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LOYALTY OATH

Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. (Ruth 1:16-17)

During wedding we often hear quoted this statement of Ruth to her mother-in-law. (Do they expect the bride to say this to her new mother-in-law?) It is indeed a beautiful statement of loyalty. Tradition says that Ruth was a princess of Moab, one of the daughters of the king. She would then be giving up privilege to help a poor widow with no means of support. It would mean that gleaning in the grain fields as a pauper was probably the first hard work she had ever done. She could not have known she would marry a rich man. She could not have known that kings would indeed include her in their family tree. She was giving up all with no promise of anything in return.

As beautifully worded as Ruth's statement is, there is another statement of loyalty that may even be greater, if less known. Ruth's descendant, David, had been king for forty years. His beloved son, Absalom, was in the process of attempting a coup. Absalom had tricked his father into letting him go to the place where kings were crowned, and there proclaimed himself king. He had the backing of many of the people, and some of the important priests. David realized his own situation was precarious, and so he fled Jerusalem, which he had made his capital. In American history it would be like President Madison fleeing Washington before it was burned by the British, or President Jefferson Davis fleeing Richmond before the fall of the Confederate States of America.

As David fled Jerusalem, he reviewed the loyal troops he had with him. The Cherethites and Pelethites, a sort of Praetorian Guard, passed by him. Then came a troop of Philistine soldiers under a man named Ittai. King David told Ittai he need not put his lot in with the fleeing king. He had only recently come over to David, and could easily go somewhere else, in case David lost.

Ittai replied, "As the LORD liveth, and as my lord the king liveth, surely in what place my lord the king shall

be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be." (2 Sam 15:21) Ittai was a soldier, not a poet. His promise may not be as beautiful sounding as Ruth's promise, but it may be more significant.

Ruth was giving up home and possibly wealth. The only threat to her life was poverty. Ittai the Gittite was promising to follow David, even knowing that death was probable. Ruth could later decide to go home, and would probably be accepted back. Ittai, on the other hand, had already left home and would die if he went back. Most of David's wars, and those of his predecessor, had been with Ittai's people. By following David, he was exiled from his homeland. Furthermore, consider where he was from. Ittai was not just a Philistine; he was a Philistine from Gath. David had sealed his reputation by killing the best-known resident of Gath, one tall dude named Goliath. Not only was Ittai a traitor to his nation, but more especially to his hometown. He was a traitor as well to his god. Here he is, swearing by the God whose holy box had toppled the chief Philistine idol.

Homeward lies death. With David may also lie death. He could go somewhere new, and live, but he chose loyalty to God and his new king.

Many people have had to make a similar choice. Even in this day, people who choose to follow God may lose family. A Catholic who leaves Roman Catholicism is treated as one dead. A Muslim who converts to Christianity is shunned by family, or even has his life threatened. And yet they say to Christ, "Surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be." How can any of us, with whom there is no threat to life except from sin, say any less. In life, in death, with God shall we be.

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TIME, OR FOREVER

Books: The Time Machine (by H.G. Wells); Timing Is Everything; When That Time Comes; Till the End of Time (by Sabra Brown Steinsiek); The Day of the Jackal (by Frederick Forsyth)

Songs: "Time On My Hands"; "Time to Say Good-Bye"; "One O'Clock Jump"; "Where or When"

Movies: "High Noon"; "Twelve O'Clock High"; "It Happened One Night"; "The Big Clock" (with Ray Milland); "2001: A Space Odyssey"

Television: "Quantum Leap"; "The City on the Edge of Forever" (episode of "Star Trek")

These few examples may show that man is obsessed with time. Maybe that is because we live in it, and sometimes want to get out of it. We write about time. We depend on our clocks, PDA's, Blackberries, and

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computers to tell us what time it is, or isn't. (The next time you see someone check his watch, ask him for the time. He will almost always have to check his watch again because he had looked at it to see what time it was *not*, rather than what time it was.) We are born, we live through our time on earth, and we die. Meanwhile, we count time by days, weeks, months, birthdays, new years, hours, minutes, seconds, and now even nanoseconds.

The Bible is full of references to time. Some might think that strange because God is not constrained by time. On the other hand, the Bible was written for us carbon-based, time-bound life forms on planet Earth.

