap us out of any drunken stupor: Christian, have you surrendered your heart to God? (My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways. Proverbs 23:26)

Second, God requires of us our bodies. (I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed

to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. Romans 12:1-2) These bodies of ours—strong in youth, powerful in their prime, and wise in old age—have they any use for the Lord? Or, are they occupied and preoccupied with the labours and cares of this world? Do we use our bodies to slave for the corporations of this world, further the kingdom of sin, and serve ourselves in lust and pride? Jesus' answer should awaken us: Christian, have you laid every last ounce of your strength, abilities, and resources on God's altar for his service? (And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; 2 Corinthians 12:15a)

Last, God requires of us our submission. As a citizen, we submit to the authorities and pay what is due to them. We read in Ephesians 2:19-22, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." Do not forget that we are citizens of another Kingdom and need to render what is due to our Ruler! What, or who is your life built and centred around? Is Jesus Christ the chief cornerstone of your life, that everything aligns to and finds its foundation and direction? Is Jesus the King who sits on the throne of your heart, to whom everything in your life is called into humble submission and worship? Are we lively stones who conform to the will of the master builder and order our lives for the good and benefit of the church, the spiritual house and the temple of God? Jesus answer should open our eyes: Christian, have you let go of all else to follow Christ, your all in all? (And he left all, rose up, and followed him. Luke 5:28)

Sorrow, Repentance, and Forgiveness

After considering if we have rendered to God the things that are God's, does your heart turn away sorrowful, having been exposed for evading our dues to the heavenly authority? Like the rich young man who could not sell and give all he had to the poor and follow Jesus, do we falter with dismay when faced with how undeserving we are to be called citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven? (Matthew 19:22) Indeed, if we are like the average Singaporean whose mind is transfixed with thoughts about money, then it would also apply to us that it would be easier for a camel

... it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for us to enter into the kingdom of God.

to go through the eye of a needle than for us to enter into the kingdom of God.

But, be not dismayed, rich young ruler.

For Jesus confronts you—and exposes your heart—not in condemnation, but in love. (Mark 10:17,21) If you hear the words of Jesus while on your knees, then His searching command is not meant to kill you, but to save, enliven, and sanctify you.

Do you know what it means to be sorrowful and to be grieved? They are feelings that come when one is sorry about something. By God's grace, He leads us to sincere repentance for our failings when it comes to surrendering to God what we owe. Repentance brings us to the only place where forgiveness can be found—the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. There, we realise with full clarity, that without the intervening grace of God, our salvation would be impossible. (Mark 10:27) Our thankful hearts rejoice at the great mercy that has been shown to us thieves who have stolen repeatedly from God, and who would otherwise be fully deserving if found on the crosses beside Jesus'.

When the people asked "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not? Shall we give, or shall we not give?", Jesus' answer searched the hearts of His elect and spoke in there, "Forget about earthly matters of little consequence, you need forgiveness that only I can give", knowing that He would soon die and pay for the sins of His beloved people.

Today, as we entertain questions in our minds about the GST hike and all kinds of money matters, do we hear the Gospel of the Cross and how we need Jesus, who turns our sorrow into joy?

Lessons from God's Letters to the Churches (7): Letter to Philadelphia, The Witnessing Church



Prof. Herman Hanko

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There are two churches of the seven to whom the Lord makes no rebuke: Smyrna and Philadelphia. We are not meant to interpret this as meaning that these two churches were without any sin – no one is in this life without sin; but rather, these two churches were faithful in proclaiming the gospel of Christ Jesus in their life and calling. Smyrna was faithful in bearing the cross of Christ in persecution; and Philadelphia was faithful in her witnessing of salvation in Christ.

Philadelphia was one of those cities clustered around Ephesus in western Asia Minor, probably organised during those years when the apostle Paul was in Ephesus and the gospel was preached throughout the province of Asia. In some respects, CERC was organised as a Reformed church in much the same way. That is, it may have been organised by witnessing saints from Ephesus (or the United States), which witnessing caused it to continue strong and godly in its own calling.

Verse eight tells us that the church of Philadelphia was very small, and financially very poor. It nevertheless had many opportunities for witnessing. (I could tell you a lot of stories of a small and poor church that was faithful in its calling when there was not even enough money to pay the minister. It was during the Great Depression of the 1930s.) This witnessing was, apparently, among the Jews primarily, and therefore sparked fierce persecution against the church (vss. 9, 10).

But the Lord was with them and blessed them richly. He gave them many opportunities to witness; He gave them an open door; He protected them from the persecution that always follows. He even gave them fruit among these Jews that persecuted the saints. And Christ himself (vs. 9, from his throne on high, would fulfill the eternal will of

God in saving his own elect people: He opens and shuts the door to heaven. He has the keys of David to open and shut, that is, open the door of the church to those destined for heaven, and shut it to keep the reprobate out.

What are you in your church doing in the command to witness? Would you receive a letter to your church similar to this letter to Philadelphia? Are you ashamed or scared to witness?

A man from another denomination said to me: "I want to join your church because I believe your church has the truth; but I cannot join because your members often times do not live what they claim they believe". What he was saying was: "Our lives are a greater witness than our words. All the words we say mean nothing if we do not live according to God's commandments. We may claim to read the Bible, but if we watch the trash on TV, we deny what we said and prove ourselves liars.

The church of Philadelphia witnessed – in spite of the fact that they were being persecuted by the Jews. The Jews denied that Christ was God; the saints worshipped the ascended Lord and served him by their words and deeds.

The Lord blesses them for this and commends them for their godly life.

