

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

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Fredrick the Great of Prussia asked his court preacher if he could prove to him that the Bible was true. To which the court preacher replied, "Yes, I can in one word: Jew." In that sense what the court preacher was saying was very powerfully what Leviticus 26 is saying today. That God would always have a people. A people who did not become like the Canaanites. Where do we hear of the Canaanites today? Or the Babylonians or Assyrians or Philistines. God would have a people.

As we look at Leviticus 26 today what we have before us is over three thousand years of history condensed in the form of a prophecy. When I speak on a subject such as this morning I want to be very careful that what I say is not misunderstood. There is a difference between proclaiming what the scriptures say and being anti-Semitic. I'm very sensitive to the feelings I think many Jewish friends have held in regard to anti-Semitic expressions on the part of Christians or gentiles. There has never been a Christian who has persecuted a Jewish individual. There have been people who have called themselves Christian but there has never been a true believer of Jesus Christ who has done that. Because Christ specifically says for the Christian that, while he is called to suffer himself, he is never called to inflict suffering. So on the one hand we must be very careful about what we say from scripture is not filtered through any prejudice of our own but on the other hand we must be exceedingly careful that we actually do say what the scriptures themselves declare.

The prophets should not be called anti-Semitic. They spoke as members of the community of Israel within Israel. They were talking within the context of their people's sin. As a pastor you cannot call me anti-Christian if I would speak to you of the sin of the Christian people. I am simply a prophet speaking within the Christian community.

That is the setting of this chapter of Leviticus 26. Look at the chapter as divided into 4 specific areas of thought. The first two verses which gives us the seed to experiencing the blessings of God or experiencing the judgements of God. God never leaves us in a neutral position. A position of indecision. So in these three verses he brings us to an awareness of what our responsibilities are for either possessing or losing the land. "You shall make for yourselves no idol and erect no graven image or pillar and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bow down to them for I am the Lord your God. You shall keep my Sabbath in reverence to my sanctuary. I am the Lord." These two verses sort of serve as a summary for the totality of the law of God. We have seen many positions of the law of God as it has unfolded before us in Leviticus.

Then 26:1-2 we find God reducing his law to two basic principles coming out of the second and the fourth commandment. The first part of the decalogue which covers our relationship to God. The scriptures hold this basic fundamental viewpoint that unless we're related to God first of all life is meaningless. Life cannot be fulfilled, life cannot be truly happy. So here the second and fourth commandments are restated. One on a negative level: "You shall make no idols or graven images." The other on a positive level: "You shall keep my Sabbath. You shall reverence my sanctuary." In those two words to either failing to inherit God's privileges for us or we find the key to possessing the goodness of the land. Idols were forbidden. The commandment against idolatry here is not being directed to the pagan civilizations in which Israel moved in its day.

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They had their idols. Just like our culture, our pagan world today has its idols. Idols dedicated to sex, money, intellect, sophistication, self gratification. All kinds of idols. God knows they're in the pagan world. But God here in Leviticus is not addressing the pagan community. He's addressing Israel. Just like he's addressing us this morning – the community that belongs to him, people who are called by his name. He says to us also that we have the tendency to go into idol worship. We have the tendency to love the idols of the pagans. Even more than that we have the tendency to want our own idols.

Idolatry is not simply making something physical. An idol is something you make – and that's it. We can make something in our mind. We may make a concept. We may make a thought. We may make an attitude our idol to which we bow down and worship. And there are all kinds of idols that are present even among believers.

There's an idol that says, "I don't believe God will ever forgive me." That idol kept over a period of time in our minds makes us bow down and worship and forces us to accept the idea that we have sinned so great and we have sinned so often that God will no longer forgive us at all. Yet the scriptures say, If we confess he will forgive us. We may have an idol that says, I don't believe God cares for me. What God is shouting at us, whispering to us "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." If we stand face to face with Jesus Christ none of us can worship at the idol that says God doesn't care for me.

