

# CAN WE CHANGE GOD'S MIND? <sup>1</sup>

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It's said there are only two certainties in life ... taxes and death. Given the futility of ever changing the Government's intention to stop taxing us, let's talk about whether it's possible to change the mind of *God!* And let's examine the question in the context of the certainty of death.

There are a number of stories in Scripture where God appears to have made up His mind to execute judgment on somebody or somebodies because their sin provoked Him to holy anger. The story of Balaam whipping his donkey that would not budge because the Angel of Death was standing there with sword drawn comes to mind. The narrative of David sacrificing on the threshing floor to stay the Angel of Death who was punishing Israel with a deadly plague --- because of that king's pride in taking a census --- is also memorable.

And let's not forget there are New Testament stories that also teach God sends His Angel of Death to visit judgment upon certain sins whether they be found in believers or unbelievers. Remember Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5)? Then there's king Herod who was struck dead by "an angel of the LORD because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died" (Acts 12:23). We definitely learn that Christians may die prematurely because of failure to properly "discern the body of the Lord" when taking the bread and cup of communion (I Cor.11: 27-31).

So there are instances where the Angel of Death will swing his deadly sickle no matter how earnest our pleading and praying. Yet, in some circumstances it's also clear that God's mind can be changed and the deadly blow from the Angel of Death stayed. Let's delve deeper.

## SOLOMON TRIES TO OUTSMART THE ANGEL OF DEATH

Jewish sages tell us two stories about the Angel of Death. Taken together, these stories present two very different pictures of the human capacity to combat, bargain with, or to work around, the Grim Reaper. Let's compare and contrast these stories with each other to see if it's possible to stop, or at least postpone, the Angel of Death's mission when God sends him on his fateful errand.

The first of these stories comes to us from the Talmud, and it is a story about King Solomon. <sup>2</sup> Solomon, of course, was reputed to be the wisest of all men, and according to the same extra-Biblical source, there was one occasion when Solomon encountered the Angel of Death and had a very interesting conversation with him.

On this fateful day when he meets up with the Angel of Death, Solomon finds him looking particularly dour. The king says to the angel, "What's wrong, why are you are so upset?" And the Angel of Death replies kind of coyly, "Solomon, you know those two secretaries of yours, the ones that you really count on to help your whole administration run? I hate to tell you, Solomon, but I've been sent on a mission to take them from you. They've got to go." Solomon, of course, is shocked by the revelation – but he sees an opportunity here. He's got advance warning, and he intends to make full use of it to save the lives of these men.

So he runs back, puts his secretaries on his fastest steeds, and dispatches them to Luz - a city that, by legend, the Angel of Death was unable to penetrate; he did not have jurisdiction, as it were, to kill anyone in Luz. So Solomon, well, he's going to outsmart death, by sending these two secretaries to Luz.

The next day, Solomon meets up with the Angel of Death who is in a terrific mood. Couldn't be more jubilant. Solomon remarks on his mood: "You're really looking much happier today; what's going on?" And the Angel of Death replies: "Yeah, I really am feeling better, Solomon, thank you so much. You know yesterday I was so troubled,

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<sup>1</sup> I fully acknowledge my indebtedness to Rabbi David Fohrman and his website at Aleph-Beta for the inspiration for this article. Most of my readers will not be subscribers to the rabbi's web site, and will be unable to access his article of this title.

<sup>2</sup> Tractate Sukkah 1

I was thinking, they're telling me to get your two secretaries, but the problem was, I was only allowed to kill them at the gates of Luz. Thank you so much for sending them there."

I think it's fair to say that - according to that story - human beings are portrayed as not really having much power against the Angel of Death. Even Solomon, the wisest of us, can't outsmart him. It seems that when the Angel of Death embarks on a mission to take someone's life, that's it - it's inevitable. Kaput!

## AARON'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE ANGEL OF DEATH

Now let's read story number two. It comes as a gloss the rabbis mention about the account of Korah's rebellion against the authority of Moses and Aaron. In response to the rebellion, Korah and his followers are killed; the earth miraculously swallows them up (see Numbers 16).