And his blessing is wonderful. It consists of three special blessings promised to those who are faithful, and this includes a new name.

We cannot go into the meaning of "Name" here, but I mention a few points.

When Adam named the animals, he gave each a name. That name was not a name we give an animal, or even a name that is used in another language. It is a name which reveals how a particular animal reveals God. Those names we do not know, for the curse came and those names are hidden under the curse.

The same is true of every person's name in that his/her names mean nothing. But in heaven each of us will receive a new name, a name which reveals why God created us, why and how he saved us in Christ, God's reason for the kind of person each man is, why he suffers his infirmities, how

he fits into the body of Christ, and to make it personal, why I who long to go to heaven, must stay here so long – unable to do anything and useless in the church. But I will know when I receive my new name, and you will too. It will be a beautiful name that sings God's praises.

The believers of the church of Pergamos are promised a white stone in which a new name is written (Rev 2:17).

A glorious promise!

God's Saving Will in the New Testament (3)



Rev. Angus Stewart

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So far we have treated two major Scripture passages, Ephesians 1:1-14 and Romans 9:6-24, on God's will. Now we are going to consider the will of the Triune God in several texts in the New Testament.

The Elders in heaven utter this doxology regarding Jehovah's will: "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11). God created everything to honour Himself and for His pleasure!

Not just the whole vast creation, but even the nature and form of all kinds of tiny plant seeds are determined by the sovereign will of the Almighty: "God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body" (I Cor. 15:38). It is not due to time and chance or millions of years of evolution after a gigantic explosion; it is the will of the Most High that determines the shape and size of the seeds of all the types of vegetation!

In the parable of the vineyard, the Triune God, portrayed as "the lord of the vineyard" (Matt. 20:8), asks, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" (15). Our Father in heaven explains that His unconditional decree of election is determinative in salvation: "for many be called [i.e.,

externally in the preaching], but few chosen" (16). As the sovereign Lord, He has the right to do whatever He wills or wishes or wants, including in eternal predestination!

What about regeneration, the first element in the application of God's salvation in Jesus Christ? John 1:13 states that elect sinners are "born [again], not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." No one has been, or ever will be, regenerated by his own will or by the will of another human being, whether it is the will of their minister or parents or neighbours. Instead, the new birth comes solely by the will or desire of the blessed Trinity!

What is Jehovah's will regarding the elect children of believers? Our Redeemer teaches us, "it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish" (Matt. 18:14). Since God does not wish the destruction of any of His young children, their preservation in this life and everlasting salvation are divinely guaranteed!

Hebrews 6:17 declares that our heavenly Father, "willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability [or unchangeableness] of his counsel,

confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us." These "two immutable things" are Jehovah's promise (13) and oath (13-14, 16-17). By nature, the true and faithful God cannot lie. By adding His promise and oath, He shows that He "more abundantly" wills and earnestly desires that His people know that His "counsel," decree or purpose to bless us is absolutely unchangeable (14)!

I Timothy 2:4

In the history of the New Testament church, over the sixteen centuries from the Pelagian controversy to the present day, I Timothy 2:4 has been the most prominent text in support of the false doctrine that Almighty God earnestly wishes or desires to save absolutely all human beings, including the reprobate. Hence it is worth taking more time with this verse than the preceding texts.

I Timothy 2:4 states that Jehovah "will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." Advocates of the Well-meant offer wrongly interpret "all" men here to refer to everybody head for head.

Our first argument against this position involves the link between I Timothy 2:4 and its succeeding context (5-6): "[God] will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time" (4-6).

Logically, there are four—and only four—options regarding the interpretation of the word "all" in verses 4 and 6, and the resulting doctrines.

- [1] "All" in verses 4 and 6 means absolutely everybody, resulting in the Well-meant offer and universal atonement.
- [2] "All" in verse 4 means absolutely everybody but "all" in verse 6 refers to (the elect of) all kinds or sorts of people, resulting in the Well-meant offer and particular atonement.
- [3] "All" in verse 4 speaks of (the elect of) all kinds or sorts of people but "all" in verse 6 means absolutely everybody, resulting in God's effectual saving desire and universal atonement.

- [4] "All" in verses 4 and 6 refers to (the elect of) all kinds or sorts of people, resulting in God's effectual saving desire and particular atonement.

Theologically, [3] is incoherent, and I know of no one who believes both that God effectually desires to save the elect alone and that He sent His only begotten Son to die for the sins of everyone head for head. [1] is consistent Arminianism: God wants to save everybody and so Christ died to try to save everybody. [4] is consistent Calvinism: God effectually desires to save all His sheep out of every kindred, tribe, tongue and nation, and so Jesus shed His precious blood for all of them. [2] is an amalgam of Arminianism (an ineffectual divine desire to save the reprobate) and Calvinism (particular atonement).

Textually, the position of Well-meant offer Calvinists [2], is excluded. I Timothy 2 explains why God "will have all men to be saved" (4): "For there is ... one mediator between [the one] God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all" (5-6). If the "all" in verse 4 refers to absolutely everyone, it has the same meaning in verse 6. That is, if the "all" whom God desires to save is every human being head for head (4), then the "all" for whom Christ died is every human being head for head (6). In other words, if I Timothy 2:4 teaches the well-meant offer, then it leads to the heretical doctrine of universal atonement in verse 6! This is something that professed Calvinists should seriously consider, before swiftly drawing back from the Arminian abyss (cf. Canons II)! The fact that the "all" in both verse 4 and verse 6 refers to the same group provides textual support for [4] as the correct interpretation.