Other idol that says, "God can't use me." That's a belief that somehow we aren't blessed enough or capable enough to do God's work. And yet the Lord has given each of us some ministry. It may be simply welcoming people and the gift of hospitality that God has given us something whereby we will be fit for service in his kingdom and to deny the fact that we are useful to him is to say there is an idol in my heart.

I find myself staring at the idol that God can't heal. It's an idol to simply accept things as they are and don't trust God to believe that he can heal.

No idol that says that God can't be more in the future than he is in the present or in the past. No idol which we would erect that would limit our faith, a faith which believes that God is in control. A faith that dares to claim great things for God. To seek to do less than expect God to do the impossible in our midst is to erect in idolatry an idol of non-faith. God says let idols be banished from your midst. You are related to me, the eternal omnipotent sovereign God and with me all things are possible. Your life is possible with me.

God comes in at the positive level and says to us, keep the Sabbath and reverence the sanctuary. We've been talking about the principle and the significance of what is meant by the Sabbath. That God has designated that our work as people proceeds from a principle of rest. We learn what it is not just to rely on our own striving, our own efforts. But we learn to relax and realize that it is God after all who ministers to us and through us. We learn to trust in him to keep his promise. To reverence his sanctuary. To reverence the meeting together of believers. Paul says a meeting such as this as we renew our faith in him our trust and rest, God keeps us and a principle of blessing is set before us.

Leviticus 26 God is setting before his people the two roads that they could take. Once those basic principles are given then from verse 3 through 13 the Lord indicates to Israel that if they'll

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put away their idols, if they'll keep his Sabbath, then this thing will happen to them. If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them.

So many people think that to keep the commandments of God is to try to keep the Ten Commandments – the law, the moral law. Yet God has more commandments than these. God has the commandments for the sacrifices in the book of Leviticus. God has the commandment which says that when you fail to keep the commandment you come to me and seek forgiveness. There is another who has taken your place, another who has died for you and has lived a life you cannot live. A perfect life. And his life will stand good for yours if you will accept him. That's part of the commandment of God as well.

To keep God's commandment is an impossible thing if the commandments are related to the moral law alone. Because every one of us in this room has at one time or another broken one of the Ten Commandments and indeed you may and I may be breaking them today. But God's commandment is to follow forgiveness so that to walk in the statutes of God what it really means is keep a relationship with God that flows free and never grows stagnant. God says if you'll do this I'm going to do some things for you. As we have so often seen in Leviticus what God is saying to Israel on the physical level the New Testament comes along and says to us on a spiritual level.

One thing God promises is fruitfulness for his people who walk in his ways. He will make the land fruitful and he will make them fruitful as a family.

Look at how God would make the land fruitful. verse 4 "I will give you your rains in their seasons. The land will yield its increase. And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last until the time of vintage and the vintage shall last until the time of sowing and you shall eat your bread to the full.

That phrase, "Your threshing will last until the time of vintage and vintage to the time of sowing," means that there's to be a constant productivity in the land. One crop just leads on to another. This is backed up in verse 10 when the statement is made "You shall eat old store long kept, and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new." Which is God's way of saying you will never have to live long on a stored product. Always there will be the best grain coming in. He would make the land fruitful. And not only would he make the land fruitful but he would make them fruitful as well, verse 9, in their family. "I will have regard for you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you."

God gave to Abraham the promise that his descendants would be as the stars of heaven in number. God ordained that this would be true in Israel's experience – the fruitfulness. This is always God's promise to his children who obey, who walk in his light. It's God's promise to his church. It's God's promise to you as an individual that in God's plan you would be fruitful. Jesus says in John 15 that if we abide in him and he in us we would bear forth much fruit and we would be known as his disciples because we do bear much fruit.

Of course the way we bring forth fruit is both internal and external. We bring forth internally the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5, the qualities of life that make for happiness and soundness and peacefulness in our disposition. But we also bring forth external fruit in terms of productivity and causing others to join us on the vine with Christ. Fruitfulness. God has promised this to us as we walk with him. It will happen. There's no way that it can't happen.

