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IN AN INFERIOR BODY

It's tough being superior in a body that is considered inferior. I know. My name is Gretl. I have an older brother named Hansel.

Mine is the superior intellect, but I am always looked down upon because I am a woman; worse, I am a girl. But I tell you, if it weren't for me, Hansel would not be alive right now. He is the one who made all the mistakes. After all, in the middle of a famine when even the animals are starving, who leaves a trail of bread crumbs? In a forest known to be full of hungry animals? And then when we found that house, who was it that stuffed his face with gingerbread, without asking permission? Was it the properly cautious little sister? No, it was Mr. I'm-Hungry-So-Don't-Try-To-Stop-Me. Who fattened himself, just as the witch wanted? Who would have walked into the oven on his own if there was food in it? Certainly not the "inferior" sister, who outsmarted even the witch. (It was easy to outsmart the brother, not so easy to outsmart another woman.)

Well, just as it is tough to be superior in a girl's body, it is even tougher to be a superior spiritual being in an inferior physical body. Yet that is what God chose to be. Imagine! As a spiritual being, God was not restrained by space or time. He was (is) everywhere, everywhen. He knows the future because it is his present/past. His ability to multitask is endless. And yet, he chooses to be constrained by time and space.

What might it have been like for the baby Jesus? Used to being, he is now limited. He cannot move. He cannot communicate freely. I don't believe any of this "no crying he makes" nonsense. He must have cried. Maybe not out of sorrow; maybe just to communicate.

And then there was that walking on water bit. Pretty impressive stuff. And yet, how must it have felt to have to do even that? Don't you think he wished he could have just been at Genneseret without having to walk there, even if he was able to take the shortcut?

How many times in his thirty-something years might he have thought, "let's get this thing over with." Why could he not just go from newborn to resurrected? Yes, he had to learn to suffer like man. (Heb 2:9-10) But just a few years could have taught him that. And, yes, he had to prepare his disciples to spread the gospel. That took three to four years. It might have been nice, though, to skip straight from that baby in swaddling clothes to

itinerant rabbi without going through that time in between. (Although maybe it was good that he spent time as a teenager, so teenagers can relate to him.)

Maybe there was a purpose for every day he spent on this earth. Still, a man that could pray "let this cup pass from me" may also have wished some of those days could have been skipped.

We live in that "inferior" body, that he shared for a lifetime. Because he shared this body, and yet was raised from death in this body, we can know that we are only shortly constrained.

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. (1 Cor 15:51-53)

Paul rejoiced that God became man. More than that, he said we should all be of a like mind.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Php 2:5-11)

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GOOD AND BAD

Good and bad. Light and dark. Young and old. Rich and poor. Our lives are full of contrasts. It almost seems that we cannot define a thing except by its opposite. Rather than explaining what it is, we explain what it is not.

Apparently this is not new. Jewish poetry is characterized by just this idea. It does not rhyme, like English (and some other countries') poetry. Instead one of the distinguishing characteristics of Jewish poetry is the couplet. Two lines next to each other either say the same thing in a slightly different way, or say a thing and then its opposite. This may be most obvious in the Proverbs or in Psalm 119. Other poems make these contrasts on an even larger scale. Such a poem is Psalm 1.

His delight is in the law of the Lord

The first two verses of the psalm include several contrasts. The obvious one is between the man who delights in God and the one who denies God. There is also the idea of day and night. But there is also a contrast between different aspects or locations of the ungodly.

The blessing is on the man who does not do three contrasting things. First, he does not walk in the counsel of sinners. Walking is a common metaphor for our journey in life. One of the apostles of Jesus, perhaps thinking of this psalm, wrote "If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood

Blessed is the man who does not sit in that chair, because all the scornful man gets in return is contempt.

of Jesus the Messiah his son continues to cleanse us of all sin." (1 John 1:7) Walking is a continual action. Walking in the light, or in the counsel of sinners, implies that it is not part of a short-lived association. One did not just cross the path of the sinner; he or she walked in his counsel. That person sought, listened to, and followed the advice of one who had already established that he did not pay any attention to God. The man of God, then, is one who does not follow bad advice.