Our second argument looks not at the succeeding context but at I Timothy 2:4 itself: God "will have all men [1] to be saved, and [2] to come unto the knowledge of the truth." The two things that Jehovah is here said to desire are essentially one. In fact, I Timothy 2:4 contains a hendiadys, that is, [1] through [2]. In other words, the

**"Thou art worthy, O Lord,
to receive glory and honour
and power: for thou hast
created all things, and for
thy pleasure they are and
were created" (Rev. 4:11)**

Lord wants to save “all men” through their coming to the knowledge of the truth.

By any reasonable analysis, if God really desires everyone to come to the (saving) knowledge of the truth, He is making a very poor job of it. After all, in the history of the world, only a minority of people have ever heard the gospel even once. In Old Testament days, only the Jews received God’s verbal revelation (Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:2). Even in the first 1,500 years of the New Testament era, the gospel was largely confined to the Mediterranean area or northern Europe. Is it really credible that the Most High passionately wants everyone head for head to come to the knowledge of the truth of His crucified and exalted Son, yet He has not even brought the preaching of His Word to most of them?

In our third argument, we move from the succeeding context of I Timothy 2:4 and the text itself to the preceding verses, which exhort us to pray, and express our gratitude to God, for civil rulers:

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth (1-4).

Have you prayed today for a politician, king or anyone in a position of civil authority? You might think, “What’s the point? They are trapped in a politically correct system where it is almost impossible for them to believe in Jesus Christ and live unto Him within that ungodly framework.”

Yet consider Paul’s own day! The Roman Empire in which he lived was the fourth beast of Daniel 7. Under its auspices, the incarnate son of God had been crucified. Paul himself had been imprisoned multiple times by imperial authorities and he would later be martyred by the Roman state in its capital city on the Tiber.

Paul’s point in I Timothy 2 is, pray for all kinds of men, even kings and magistrates, because God wants to save all sorts of people, even pagan rulers, including those who persecute Christians (1-4). Among them too are those for whom our only mediator “gave himself a ransom” (5-6). The apostle gives another good reason for intercession for civil authorities: “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in

all godliness and honesty” (2).

After this examination of I Timothy 2:4 in its context, the Reformed man or woman responds, first, with a measure of holy relief: “It is good to see clearly that I Timothy 2 does not teach either a failed desire of the Lord of glory to save everybody or the Arminian lie of universal atonement.” Second, the apostle’s exhortation regarding intercession and thanksgiving for civil magistrates often forces us to conclude, “I need to pray more for politicians for I have been sorely tempted to neglect this, since it must be so hard for civil rulers to trust in Jesus alone and operate as faithful saints in their environment.”

II Peter 3:9

Besides I Timothy 2:4, II Peter 3:9 is a second New Testament text that is often cited as if it taught a frustrated desire of the Triune God to save everyone head for head. The verse reads, “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

But what one usually hears cited is only this part: “The Lord is ... not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” The “any” and “all” allegedly refer to absolutely everybody. Thus the Well-meant offer claims that God does not wish or desire that a single person perish in hell. It is wrong, however, to take half a verse from the Bible and then run with it into strange theological positions, without even explaining it in its context.

First, what is the situation that II Peter 3 is addressing? Some people denied that the Lord would ever return: “Where is the promise of his coming?” (4). By the inspiration of the Spirit, the apostle explains the reason Jesus has not yet appeared, over against the “scoffers” and their arguments (3-4).

If Peter is teaching that Christ delayed His second coming because God is not willing that any individual human being should perish, as the well-meant offer teaches, the Lord is never going to come back, since everybody will never be saved. It is certain that not everybody has been saved in the past, not everybody is saved now and not everybody shall be saved in the future.

Thus Peter’s argument would reach the same conclu-



sion as the scoffers: Christ is not returning. If He will not come back until He has saved everybody, then we are in for an interminably long wait! Some of the postmillennial Reconstructionists say that the last day might be tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands or millions of years away. The Well-meant offer reading of II Peter 3:9 is even worse: There is no point looking, longing or praying for the Saviour's second coming since He will never return!

Second, Peter exhorts believers to "account that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation" (15). All of those to whom God is longsuffering (9) will certainly be saved, for "the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation" (15). Peter instructs us that we are to "account" or reckon this as a first principle of the Christian religion!

Third, we should notice the word "usward" in the apostolic affirmation that "God is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish." Are we to think that God's long-suffering is particular and always effectual (15) "to usward" (9), that is, His "beloved" elect (1:10; 3:1, 8, 14, 17) in His "beloved Son" (1:17), but that, when the next clause in II

Peter 3:9 states that He is "not willing that any should perish," the word "any" is to be understood universally of each and every human being, most of whom eternally perish? No! God's eternal love and irresistible longsuffering toward us, the predestinated elect, carries through the remainder of the verse: "But, beloved ... the Lord ... is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any [of us] should perish, but that all [of us] should come to repentance" (8-9).

Christ cannot come back so long as there is even a single elect sheep who has not yet been effectually called, any more than the Almighty could have rained down fire and brimstone on Sodom while righteous Lot remained in that city. The full company of the elect, the whole body of Christ, must be regenerated and only then will the Lord return. All of those chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world must be physically conceived and spiritually reborn before He will appear with great majesty to make all things new!

Salvation is of the LORD (5): Jonah in the Belly of the Fish (Jon. 1:17)



Pastor Marcus Wee

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Jonah had been thrown overboard by the mariners, at his own urging (Jon. 1:12). At first, the mariners had refused, resisting God's will of chastisement for His wayward prophet. Finally, as God's anger was directed towards them ("the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them", v. 13b), they recognised the futility of their efforts in the face of God's sovereign will, and cast Jonah into the raging sea.