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Another thing that God has indicated in addition to fruitfulness is that as we walk with him and trust in him he will cause us to have security and peace. Verse 5, at the end, “and dwell in your land securely. I will give peace in the land and you shall lie down and none shall make you afraid. I will remove evil beasts from the land and the sword shall not go through your land.” God promises peace. It’s still a promise for believers. A promise which finds Jesus saying after his resurrection to the disciples and to us, “Peace, I leave with you.” The Lord has come into life to really free us from hang-ups. Christians are individuals in whom the Lord is still working in that they are finding healing for their problems. It may be that the healing is not always accomplished at once. But the healing power and the resources there to produce in us the kind of individual that lives free, that lives happily and joyfully. That’s God’s promise.

If this isn’t being experienced in our lives then we need to revert back to that original thing we’ve been talking about – the idols or the rest in God. Because the promise is there. A surety from God. Peace and security.

Not only is peace and security has God promised to give us as a condition for our faithfulness. But he also promised to give us an exceeding powerfulness for him. He says in verse 5 “Five of you shall chase a hundred. And a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand. And your enemies shall fall before by the sword.” I call that the principle of the five percent leverage or one percent leverage. Five will chase a hundred – that’s 5%. And one hundred shall chase ten thousand – that’s the 1%. In the natural it’s barely possible that we might succeed in a one on one relationship. Other people have strengths also. But in the spirit, God has said to us that as we walk with him, he would give us leverage, a capacity and power that is way beyond our natural ability. God wants us to walk phenomenally in his Spirit.

Look at the disciples on the day of Pentecost. A few men, a few people, totally committed to God, totally possessed by the Spirit of God will do great things in God’s name. To believe anything else is idolatry.

We feel this forcefully now in our experience as God is sending people our way and entrusting to us the needs in this community. God wants us to walk in his way so that this very thing will be fulfilled. That we will experience the realization of this blessing from God.

A fourth blessing that God has promised for his people, not only would he make them fruitful and would he give them peace and security and power. But he also promises that he would commune with them. Verses 11-13 “I will make my abode among you. My soul shall not – abhor you. I will walk among you and be your guide. You shall be my people. I am the Lord your God who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bonds of your yoke and made you walk erect.”

If you are here today without a knowledge of God, God is a stranger to you, God’s promise is if you take one step towards him he’ll make himself real to you. He really saved the best promise for the last promise, the fourth. He has given us the blessing of his presence. Of communion with him. Above all things that is the most coveted in thought. We may have fruitfulness, and peace and security and power but that is not enough. We need also the constant presence of the living God breathing in us and whom we are communing with.

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There has been a third part of this chapter which is the lengthy portion. Perhaps God has to speak more lengthily in judgment because that is the very area where we have the most problems. Israel had that tendency. Instead of head towards God to head away from God. God speaking through Moses in verse 14-39 indicates to Israel the tragedy that will come upon it if it does not adhere to the word of the Lord.

There's a series of five judgments that are announced. All of them are successive which is God's way of saying, "I will give you time to repent. I will not deal with you all in one blow. I'm longsuffering." He's full of compassion. His eyes are looking to save. His judgments none of them are simply punitive in nature. None of them are given just for the punishment. All of the punishments which God gives are disciplinary. They are meant to turn us around and to cause us to look anew to God and to find healing and to come back and inherit the blessings we lost because of our disobedience. But the setting of the punishment begin to take place the first phases, verses 14-17. "If you will not harken to me, if you will not do all of these commandments, if you spurn my statutes and your soul abhors my ordinances you will not do all my commandments but break my covenants I will do this to you." Then God says "I will appoint sudden terrors." Terror is the theme of this first phase.

There are four things that God is going to cause to happen in this terror. One thing is disease. Consumption and fever that wastes the eyes and causes life to pine away.

The second thing that God will bring in judgment is an inability to eat the produce of the land. An inability to eat what you have sown. "You shall sow your seed in vein for your enemy shall eat it."

The third judgment that God will cause to happen is defeat in battle. "I will set my face against you. You will be smitten before your enemies and those who hate you shall rule over you."

The fourth thing that God will cause to happen is a deep inferiority complex. "You shall flee when none chase you."