The blessing is also on the man who "does not stand in the way of sinners." This does not mean that he is standing in such a way as to block a sinner from

continuing in his sinful way. He is standing in the sinner's way, but not to impede his progress. There may be many reasons that he is standing, and not walking, but he is still in the pathway of the sinner. "Broad is the way that leadeth to destruction." (Matt 7:13) This is contrasted with the narrow way that leads to life. Whatever his reason for standing in the sinner's path, such a man is still standing in the wrong path. Perhaps he is standing there to cheer on the sinner who is running toward destruction. Maybe he is standing because he does not want to travel alone. By standing in that path, such a person has made a choice to associate with those who can only lead him in the wrong way. That is why a blessing is placed on the man who does not stand in that way. He is blessed because he is on God's path. He is also blessed because those who run down that other path are likely to heap on him curses and imprecations, rather than blessings. If he were to stand in the way of sinners, and especially to stand as a witting or unwitting hindrance, all he would bring on himself would be abuse and not blessing.

The first sinner walks; the second stands. The third has sat himself down in the seat of the scornful. He is settled and comfortable. Worse, he is taking the chair of one who is not just rejecting God, as bad as that may be, or one who is a willing, but perhaps passive, sinner. He sits in the seat of the scornful. This is the braggart. This is the one who puts others down. This is the one who makes fun of those who would try to follow God's path. Blessed is the man who does not sit in that chair, because scorn breeds scorn. All that the scornful man gets in return is contempt. "The thought of foolishness is sin: and the scorner is an abomination to men." (Prov 24:9) Moreover, he receives the just punishment for his reproaches. "Judgments are prepared for scorners, and stripes for the back of fools." (Prov 19:29) The man who refuses to sit in this person's chair is blessed, because he will not receive the stripes. Instead he gains wisdom. "When the scorner is punished, the simple is made wise: and when the wise is instructed, he receiveth knowledge." (Prov 21:11) (Do you get the idea that Solomon, like his father, had little use for the scornful person?)

In contrast to walking/standing/sitting among the sinners, the man who will be blest delights in the word of God. The immediate implication is that the one who has been previously described shows contempt for God's word. He delights instead in sin. A second implication is that the one who meditates on the word of God will not delight in sin, and that also is a reason he is blessed.

What is the distinguishing characteristic of the person whose delight is in the law of the Lord? It is that he meditates on it day and night. This is one example of

where Hebrew poetry uses a couplet to say the same thing rather than a contrast. It is almost axiomatic that what one spends his free time doing is that which holds his interest. If a person spends all his free time looking at pornography it is a foregone conclusion that his real interest is not fine literature. When a person spends every waking moment playing video games, his interest is not gourmet dining. One whose delight is the law of the Lord spends his time, day and night, meditating on that law. It is what he is interested in. It is what controls his life. He may do other things, but it all comes back to whether it complies with God's law. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with spending some time in other pursuits. Clearly we sometimes have to spend a lot of time in providing for our families, or school work, or other important activities. Sometimes those things take up most of our time. But the blessed man is one who, even in those activities is thinking about God's word. When watching television programs that are about other things, he still keeps God's word in mind. And he takes opportunities to actually read the word of God, individually or with family (or both).

The tree and the straw

The next contrast between the righteous and the ungodly relates to farming. Essentially it says the former is living and the latter is dead.

In the American southwest we know the value of water, and trees. In 1902 it was said that the town of Carlsbad, New Mexico had more trees in the city limits than any city west of the Mississippi river, including San Francisco. That was because the town was on a river and had an excellent irrigation system. In Albuquerque one can trace the path of the Rio Grande by the number of trees along its banks. In a region where drought is a fact of life, a tree planted by the water is blessed more than one planted a few feet away. Such a tree is nourished and strengthened at all times. When other trees get blown over, the cottonwoods along the river stand firm. This is the man of God. In times of trouble he stands firm.

In contrast, the unrighteous man is dead and dry. When wheat is harvested, the time-honored way of keeping the good stuff is to beat the plants with a flail. Then one waits for a good breeze and throws everything up in the air. The grain is heavy enough to fall to the floor. The chaff or straw is light, and is blown away. The unrighteous man is "here today and gone tomorrow." Worse, when the storms of life come, he has no root. He has nothing to help him through the hard times. That is not a blessed way to live.