But that was not the end of the prophet Jonah. He did not perish beneath the waves as he deserved. God mercifully preserved Jonah's life. He had a lesson for Jonah to learn. He had a task for Jonah to accomplish. He had a sign for all to see. And all of that would begin in the belly of a great fish. v. 17: "Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

A Historical Reality

Jonah was alive in the belly of a fish for three days. Do you believe that it really happened? Many today would laugh at you. This is physically impossible, they say. Jonah would have drowned. There was simply not enough breathable oxygen for him to have survived. He would have died from hypothermia under the wet and freezing conditions. He would have been crushed by the great pressure from the depths of the ocean. And so on.

Instead of such unbelief, our response is the response of faith. God said so in His Word; therefore, I believe it. As the American lawyer, William Jennings Bryan, asserted: "I believe in a God who can make a whale and can make a man and make both do what He pleases." Also, "If the Bible had said that Jonah swallowed the whale, I would believe it."

Such is the response of faith—faith takes God at His Word.

It is important to maintain the historicity of the narrative of Jonah, that he was in the belly of the fish for three days, not only because God said so and God is not a liar, but also because our salvation is tied to it. Jesus Himself said so, in Matthew 12:39-40: “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and nights, just as certainly as this event was a historical fact, so too Christ’s death and resurrection after three days is a historical fact.

And the Christian faith is based on historical facts. Our faith is not made up of myths that contain moral lessons; our faith is based on real, historical facts. As the apostle Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15:17: “And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.”

A Miraculous Sign

This event of Jonah being in the belly of the fish for three days and nights is miraculous. It is a wonder, something that does not happen under ordinary circumstances. The unbelieving critics do have something right—it is impossible, ordinarily, for a man to live in the belly of a sea creature for three days. But they fail to reckon that God is the God of wonders, that with God all things are possible (Mk. 10:27).

And with all miracles, they point us, not only to God’s greatness in performing humanly-impossible wonders, they point us to God’s gracious work of salvation. What Jonah endured in the belly of the fish for three days (“belly of hell”, 2:2) was a type of what Christ Himself endured: suffering the agonies of hell on the cross, crucified, dead, and buried. Matthew 12:40: “For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Even as we believe by faith the miraculous sign of Jonah in the belly of the fish, let us believe also the greater miracle, the reality to which the sign points, Jesus’ work of salvation for us, in His suffering, death, and resurrection.

In addition, Jonah is also described as a sign to the Ninevites, and to the present, unbelieving generation. Luke 11:30-32: “For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation. The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation, and condemn them: for she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.”

How was Jonah a sign both to the heathen Ninevites, whom God saved by a wonder of His grace, and also to the unbelieving generation, who rejected the sign of Jonah and the reality to which the sign pointed, Jesus Christ Himself? In this way: Jonah was a sign both of gracious salvation and righteous judgement. Grace, for those who are least deserving of it. Grace, even for a rebellious prophet like Jonah, whom God delivered from the belly of hell. Grace, also for the heathen people of Nineveh, who saw in Jonah a living testimony of God’s grace.

But at the same time that Jonah was a sign of God’s gracious salvation, he was also a sign of God’s righteous judgement. The nature of God’s grace to sinners is that it is shown to those who are undeserving of it. Jonah and the Ninevites deserved God’s righteous judgement, but were spared from it, by God’s grace. So too does every unbeliever deserve God’s righteous judgement, especially the unbelieving generation of Jesus’ day and our day, who see the sign of Jonah and reject the reality to which the sign points, Jesus Christ.

In that way Jonah is a sign both of gracious salvation to the Ninevites and righteous judgement to the unbelieving. In that way we are brought back once again to the reality that salvation is of the LORD. He righteously judges all who reject Him. And He sovereignly and graciously saves those who are undeserving.

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Our Rejection of Conditions (3): Herman Hoeksema, late 1940s and early 1950s (Part 1)



Rev. Martyn McGeown

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In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the topic of conditions was debated in the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Standard Bearer and one of the chief proponents of conditional theology was the Rev. Andrew Petter with whom a number of men, especially Herman Hoeksema, discussed the issue in a robust, but cordial and respectful, manner. One such series, found in volume 26 of the Standard Bearer, is titled “As to Conditions,” although some articles around the same time are titled “Faith: A Condition According to Scripture.” In those articles, Hoeksema defines and explains “conditions.” The whole series is worth reading (the reader can find the articles on pages 28, 52, 76, 100, 124, 196, 220, 244, 269, 292, 316, 364, and 388 of volume 26 of the bound volumes of the SB).

Now, I should add that Hoeksema is not the authority in the PRC, nor would he want to be called the authority—Scripture as it is summarized in the Reformed Confessions is the authority—yet, Hoeksema’s teaching on conditions (namely, why we must reject conditional theology and the term “condition”) is very helpful and insightful. I will quote a lot of examples, and I ask the reader’s indulgence; I had to restrain myself and limit myself to a limited number of quotes. The whole series, as I said, is excellent.

In the following quotes I have added italics for emphasis, where appropriate, so I will not repeat “my italics” after the quotes below. Assume, unless otherwise stated, that the italics are mine.

“The question is, of course, whether faith may be presented as a condition of salvation, and whether the establishment and continuation of God’s covenant with us is in any sense of the word contingent upon our fulfilling the conditions of faith and obedience. This, unless we juggle words, is the plain and simple meaning of the question” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” Standard Bearer, vol. 26, issue 2 [Oct 15, 1949] 29).

“The term ‘condition’ undoubtedly stands for some notion that makes salvation dependent on something man must do” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” Standard Bearer, vol.