But the next day, shockingly, instead of realizing the obvious fact that the Almighty rejected Korah's rebellion, the people somehow find a way to still blame Moses. They accuse Moses of illegitimately engineering the death of Korah and his followers. This, as it turns out, is pretty much the last straw as far as God is concerned. The Almighty tells Moses and Aaron:

"Lift yourselves up from this congregation, that I may consume them instantly" (Numbers 16:45). <sup>3</sup>

And so, the die has been cast. God has made clear that the entire people's continued existence is in peril; they are but seconds from being destroyed. In desperation, Moses and Aaron fall upon their faces. Moses seems to intuit that the end is not only near, but the destruction of the people has actually begun. A plague has begun to radiate out into the camp. The sickle of the Angel of Death is already swathing through the congregation of dissenters. We learn later that 14,700 are executed (v. 49).

At this critical moment Moses dispatches his brother Aaron with urgency. Aaron is told to carry the incense (which would normally be offered in the Tabernacle) out into the midst of the people to try to stop the plague;

"Take your censer and put fire in it from the altar, and lay incense on it; then bring it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone forth from the LORD, the plague has begun" (Numbers 16: 46)!

So Aaron runs out and finds the edge of the plague, as it were. He stands between the dead and the living with the incense ...

Aaron took his stand between the dead and the living, so that the plague was checked" (v. 48).

Immediate results! For as soon as Aaron stood between the dead and the living with his censer of fire, atonement was made and the rest of the people were spared. The plague is miraculously stopped.

It's right here at this very point in the story that the Jewish Sages discover something very fascinating. They observe an apparent contradiction in the text. Let's put the verses together and see if we can't spot what the rabbis spotted long ago. I'll make it easy by underlining the apparent contradiction as nearly as the Hebrew has it;

He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague stopped. The number of dead in the plague was fourteen thousand, seven hundred, besides those who died because of the matter of Korah. Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and the plague was stopped (Numbers 16: 48-50).

So, did the plague stop because and when Aaron stood before the living and the dead, as verse 48 indicates, or did it stop because and when Aaron returned to Moses before the Tabernacle, as verse 50 seems to indicate? Which action really precipitated the end of the plague? Was it Aaron standing between the dead and the living with his censer, or was it Aaron's subsequent return to the Tabernacle and to Moses that precipitated the end of the plague?

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<sup>3</sup> Modern translations read, "Get away from this congregation", but "Lift yourselves up" gives the more literal rendering, and as we will shortly discover, carries the better nuance.

In classic Midrashic fashion, the Jewish Sages answer: Both are actually true. It was a combination of these two things that stopped the plague. And to explain how, they tell us a story – a story involving Aaron and the Angel of Death.

Here is how it goes: According to the midrash, when Aaron runs out into the camp, and stands between the living and the dead, he encounters the Angel of Death himself - at which point, he grabs hold of the Angel of Death and physically restrains him.

Incredulous, the Angel of Death turns to Aaron and pretty much says: *Who do you think you are? Leave me alone, so that I can fulfill the mission I've been sent to carry out!* Aaron though, stands his ground. He replies: 'You, O Angel of Death – you are not the only one acting on orders; I, Aaron, am acting on orders, too. Moses himself has dispatched me to stop the plague!'

The Angel of Death is not impressed: "I'm the agent of God," he says, "and you're only the agent of a mere human being – Moses. So why should I listen to *you*?" Aaron, undeterred, raises him one, and asks, "Do you really think Moses is acting on his own authority here? Moses doesn't say anything unless it comes from God!"

As if to top off his point, Aaron issues a challenge to his angelic adversary: "If you don't believe me – well, right now, Moses is at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and God is right there along with him. Come back with me, and we'll ask him!" And according to the great Middle Ages commentator, Rabbi Rashi, that's exactly what they did.

Aaron returned to the Tent of Meeting, dragging the Angel of Death, as it were, along with him – seeking to clear things up once and for all. Which is why, the Midrashic Sages say, the plague was really stopped – for good – only once Aaron returned to Moses.

### CONTRAST THE TWO STORIES

Think about the portrait of the Angel of Death which is offered in this story and contrast it with the first story where the Angel of Death encountered King Solomon. How are they different?

At face value the Midrashic story involving Solomon and the Angel of Death seems to teach that people --- even people as wise as Solomon himself --- are incapable of really outsmarting the Angel of Death. But now, along comes this story of Aaron and the Angel of Death, and it seems like we are hearing exactly the opposite moral: Aaron thwarts the deadly mission of the Angel of Death. He beats him at his own game, as it were. So, which is it? Can human beings significantly change the course of history even when it comes to negotiating life and death?