You see again these four things that are a reverse of the blessing. Instead of blessing there will be disease. There will be lack of eating the produce of the land. There will be defeat in battle and there will be inferiority complex.

Leviticus 26 goes on to amplify this inferiority complex when in verse 36 the phrase is used, "The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight." All of us as children have had that experience. God said that same kind of thing that if his people do not walk in faith, if they begin looking at the difficulties of the situation and become frightened, and not only that they'll begin to conjure up situations that don't even exist so that they live in fear. Fear is not a fruit of the Spirit. God wants to drive fear out of our experience so that we go forward in faith to live for him.

The third phase of judgment comes in this four fold emphasis. The second phase of judgment starts in verse 18. "If in spite of this you will not harken to me then I will chastise you seven fold for your sins." What's God saying here? He's using an if-then phrase. Seven times in Leviticus 26 this phrase is used. Five times it is used in a negative kind of way. It's used of disobedience to God. If you break away from me then...here is the consequence. Two times it is used positively. If you obey me then here's what will happen to you. God has a conditional

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arrangement with us. He doesn't arbitrarily visit us or dwell in our lives unless we voluntarily receive and respond to the condition which he has set for us.

Then God indicates that if in the first phase of judgment Israel does not turn again then there will be judgment which comes seven fold. Seven of course is the full nature of God's judgment and power. What the writer of Leviticus is really saying is that when the second phase of judgment sets in the process initiated in the first phase will become seven times worse. Disease will become seven times worse. Unproductivity in the land will be seven fold. Defeat by enemies will be seven fold. Terror and inferiority will be seven fold. When we walk a way from God these things begin to happen begin to happen in the human personality.

Then God goes on to say that not only will there be a seven fold increase of these previous plagues but there will be one plague added. That will be the plague of drought. "I will break the pride of your power. I will make your heavens like iron. Your earth like brass." Heavens like iron means there won't be rain. Earth like brass means it will be hard as a rock, they won't be able to plow it to get the crop in. "Your strength shall be spent in vein for your land shall not yield its increase and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit." Yet if it is in this process of God's disciplinary judgment there is not repentance the third stage sets in.

"If you walk contrary to me and will not harken to me I will bring more plagues upon you. Seven fold as many as your sin." In other words the plague of the first plague and the new plague will all be taken will be intensified seven times and to those will be added two new plagues. Destruction by wild beasts, verse 22 "I will let loose the wild beasts among you which shall rob you of your children, destroy your cattle, and make you few in number so that your land becomes desolate." Destruction by wild beasts and loss of children becomes the two additional plagues that are noted here.

During the famine when the heavens are like iron and the earth is like brass eventually the forest are such so that animals which have their living from those no longer are gaining their living and come into a populated area. Just like wolves do in time of famine to get whatever is possible. Also God speaking to Moses says this is going to happen in the land.

Progressively the judgment worsens. The fourth stage of judgment, verse 23. If by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me then I will also walk contrary to you. I myself will smite you seven fold for your sins. All the plagues which have been heretofore mentioned in the first, second and third stages are now increased again in intensity.

Then three new plagues are added. By the way in each additional plague one additional plague is added. "I will bring sword upon you." That is there will be war "That shall execute vengeance for the covenant. If you gather within your cities I will send pestilence among you." [That's the second judgment. The third judgment which is pronounced is famine, verse 26.] "When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven and shall deliver your bread again by weight and you shall eat and not be satisfied." Imagine the day of famine when ten women are cooking in one oven. Imagine what kind of social conditions.

But beyond that the writer is saying that food will be measured by weight which is to say it's being rationed out. In the midst of rationing those who are eating are not satisfied.

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Then the last judgement, series of judgements, is set in. The fifth and most severe judgment, verse 27 “If in spite of this you will not harken to me but walk contrary to me then I will walk contrary to you in fury and chastise you myself seven fold for your sins. [Now there’s an elaboration of the plague that was just given in verse 26, the plague of famine, now the plague in its intensification becomes so severe that] You shall eat the flesh of your sons and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters.”.