26, issue 3 [Nov. 1, 1949] 52).

“How utterly impossible it is, then, to conceive of faith as a condition which man must fulfill in order to obtain salvation, or to enter into the covenant of God!” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” Standard Bearer, vol. 26, issue 4 [Nov 15, 1949], 77).

“A condition is either something which man must fulfill in order to receive grace from God, or it is no condition, but simply a work of God. Faith, or believing the promise of the gospel, is either a condition the fulfillment of which God demands of man before He saves him, and in order that God may establish His covenant with him; or the gift of faith, together with the act of believing, is the sovereign work of God, and then it is no condition. And only the latter is true” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” Standard Bearer, vol. 26, issue 5 [Dec 1, 1949], 101).

“Always a condition is something, some requirement man must fulfill. That means that the entire way of salvation, from beginning to end is, ultimately, dependent on the will of man. Let us, therefore, reject this Pelegian heresy, together with the term that is used to express it.” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” Standard Bearer, vol. 26, issue 6 [Dec 15, 1949], 125).

“There simply is no room for anything that man must fulfill before he can attain to salvation” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” Standard Bearer, vol. 26, issue 6 [Dec 15, 1949], 126).

“Faith can in no wise be presented as a condition which in some way must be fulfilled by man, and is, therefore, in some way dependent on the will of man” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” Standard Bearer, vol. 26, issue 10 [Feb 15, 1950], 222).

“The question is simply whether there is any part of the work of salvation as God works it within us left to man, so that the work of God’s salvation is really not complete, or so that at

any stage of that work of God in us His work is conditioned by and contingent upon anything that we must still do. And also this is most emphatically denied by Canons 3-4.12" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 12 [March 15, 1950], 270).

"We do not say ever, to any man, whether he be elect or reprobate: 'God will save you on condition that you believe; you must first fulfill a condition before God will ever save you.' That certainly is not the gospel; and it certainly is not the Reformed conception of the relation between faith and salvation" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 13 [April 1, 1950], 294).

"Whatever else it (condition) may mean, it certainly denotes something that must be fulfilled prior to something else ... It is a conditional promise, for a condition is something demanded or required as a prerequisite to the granting or performance of something else. It is something that must exist if something else is to take place; and that something else is contingent on the condition" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 14 [April 15, 1950], 316).

"The grace of preservation is God's part in the covenant. But the grace of perseverance is man's part, which always is the fruit of God's part. But these two parts are never so related that man's part is a condition which he must fulfill in order that God may fulfill His part. The grace of God is always unconditional" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 17 [June 1, 1950], 390).

From these statements it is clear that if something is a condition it is something that man must do, perform, produce, or contribute on which his reception of salvation depends, or on which it is contingent. Such a condition must be contrasted, explains Hoeksema, from something that God gives or something that God works in the sinner whom he saves; for, since it is God-given or God-worked, it is not a condition for salvation, but part of the salvation that God gives. That remains true even if in God's good pleasure certain activities of man (believing, repenting, etc.) precede God's giving—and man's receiving—of certain blessings of salvation. Temporal sequence is not decisive in the determination of whether or not something can be called a "condition" in salvation or in the covenant.

Sadness (1)



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The Reality of Sadness

Sadness is an emotion every one of us knows from experience. You know what sadness is because you have felt it. Sadness is an inescapable reality of life in this world. Our experience of sadness may take different shapes depending on our season of life and the circumstance through which God's providence leads us. But in essence, sadness is the same for all of us. Sadness is an inner pain of your heart which you experience when something hard or hurtful happens to you. Sadness is our emotional response to the experience of affliction. Sadness is an inward pain that often shows itself outwardly. Sadness makes you cry, sometimes many tears. Sadness shows in your face, in a downcast countenance. Sadness becomes visible in a weary, worn down posture and appearance.

Scripture does not gloss over or minimise the reality of

sadness, but realistically portrays it in the many shapes it takes in human life. The Psalms especially provide inspired expressions of this emotion which deeply resonate with our own experience. Sadness makes your heart heavy (Ps. 69:20). This sorrow of the heart breaks the spirit (Prov. 15:13). Sadness can be so strong that it almost swallows you up (Ps. 18:4-5); so deep and dark that it feels like a horrible pit (Ps. 40:2). Sadness can be long-lasting (Ps. 13:2). Sadness can keep you up at night so that your bed swims with tears (Ps. 6:6). Sadness saps your strength and leaves you feeling faint and wasting away. (Ps. 31:9-10). Sadness consumes and dims the eyes (Job 17:7). Sadness sometimes brings you to the brink of despair, even to the point of wrestling with the thoughts and feeling "has God abandoned me?" (Ps. 42:9, Ps 77:7-9). There are entire Psalms of lament, in which the inspired Psalmist gives voice to agonising sadness that grips his heart (e.g., Ps.

77, 88). The book of Lamentations is the prophet Jeremiah's outpouring of the sadness of his soul over the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of his people. The Bible does not blink at sadness. Sadness is real. Sadness is painful. Sadness is something every child of God goes through.

Where Did Sadness Come From?

The ancestry of sadness can be traced back to the fall of our first parents. When you read the first two chapters of the Bible, sadness is nowhere to be found. Sadness was not a part of God's original creation. God's creation was very good and without any flaw. God created Adam and Eve perfect, in His own image, and upright in all their ways. Above all, God created Adam and Eve in possession of the highest good, namely, covenant fellowship and friendship with Him. Adam and Eve walked and talked with God in the cool of the day. There was nothing to be sad about!