### MAKING SENSE OF THE TWO STORIES

Rabbi Fohrman suggests a possible way of reconciling these two very interesting stories. Maybe they don't really contradict each other. Let's go back to the moment describing what happened right before the onset of the plague:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Lift yourselves up from among this congregation, that I may annihilate them in an instant..." (Numbers 16: 45).

Now, keep that language in the back of your mind and look at the very next thing that happens: Then they [i.e. Aaron and Moses] fell on their faces. (Numbers 16: 45).

Compare Aaron and Moses' response (falling on their faces) to the instruction that God gave them ("Lift yourselves up from among this congregation"). Does anything about it strike you as odd?

Evidently the decision to cast themselves down prostrate on their faces was not trivial or inconsequential. It's not that Moses and Aaron were simply anguished and fell on their faces because they were full of grief and couldn't think of anything else to do. No, there was a deliberate response here: God had said, "Get away," but they stayed right where they were. God had said, "Lift yourselves up", but they went down.

For some reason Moses and Aaron dared to do the very opposite of what God said. And that's important – because if you really think about it, this is a harbinger of things to come. Remember: God had started a plague, but Moses

and Aaron--- mere human beings – had the gall to act on their own to contravene that plague. They were saying, in effect: “No. We are going to stop *God’s plague*.”

How audacious! How could they have the temerity, the gall, the license, to stop a plague if God was behind it? Unless ... unless God purposely allowed for the possibility of the plague to be stopped. And, indeed, we find this corroborated by a subtlety in the language of the text.

Remember that God didn’t just say to Moses, “There’s going to be a plague, it’s all going to be over.” What God actually said was: “Lift yourselves up and there will be a plague.” And that makes all the difference in the world. That implies that the plague is conditional; it depends on something the Almighty is asking Moses to do: Lift yourselves up. Well, Moses and Aaron seem to be saying: What if we don’t lift ourselves up? What then?

If this is correct, then that ‘command’ to ‘lift yourselves up from the people,’ to separate yourselves and to be spared from the fate of the grumblers – that command, in effect, offered a tantalizing option to Moses – an option implicitly sanctioned by the Divine Will. God was saying in effect: You don’t have to go along with Me here. There is another possibility.

Thus, there is an overt message that God is conveying to Moses – but there is a covert message, too. The greatness of Moses and Aaron is that they choose to listen not only to the overt message but to the covert one. But those covert messages of the Divine, that which is written between the lines of an ostensible command – these are things that it takes a special kind of being, a human being who knows God and His gracious character, to hear. Angelic beings such as the Angel of Death – they don’t hear these things because they don’t need mercy!.

And in this lies the kernel of the ‘dispute,’ as it were, between Aaron and the Angel of Death. You see, the Angel of Death is convinced that he has got it all figured out: God clearly wants the plague. He mandated it in response to the people’s rebellion, so He must want it. But the Angel of Death, unlike Aaron, does not discern what’s written between the lines, a subtle, more covert layer to the Divine Will. Why? Because an angel, when you get right down to it, is just a messenger. In fact, the word angel in Hebrew (*malach*), really means nothing more than that --- messenger. What does a messenger do? He faithfully carries out orders. He doesn’t interpret orders.

When God issues an overt decree, that’s what the messenger sees, no more and no less. And so the messenger, the angel, goes out and fulfills that decree to the letter. It takes a human being with his own sense of need, his own mind, as it were – to use his God-given sense of pluck and possibility to actually challenge the Divine – only to find out in the end, astonishingly, that the challenge he put forth was something that, in fact, God wanted from him; it was actually an implication that God incorporated in His own words. “Raise yourselves up” leaves open a possibility: If you choose to cast yourselves down... you can get me to change My mind ... which was deep down really my preferred option all along!

You can’t outsmart the Angel of Death --- but you can confront Him. In the end, these two stories about the Angel of Death tell us it’s possible to intercede and confront apparent inevitabilities by knowing our place in God. You can’t do an end run around the Angel of Death, sending your secretaries on your fastest horses to somehow outsmart death, but sometimes, God’s will, as it were, can be changed by human appeal.