The Old Testament itself shows us how that prophecy was fulfilled. Remember Israel had two times of captivity in the Old Testament. One time was in 722 B.C. when it was led off by the Assyrians. And in 586 Judah was led off into captivity by the Babylonians. In both of those periods of God’s judgment on Israel this promise was in focus that God threatened famine. 2 Kings 6 is the setting of several years before the fall of Israel in 722. Verse 25 “There was a great famine in Samaria as they besieged it until an ass’s head was sold for eighty shekels of silver.” Then the next “And the fourth part of dug dung for 5 shekels of silver. As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall a woman cried out to him saying, ‘Help, my Lord, O king.’ And he said, ‘If the Lord will not help you whence shall I help you? From the threshing floor or from the winepress?’ And the king asked her, ‘What is your trouble?’ She answered, ‘This woman said to me “Give your son that we may eat him today and we will eat my son tomorrow.” So we boiled my son and ate him and on the next day I said to her, “Give your son that we may eat him,” but she has hidden her son.’ When the king heard the words of the woman he rent his clothes.”

Look at what happened before and after 586 B.C. in the judgment of Judah. Jeremiah writes of it in Lamentations. You should read Lamentations. Lamentations itself is a commentary on Leviticus 26. It tells the weeping of the prophet when God’s people have not kept his word. 2:20 “Look O Lord and see with whom hath thou dealt thus. Should women eat their offspring, the children of their tender care?” And 4:10 “The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children. They have become their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people.”

Who in the last suffers from disobedience? God suffered, we suffer, our children suffer. There is no way to isolate the evil that eventually spills out and effects all of life’s relationships.

To this seven fold intensification of all the plagues noted in the first four stages there now comes four additional plagues. First of all the destruction of all the idolatrous places, verse 30 “I will destroy your high places and cut down your incense altars.” In the earlier stages God had wanted them to do this, but they had failed. Now he himself will take it in hand as God to abolish idolatry from the land. “I will cut down your incense altars and cast your dead bodies upon the dead bodies of your idols.”

The second plague: There will be a plague against their civilized cities in the land. “I will lay your cities waste. I will make your sanctuaries desolate. I will not smell your pleasing odor.”

The third plague: the devastation of the land itself. Not only the cities but the land. “I will devastate the land so that your enemies who settle in it will be astonished.”

And the fourth and final and culminating plague verse 33, dispersion “I will scatter you among the nations and I will unsheathe the sword after you and your land shall be a desolation and your cities shall be a waste.” How awesome are the judgments of God.

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Paul points this out in his letter to the Romans where he indicates that God's ways are unsearchable and his judgments past finding out.

Leviticus 26:34-39 speaks of what is going to happen during this time of dispersion. What is going to be happening in the promised land. "Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbath as long as it lies desolate. [we talked about that last week.] while ye are in your enemies' land; then shall the land rest, and enjoy her Sabbaths. As long as it lieth desolate it shall rest; the rest it had not in your Sabbaths, when ye dwelt upon it. And as for those of you who are left I will send a faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies; and the sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight; and they shall flee, as one flees from a sword; and they shall fall when no one pursues. And they shall stumble over one upon another, as if to escape a sword, though none pursues: and ye shall have no power to stand before your enemies. [How true a condition that was up until 1949] And ye shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up. And those of you that are left shall pine away in your enemies' lands because of their iniquity; and also because of the iniquities of their fathers shall they pine away like them."

But God never closes his page, his book in an atmosphere of defeat. God is always determined to create a victory in the midst of defeat because God is the God of the resurrection. He's always determined to bring about life where there has been death. God has that in mind for Israel's experience as well. Because God looks forward in faith to a time when the people will return. He gives them a condition where in the midst of any of their judgments they might look to God. A condition which is true for us as well. Because God is no respecter of persons. God also has judgment or blessings for us who are his people.

There are three things God says that make it possible for us to return to him. Confession is the first. "If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery which they committed against me and also in walking against me, though I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies." That's the first condition – confession] Confession of our sins and confession of the sins and the ways of the past. Zachariah prophesied, and we noted this last week, how eventually there would be a fountain open and they would look upon him whom they had pierced and they would mourn as a father mourning over his first born. Confession.