But then you get to Genesis 3 and the history of the fall of the human race into sin. The first place sadness appears on the pages of Scripture is Gen. 3:16-17. To Eve God says "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children." To Adam He says "cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life." Here is sadness! The bitter fruit of man's transgression against his Covenant Friend-Sovereign! The fall had terrible consequences. The whole creation was cursed for man's sake. Sin and death entered the world. The fall gave birth to sadness. But God, in wondrous grace and mercy, sought and comforted His fallen children. He gave them the Mother Promise, the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that they, and we, would not be swallowed up by sorrow. They had fallen, but by God's mysterious and marvelous design, they fell into the arms of the coming Christ, who in the fullness of time, would be "made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). Thus, even as the first tears fell upon the soil of a fallen world, the eyes of our first parents were lifted up in hope, for the coming of the Man of Sorrows who would save from sorrow, and put an

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end to crying forever.

In sum, we see that sadness is a consequence of the fall. God created man with the capacity for sadness, but Adam and Eve did not feel this emotion in paradise. Sadness was first drawn out of the human heart in response to the new and horrible reality of evil and its effects. Sadness will continue to exist so long as we live in this fallen world. The wise king Solomon, as he reflected upon the human condition in this world, was led by the Spirit to write the sober words: "For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief" (Eccl. 2:23). But in all our sorrows, we have hope!

What Makes Us Sad?

We are a fallen people living in a fallen world. There are manifold reasons for sadness. Ever true to life, our Catechism calls our world "this valley of tears" (Q&A 26). It's a deep, dark place. Many are the shadows cast upon those walking its winding pathways. So many things we meet in this valley cause our hearts to ache and our tears to flow.

Foremost among the reasons for sadness is loss. Indeed, suffering loss—something precious is ripped away from you, leaving a painful hole in your life—is often one of the most painful forms of sadness. Anyone who has walked through the valley of the shadow of death, who has lost a loved one, knows the piercing agony of sadness that death brings, and the recurring waves of grief that follow in its wake. The single person whose hope of marriage goes long unfulfilled, or the childless couple for whom each passing year brings fresh sorrow, know the deep sadness of the loss of "what could have been." The loss of a close relationship with a friend or a loved one, because of conflict, or rejection, or even betrayal, is loss that can bring sadness too excruciat-

ing to put into words. Or maybe you yearn for a close friend but feel you have none. You spend much time lonely and sad. Other kinds of losses bring sadness too. The disappointment of a missed opportunity to get into a certain career you have wanted. Sadness surges within the heart when our plans do not come together as we envision. Sickness or the infirmities of age bring loss. You cannot do what you used to do anymore.

Then there is the sadness of sin. Oh how this weighs upon the believing heart! Indeed, there is a good sorrow, namely the godly sorrow of true repentance, the sorrow that I have offended and aggrieved God (II Cor. 7:9-10). We ought to have this sorrow. It's a fruit of grace and an engine of God-glorifying change in our lives. This godly sorrow will not swallow you up, for it paired with the true and abounding joy of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, there is much sadness that comes from sin. There may be long-lasting consequence of our own sin that we must humbly deal with, and which make us groan. We see the damage that sin does to the church, the division it sows between believers, and we weep. We watch a loved one wander astray from the Lord, and we mourn. We have family and friends who do not know the Lord, and it makes our hearts heavy. So much sadness in this valley of tears!

Is it Sinful to Be Sad?

That's a question Reformed Christians sometimes struggle with. If sadness is a consequence of the fall, does that mean it is sinful to feel sad? Since we know God is sovereign and that all things come to us from His fatherly hand, does that mean I am rebelling against God when I feel sad about something that has happened in my life? Does my sadness go against the petition "Thy will be done"? Sadness is not in itself sinful. The calling of the word of God is not to suppress sadness, or deny it, or never show it. That is not what you find in the Psalms we looked at earlier. Sadness is a proper response to evil! We feel sad precisely because things are not the way they are supposed to be! In our fallen world there is so much hurt, brokenness, and trouble. God created us with emotions. Emotions are not sinful in themselves. The question is how we handle our emotions. Sadness, like any other emotion, can be handled properly according to God's Word, or it can be handled sinfully. Sadness can be expressed in healthy God-glorifying ways, or in unhealthy God-dishonoring ways.

A couple of biblical examples will help us see this more

Scripture does not gloss over or minimise the reality of sadness, but realistically portrays it in the many shapes it takes in human life.

clearly. First, think of Hannah in I Samuel 1. God gave her the heavy burden of barrenness. This inability to conceive brought her great sorrow. Hannah's sadness was compounded by those closest to her. Hannah's husband Elkanah had sinfully married a second wife, Peninnah, who "provoked her sore, for to make her fret" (I Sam. 1:6). Peninnah threw it in Hannah's face, causing more heartache and tears. Elkanah was little help. This is evident from his attempt to comfort her "Hannah, why weepest thou?... am not I better to thee than ten sons?" (I Sam. 1:8). Elkanah meant well, but he didn't understand Hannah's deep sorrow. Yes, of course she valued the love of her husband, but that did not cancel out the very real pain and grief of her childlessness. Elkanah's counsel was basically "Hannah, because you have me, you really don't have any reason to be so sad." That was miserable comfort to Hannah which only added to her sorrow. But as we read on in I Samuel 1 how do we find Hannah handling her sadness? She went to God's house. There "... she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore" (I Sam. 1:10). As Hannah poured out her soul to the Lord, even as she wrestled with the Lord's will for her, she did not sinfully rebel against God, or question His wisdom and goodness. In Hannah we see a woman of God, by the grace of God, handling sadness in a good, God-glorifying way. Even Eli the high priest judged her rashly and unheard, jumping to the conclusion that she was drunk. Yet Hannah replied to Eli with grace: "No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD. Count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial: for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto" (I Sam. 1:15-16). The story of Hannah is a glimpse of how even deep sadness can be handled and expressed properly according to the Word of God.