God and Time

God is outside of time. He is not bound by time. In fact, he could be said to have invented (or created) time. "And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day." (Genesis 1:5)

It is hard for us to conceive of a timeless God. We are so bound by time that we have difficulty understanding that which is not so bound. So people

ask, "What was there before God was?" They want to know, "Where did God come from?" And then they have difficulty understanding that there was no before God was, and that he couldn't come from anything because he always has been.

God's view of time may have something to do with his knowledge. How can God know the future? How could he have told the prophets accurately what would come to pass years or hundreds of years later? When you are outside of time it is easy. God knows because it is all present time to him. Since he is outside of time, he exists currently (if such a word can be used of him) today and two thousand years ago. He knows our future because it is part of his present. After all, "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." (2 Peter 3:8)

That, of course, creates what to us seems a paradox. If God knows what will happen because it is happening, how does that affect free will? If he knows that a person will not choose to obey him before death, does that compel the person not to obey? Or can God's knowledge be changed by our choices? Since the Bible clearly teaches that we have choice it makes for an interesting, but ultimately unproductive discussion. We either conclude that God does not have all knowledge or that he is unjust in punishing sinners who have no choice. We usually discount a third choice, that we just cannot understand it because we are bound by time, and so we are wasting our time by discussing it.

Of course, that quote from Peter has been misinterpreted and misused many times. People forget that Peter was talking about being patient with God. Of course, there was the man who supposedly argued with God. He told God that since he was only making ten dollars an hour it should be ten thousand dollars. After all, if a day is as a thousand years, why not dollars? So God answered him and said it would happen. When the man asked how soon he could expect it, God replied, "In a day."

Even though God may not be constrained by time, he understands it. He even knows when time is right. "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, 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) For one who doesn't experience time, or maybe because he invented it, his timing is impeccable.

A Few Days

There are a few time periods that stand out in the scriptures. Perhaps the most famous of those is the period

of forty days. There are eleven different periods of forty days mentioned in the Bible. That would seem to make it a significant number of days.

Most people can remember that it rained on Noah forty days, which may have been the last time that New Mexico got forty days of rain in any given year. Because the Israelites wandered in the wilderness forty years, one for each day the spies were in Canaan, some people might remember that instance. Three people fasted for a period of forty days: Moses twice (both on Sinai when the Law was given), Elijah (1 Kings 19:8, traveling to Sinai), and Jesus (while being tempted by the devil). But how many people can name the other periods of forty days? How many do you know? (Stop, don't read on until you try to figure out the other five instances.) OK, here they are. The period of embalming for Joseph (Gen 50:3). Goliath challenged Israel (1 Sam 17:16). Ezekiel prophetically lying on his right side (Ezek 4:6). Jonah's message to Ninevah about how long they had to repent (Jonah 3:4). The number of days between the time Jesus was resurrected and ascended to the Father (Acts 1:3)

What is the significance of forty days? Who can say for sure? One possible interpretation is that it is a time of preparation. Certainly it can be argued that something significant ended each of those periods. The question is, was the event significant because it followed forty days, or is the forty day period significant because it happened to precede the event? Just because it seemed significant those times, does that mean that forty-day periods might have spiritual significance today? Nobody can answer that from the scriptures.

Three and a half

For those that work for an hourly wage in the United States, time and a half is significant. Any time worked over forty hours in a week is to be paid at a rate one and a half times the normal hourly wage. In prophecy, however, it is not time and a half, but "time, times, and half a time" that is significant. Because of references to forty-two months (Rev 11:2, 13:5) or 1,260 days, most people accept a "time" to be a year. The phrase is actually rarely used, and unique to the books of Daniel and the Revelation. In every case, the time is used symbolically for a period of persecution of God's people.

If seven is a perfect number, then the half-seven might symbolize incompleteness or imperfection. Regardless of the specifics, which often aren't as significant in prophecy, the interpretation is fairly obvious. The enemies of God may prevail for a period, but God is aware of time, and will not let his people be persecuted beyond reason. The harrying of God's people will not be forever. God will overcome. In that sense, three and a half times is actually a good thing, because it is not seven, nor will it ever be.