A second condition is humility. "If then their uncircumcised heart is humbled." The apostle Paul is not the only one who used that phrase, "uncircumcised heart." It occurs right here in the Pentateuch and shows clearly even with Israel wanted them to understand that physical circumcision was only an outward sign of faith. That the inward sign of faith was a uncircumcised heart. In other words, a disposition that was willing to put off the sins of the flesh and to turn to God in purity of spirit.

The third condition God indicates must be held is they will make amends for their iniquity. The trespass offering, the ability to seek to restore is given again. What does God say if we meet these conditions of repentance? "Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob" – look how many times God says "I will remember." – "I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land. The land also shall be left of them, and shall enjoy her Sabbaths, while it lies desolate without them: and they shall make amends for their iniquities because, even because they spurned my ordinances and their soul abhorred my statutes. And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them,

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neither will I abhor them, so as to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, so that I might be their God: I am the Lord.”

The same words that God spoke to Israel in the book of Hebrews, come crashing back to the church. He promise of God is made that none of us fail to enter his rest through unbelief. We must always remember that God comes crashing through to us in one way or the other to remind us that only can fruitfulness and productivity, peace and security and blessing occur when we're walking with him. He will successfully try to reach us in maybe a progression.

The judgment of God is not an easy nor is it a popular theme to preach on. Nor is it popular thing to contemplate but the word stands and we have the vantage point of looking back over the process of 3000 years of history and seeing the unbreakable quality of the word of God. What he has spoken he will establish.

C. S. Lewis said, “God whispers to us in our pleasure; God speaks to us in our work; God shouts at us in our pain.” God shouts at us in our pain. God would prefer any way to come to us other than personal tragedy in our experience. But because relationship with God is so desired by God and because it's so necessary for us God will use every effort possible to yet secure relationship to us.

O love that will not let me go. That is power and sweep of God's love, magnitude of his love. He's ever reaching through to love us, to restore us, to bring us into his presence. The present judgment and the present discipline is nothing compared to the glory that is set before us if we return to him.

As we mentioned our Father, we have the opportunity of standing at the end of prophecy and looking back. And seeing how powerfully your word is concerned in the events of history. Lord, when the people heard the law on the day it was first read, when Moses related what you had said, they stood at the beginning of prophecy and they had the choice of determining whether or not it was a verified word from you. Sorrowfully they chose to disbelieve the word which you spoke and just as powerfully you kept your word. Let us, who stand at the end of prophecy, not enter into the unbelief of those who stood at the beginning. Yet Father in every way we not only stand at the end of prophecy but we also stand at the beginning. For you say the same words to us today. You say, walk with me and enjoy the blessings of life. And you say Depart from me to your own sorrow. You do this because you know outside of you there is no life. We bring judgment upon ourselves and distress and ruin by leaving you. So we pray Lord this morning that there will not be found in any of our hearts a disbelieving spirit. Or a spirit which cannot be chastised by you. We thank you heavenly Father that you speak stern words to us because you love us and because you're not content with our slothfulness. You're not content with our ease. You're not content that we simply call ourselves Christians anymore than you were content with Israel to call themselves Israel. What you want is not a name. What you want is not a title. What you want is not lip service. What you want is real, heart felt relationships. So we stand before you this morning in that awe and reverence that you see us, you know us above all others. And you desire this morning to purge us from our sins and to release us and let us come and enter your land which flows with milk and honey. So through the blessing of Jesus Christ, your Son whom you gave to die for us that we might have life, and whom you

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gave to be raised from the dead so that we might have eternality of presence with you. So to you we give praise and honor and glory now and forever.

Father, we commit this to you. I have the faith to believe you're pressing strongly on individuals here the necessity of their commitment to you. This very day you're shaking them as they've never been shaken before. Lord, help them to know that you're shaking and your judgment is a judgment of love, a judgment which is meant to produce a walk before you. We give you praise. Now and forever. Amen.