The very opposite of Hannah is Ahab in I Kings 21. Here we find a wicked man who handled his sadness in sinful ways. Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard. When Naboth refused to sell it, Ahab melted down into a pool of sadness and self-pity: "...he laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread" (I Kgs 21:4). His wife Jezebel got so tired of Ahab's self-absorbed moping that she arranged for false accusations to be brought against Naboth, so that she could have him stoned, and procure his vineyard for her brooding husband. Ahab's sadness was selfish. His sadness led to sulking, self-pity, and ultimately to being complicit in murder and theft. Due to our sinful nature, we are prone to act on our emotions in sinful ways. Satan tries his best to use sadness to tempt us to rebel against God. He tries to turn our sadness into a stumbling block. We must be on guard. We must know his devices. When we are sad, we are vulnerable. Satan is an opportunist. He tries to prey on us when we are vulnerable. Thus, like Hannah, we do well to draw near to the Lord when we are sad, and by faith, rely upon His sustaining and strengthening grace. His strength is made perfect in our weakness (II Cor. 12:9).

But now, if these examples are not proof enough, all debate is settled when we look at our Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself experienced sadness, even intense sadness. But Jesus always handled sadness in an upright, God-glorifying way. At the incarnation Jesus, who, according to His person, is the God the Son, became fully human. Jesus took upon Himself our human nature, both body and soul, with the full range of human emotions, including sadness. He felt what we feel,

yet without sin! The words of Hebrews 2:17 are truly a wonder to ponder: "Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God."

Perhaps one of the most touching passages of Scripture where we see Jesus experience sadness is John 11. In this chapter Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is very sick. But rather than going to Bethany to visit right away, Jesus tarries for two days until after Lazarus died. Jesus then journeys to Bethany with his disciples. When Jesus saw Mary and Martha weeping over the loss of their brother, the Bible says "he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled" (John 11:33). Sadness! As Jesus came to Lazarus' tomb, we come to the Bible's shortest verse: "Jesus wept." Two words. Yet so powerful! Jesus wept! Think about that for moment... what that means! We have a Saviour who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Heb. 4:15)! When he saw Martha's deep sadness, and watched Mary grieve, Jesus' own sympathetic heart was full of sadness too! Jesus' eyes ran with tears, so moved was He at the sight of the ugliness of death and the pain of those He loved. This is all more amazing when we remember: Jesus came for the very purpose of raising Lazarus from the dead! Why should He cry right before calling Lazarus from the tomb? This shows us in the most powerful way the compassion of our Savior, who felt sadness, and in love, came to deliver us from sadness. Jesus wept. This truth, all by itself, gives us tremendous comfort when we are sad and when we weep.

(to be continued...)

Satisfaction in God



Christine Ong

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How do we experience covetousness?

As a child, I was taught 'thou shalt not covet' as the tenth commandment in God's law. I understood covetousness to be being jealous of what other people had (as the commandment had a long list which included possessions, relations and livestock), that I didn't. Yet, because no one knew I was experiencing it unless I told them, it was much easier to do than lying, stealing, or being rude. I also learned the English words 'kiasu' (scared to lose) and 'kiabo' (scared of not

having something), and there was even a comic 'Mr Kiasu', a stereotype of familiar Singaporean behaviours. The five Cs of Singapore – cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club membership – are common aspirations.

As smart phones became more common, social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and more recently, TikTok are our constant companions. Anyone can share their words, pictures and videos with their network, or even the public, depending on their settings. Everyone on social media is accessible for comparison. Even if these comparisons are not

necessarily realistic due to filters or editing (and we know this), we are still affected when we compare our bloop-er-filled lives to others' highlights.

The term 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) was introduced in 2004, and has been used extensively since 2010 to describe the phenomenon observed on social networking sites, where people feel apprehensive of not being in the know, or missing out on information, events, experiences or life decisions that could make their life better. It was added to the Oxford dictionary in 2013. Covetousness described in a nicer sounding way? Yup! Covetousness may not just feel like jealousy, but also fear. Fear is powerful. It can make us behave irrationally, and act on impulse.

Online shopping also opens our eyes to the many things we could possibly own, compared to days when the newest products were featured in shop window displays. The Great Singapore Sale is no longer that great, now that it is just one of the many sales that take place year-round. Black Friday, Cyber Monday, 11.11 Singles Day sales are just some examples.

What is covetousness and why are we covetous?

Covetousness is desiring something which God has revealed through circumstances to be something that isn't for us. It can extend beyond things that can be purchased. A single person may covet being married, a married person who does not have children may covet children, or a family with 1 child may covet more children. That desire pushes against God's providence and effectively says to God 'my way is better than your way! I am not happy with what you have given me, your promises aren't enough for me, and I will be happy only if I get X' Whoa, what does that sound like? Something is more important to me than God? Something is as equally important to me as God? To put it directly, covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). We compare ourselves with others and our pride (our self as god) causes us to want what they have, or even more than what they have so that we can be better than them.

Covetousness is complex because it is associated with other sins. 2 Timothy 3:1-8 describes men in the last days (our days). "Men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy...lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God". A covetous person loves the world and the things that are in the world. The things of the world cater to the inclinations of our human nature in these three ways: first, the lust

of the flesh, or fleshly pleasures and luxuries. Second, the lust of the eyes, or covetousness and craving riches. Third, the pride of life, in craving honour and applause. "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15), and by extension love for the neighbour! The Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 44 Q&A 113 states that the tenth commandment requires that "even the smallest inclination or thought contrary to any of God's commandments never rise in our hearts; but that at all times we hate all sin with our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness". What a tall order that shows us how easy it is to break this commandment!