The most significant time

There is one time period that may be the most significant. There are many almost insignificant examples of this period. It is how many day's journey into the wilderness Moses asked of Pharaoh (Ex 3:18, et al). It is the length of time Saul's father's asses were missing (1 Sam 9:20). It was the length of a plague that resulted from David's unwise census (1 Chron 21:12). It was the length of a fast before Esther went to talk to the King (Esth 4:16). But in the two significant examples, it shows that God is intimately aware of time on earth. The timing, as always with God, was precise.

When the world was created, speculate the rabbis, God created a great fish for one purpose only. Thousands of years later, that great fish (or an ancestor) fulfilled his purpose by being at the right place in the Mediterranean during a specific storm. He waited by a specific ship until the crew threw a specific man, named Jonah, overboard. Then this fish swallowed the man, and let him live in his belly for three days. At a specific time and place, either where Jonah started his voyage or on a coast nearest to Ninevah, the fish vomited the man up on the shore. His purpose was done; a three-day case of indigestion.

"For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly: so shall the Son of man be three days

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and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matt 12:40) Jesus said the timing of Jonah's sojourn in the fish was significant, because it was prophetic. Periods of three days are common in the Bible, but that three days was important, because it was symbolic of the most important three days in the history of man. After Jesus was crucified he spent all or part of three days in the tomb. That is not the significant part. God knew precisely when the three days was up, and raised his son from the grave at just the right time. Just as the fish vomited Jonah up, the earth, in a sense, vomited up Jesus because he had served his allotted time. The grave could hold him no more, and because of that we need not be as concerned about time. Because Jesus arose after three days, we are now part of eternity. Like God, his people are now outside of time.

WISDOM TO THE WISE

And in the hearts of all that are wise hearted I have put wisdom, that they may make all that I have commanded thee; The tabernacle of the congregation, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is thereupon, and all the furniture of the tabernacle, And the table and his furniture, and the pure candlestick with all his furniture, and the altar of incense, And the altar of burnt offering with all his furniture, and the laver and his foot, And the cloths of service, and the holy garments for Aaron the priest, and the garments of his sons, to minister in the priest's office, And the anointing oil, and sweet incense for the holy place: according to all that I have commanded thee shall they do. (Ex 31:6-11)

Moses was given the pattern to build the Tabernacle. Then God told him that certain men would help him to make the tent and its furnishings. Betzalel and Achliav were extremely talented men, skilled in a variety of arts: metal casting, metal working, embroidery, carpentry, and tentmaking. Apparently they also had assistants. Speaking of all those who would help, God made a strange statement. "In the hearts of all that are wise-hearted I have put wisdom." What did he mean by that? Isn't the definition of wise-hearted having wisdom?

One interpretation of that passage might simply be that these men have the wisdom they do because God gave it to them. They are wise-hearted because God gave them a wise heart. This may be the simplest interpretation, but there might also be another one.

Why were Betzalel and Achliav chosen for this task? Was it because they already had the God-given

abilities required? No. It was because they had the capability of receiving the wisdom to do the task at hand. And how did God know they had that capacity? Because they were already wise-hearted.

In education classes they talk about "readiness to learn." A student cannot learn if they don't have the background information on which to build. Teaching is almost worthless if the student is worried about not having had a meal in two days, or has a sick parent. There is also an emotional readiness. Many students have struggled with great literature because they were just not emotionally ready for that particular book. Two years, or two decades, later they may devour the book, but not right then. Betzalel and Achliav were able to learn because they were ready to learn.

Perhaps, though, the wisdom possessed from the beginning by Betzalel and Achliav had little to do with their craftsmanship. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding." (Prov 9:10) Because they had a heart to follow God they were granted wisdom in multiple crafts. This would have been important. Many craftsmen feel that their way may be better than a draftsman's concept. They may add something here, take away something there, until the finished product is different from the design off which they are working. These two gentlemen had such a wise heart for following God that they could be trusted to make the items "according unto the pattern which the LORD had showed Moses." (Num 8:4) They could not improve on God's pattern, and they were wise enough to know that. In their wise-hearted approach God added the wisdom to create some of the most beautiful items ever seen.

Timothy J. O'Hearn
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123