God knows

Earlier the psalmist said the blessed man did not stand in the way of the sinner. Now he says the sinner will not stand in the judgement. He will certainly face the

judge, but to stand here is in contrast to falling. The sinner, in the judgement, will not be able to stand tall and confident. Instead he will fall on his face to beg for mercy.

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand? (Rev 6:15-17)

Sinners will not stand in the congregation of the righteous. Sinners will not walk or sit in the congregation of the righteous, either. The problem there is that it is pretty hard to find someone who has not sinned. But there is a difference between one who has sinned and one who

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continues as a sinner. Anyone that God forgives is not a sinner, unless he subsequently chooses to walk in his old ways. Anyone who can stand in the congregation of the righteous, and stand proudly, is not a sinner, because they follow God.

The psalmist says that God knows way of the righteous. He not only knows the path the righteous should walk, because he made that path; he also knows those who are walking in the path. What an awesome thought. The God of the universe can know my name. Not only know my name, but know me. After all, a lot of people may know my name but never know me. But God chooses to know the path of the righteous. Of course, there is the contrast. "The way of the ungodly shall perish." And if God's knowing the way of the righteous includes those on it, then the perishing of the way of the ungodly includes those on that way.

Why does that way perish? What is involved in this destruction? The fact that this line is coupled with "the Lord knows the way of the righteous" may give a hint. The way of the ungodly will perish because God does not know that way. To be out of the mind of God is destruction. The ultimate punishment is separation from God.

Good and bad. Righteous and unrighteous. Godly and ungodly. Yes, the psalm makes contrasts. Every one of them shows the righteous favorably and the ungodly in danger. They are opposites, but the psalmist makes it clear which extreme is the best.

DEFENDING THE FAITH

Many people through the years have asked, or been asked, “If someone threatened your life because of your faith, would you remain faithful?” A few people can answer with certainty, “Yes, I would be faithful even if they kill me.” Most people might answer that they think they would, or hope they would, but admit that under the actual threat they might not. A related, and maybe in some ways more difficult question is what you would do if your life was not being directly threatened, but your faith was. That is, if someone challenged what you consider to be the essentials of obedience to God, would you stand up against such a person?

Just such a question came up about 2,150 years or more ago. Beginning about 166 BCE and ending about 143 BCE, a family of Jewish priests faced just such a question, and became famous for standing up for God’s way. In fact, these times are still celebrated by the Jewish people to this day.

A little background might be in order. The Jewish people had returned from Babylonian captivity almost 400 years previously. The Law of Moses had regained prominence in Jewish religious life. They had even retained their way of life through the reign of Alexander the Great. But after Alexander died, his kingdom was split among four generals. Two of them, and their successors, continued to fight each other, with the Jewish nation in the middle. When the Seleucid (northern) general, Antiochus IV Epiphanes gained the upper hand he tried to make the Jews become Greek in culture. Not a bad idea, that, except that there were certain things about Greek society that the Jewish people just could not participate in. These included, most notably, sporting events and worship of the

Greek gods. They could not participate in sports because total nudity was a violation of Jewish morals. And of course they could not worship the Greek gods. That was what had gotten them exiled to Babylon.

Antiochus, to make a long story short, sacrificed a pig on the altar in the Temple, thus making it unclean. He forced Jewish men to forgo or reverse their circumcisions. He basically ruled that Jewish life would cease. And there were some of the Jewish people who gladly went along. (Some say the Sadducees came out of this group.)

One priest, Mattathias, taught against this Hellenization of the Jews. His son, Judas (who became known as Maccabaeus—the Hammer) took it a little farther. He led a small band of (mostly) Levites in military actions, and won. He liberated Jerusalem from the Seleucids and restored the Temple. After his death, his brother Jonathan carried on the war. Revolution in Syria helped him, and his brother Simon, to achieve total political independence, which lasted until the Roman period.

Somebody was willing to stand up for his faith. Even if it meant he had to fight, and die, somebody stood on God’s side. It was not a popular stand (until they started winning). But without the Hasmoneans, as this family came to be known, the Jewish religion and all that came from that would probably have disappeared.

Would you be willing to stand up for your faith, as did Mattathias and his sons? That is the question that should be asked every year during the celebration of that time, known as Hanukkah. The Hanukkah lights ask us, “Would you have done that?”

Hanukkah is December 2-9 in 2010.

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