Perhaps unsurprisingly, covetousness also leads to other sins. It was present in the garden of Eden, when Eve succumbed to temptation because she "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise". In 1 Kings 21, King Ahab of Samaria coveted Naboth's vineyard, and when Naboth would not hand it over as it was his heritage, King Ahab's desire was so strong that he refused to eat (self-harm). Jezebel his wife plotted to seize the vineyard, by telling lies (getting two men to accuse Naboth of blaspheming God and the king) and murder (having Naboth stoned).

Covetousness creeps up on us especially when we are idle. "The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labour. He coveteth greedily all the day long:" (Proverbs 21:25-26a) Instead of being faithful in our callings, are we tempted to while away our time looking at what others have, and coveting them? Such was the danger for king David, who coveted Uriah's wife Bathsheba while his men were fighting a war. He should have been at the frontlines as it was "the time when kings go forth to battle", but he "tarried still at Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 11).

We can also succumb to covetousness when we think that we are the possessors of our material gains, and forget that our calling is to labour, and that the fruits of that labour come to us from God's hand in His perfect will. In 2 Kings 5, Gehazi, Elisha's servant, coveted Naaman's riches which were rejected by Elisha. He devised a plan to get hold of these riches and thought he had succeeded after hiding them away. Alas, he was rebuked and punished with leprosy that would be passed down in his generations. That was certainly not the inheritance he wanted to give. The rich man of Luke 12 planned to build barns for his goods and for his soul to take its ease, eat, drink and be merry. Alas, God said unto him, "Thou fool, this night

thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?"

How do we focus on counting our blessings?

Right after Paul instructs Timothy that "the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows"; he commands Timothy to "flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness". He elaborates on faith – "Fight the good fight of faith... Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:10-12, 17).

When we meet with difficult circumstances, we can continue to fight the good fight of faith, looking at them through the following lenses:

1. **Timing lens.** God's way and timing is best. "My times are in thy hand: Deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them that persecute me." (Psalm 31:15) Our enemies include our old man of sin, with its insatiable hunger for the things of this life.

2. **Challenge lens.** Instead of focusing on people who seemingly have life easy, and complaining why our life is so difficult, we can consider heroes of faith who stared down challenges, and are a cloud of witnesses for us "...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." (Hebrews 12:1) knowing that "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." (Romans 8:37)

3. **Learning lens.** What does God want me to learn? Is this the Lord's chastening hand? "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" Psalm 119:71. As the author of this Psalm, King David was chastened for his covetousness and other sins when God took away his illegitimate child with Bathsheba. While the child was sick, David besought God and fasted (2 Samuel 12). This trying period would have taught David the seriousness of his sins against God's laws. We also need to learn contentment, as Paul wrote to the Philippians "for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content". This is a difficult lesson that we may take our entire lives to learn.

4. **Gratitude lens.** We may have lost something, or God has made it plain that we will not have something at this

point. "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." (Luke 12:15) Our identity is not in temporal things. Even if we have no earthly possessions, we can be thankful for our priceless inheritance. Our Saviour coveted no earthly riches or glory, and gave his life to impute to us righteous contentment.

When things are going smoothly, that is also when we should be conscious that everything is from God, and give to others as stewards of what God has given us – Proverbs 21:26 "He coveteth greedily all the day long: but the righteous giveth and spareth not." If we post things on social media, we can be mindful if we are boasting – "...charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up" (1 Corinthians 13:4b). Is it out of vanity, wanting likes, wanting others to know that we are doing well? Social psychologists have observed an ironic phenomenon, where people look at the lives they have constructed online in which they only show the best of themselves, and feel a fear of missing out in relation to their own lives. They don't measure up to the lives they tell others they are living, and they feel inauthentic, curiously envious of their own avatars. Let us also be mindful of how we spend our time. Are we feeding the appetite of our covetous old man of sin, or starving it? Are we constantly thinking about how the grass is greener on the other side, neglecting to water our own grass? Are we looking to enrich ourselves only, or to the needs that others have that we can help with?

Let us sing with the Psalmist from Psalter 163 Satisfaction in God:

*O Lord, my God, most earnestly
My heart would seek Thy face,
Within Thy holy house once more
To see Thy glorious grace.*

***Apart from Thee I long and thirst,
And nought can satisfy;
I wander in a desert land
Where all the streams are dry***

*The lovingkindness of my God
Is more than life to me;
So I will bless Thee while I live
And lift my prayer to Thee.
**In Thee my soul is satisfied,
My darkness turns to light
And joyful meditations fill
The watches of the night.***

*My Saviour, 'neath Thy sheltering wings
My soul delights to dwell;
**Still closer to Thy side I press,
For near Thee all is well.**
My soul shall conquer every foe,
Upholden by Thy hand;
Why people shall rejoice in God,
Thy saints in glory stand.*

COVENANT LIFE IN PICTURES



We thank God for the baptisms and confession of faith of four brethren from the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Fellowship of Kolkata in January. Sisters Shihbani and Aweksha and Brother Nirmal were baptized, and Brother Sumit made confession of faith. We rejoice also with Brother Sandip and Sister Shihbani on their marriage, which was also held in January.

COVENANT LIFE IN PICTURES



Above: Chinese New Year visitations
at various church members' homes in February
Below: The Kregels and Bruinsmas
with the children of CERC