Indeed, God can begin to execute a Divine Plan – but the plan is not necessarily immutable. As the Protestant Reformers used to say, there is the permissible will of God and then there is the perfect will of God.

God can, at least on occasion, be persuaded otherwise – by human intercession. Indeed, part of God’s plan – however seemingly immutable – can be the very possibility of change. If this is true, it might offer us some guidance when in times of crisis or sorrow, we try to intervene with God, as it were, concerning the progress of the Divine Plan in our lives. In moments like this, we are faced with something of a theological dilemma: If God wants to do this, if this is really His plan – how can I ever convince Him otherwise?

But maybe the answer is that God likes getting convinced by human beings. He is open to advocacy. And maybe that’s what we are really saying in those moments when, in crisis, we pray: We are not looking to outsmart You, O God, we are just looking to make a straightforward, direct appeal based on what you have called us to be and what would display the glory of Your character in this situation.

Aaron and Moses acted heroically when they made a last ditch appeal for the lives of the people. And when you and I pray, we emulate Biblical moments like these. We too make last-ditch appeals for life, or for other deeply important things we longingly seek. It is possible to drag the Angel of Death back to God for at least one more hearing before the Heavenly Throne of grace. You can't outsmart God, but you can talk to Him. And the fact that we can do this, that we can actually engage with the Divine – makes us lowly humans loftier than angels!

### IS THAT ALL?

And that's right where Rabbi Fohrman stops. His article ends with an amazing lesson, of course. There is much to ponder if we stop here. But I ask, is that all? Wonderful as it is, and Biblical as it is, lowly humans can intercede and change events in our lives by wrestling in prayer with the Almighty, which in effect means God is wanting us to sometimes discover His deeper preference.

On the surface this looks like we have changed His mind! But in reality, it is exactly where God has wanted to manoeuvre us all along. In the process we learn by experience more of the wonder of the character of our heavenly Father. And wonderful as it is, and Biblical as it is, we are loftier than angels --- the Scriptures teach that angels are to us like the wind and fire in our service (Ps. 104: 4; Hebrews 1: 7, 14).

But the NT says there is more to this question as to whether we can change God's mind or not, when it comes to interceding to save the perishing.

### WE ARE TO STAND BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD ... 1 JOHN 5: 16 - 17

I wonder if the apostle John had the story of Aaron standing between the living and the dead interceding for the people in mind, when he wrote this,

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death (I John 5:16-17).

John the Beloved Disciple himself seems unsure as to whether we can successfully intercede on behalf of others and change God's mind about their premature deaths if they are "committing a sin leading to death".<sup>4</sup>

This is all the more strange when we consider John has just been speaking about the privilege we have of being able to pray to God with confidence, knowing that He will hear us in whatever we may ask within His will (v.14-15). And now John goes on to consider a particular kind of prayer ... intercessory prayer for the life of others ... that may or may not be in the will of God!<sup>5</sup> Surely the God of all compassion will grant life to those asking Him for this?

Let's delve a bit. Here we learn about praying for Christians who are in mortal danger because they are "sinning towards death". The Angel of Death is on their heels! To use our OT story, God seems to be saying, "Get away and I will destroy this person!"

### WHAT IS THE SIN THAT LEADS TO DEATH?

So, what is this mortal sin that "leads to death"? Many answers have been given. The Jews distinguish two kinds of sins. There are the sins a man commits unwittingly and unwillingly. And for these sins the Law allowed for sacrifice and repentance and restoration.

But the second type of sin is that which is committed defiantly, knowingly and proudly, against God. And for these sins there was no sacrifice under the Law.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps John with his Jewish background is distinguishing between these two categories?

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek reads "to the ones not sinning towards death" ... *tois amartanousi me pros thanaton*.

<sup>5</sup> The NT stresses again and again the importance of praying for each other (e.g. I Thessalonians 5:25; Hebrew 13: 18-19; James 5:14; I Timothy 2:1.)

<sup>6</sup> This is why David for instance, after his sins of murder and adultery, says that God will not be satisfied with sacrifice or burnt offering otherwise he would offer it. David can only plead his now broken heart before God in the hope of mercy. Psalm 51.

Then there have been Christian commentators from John's day all the way down to the present who have added their ideas as to what the sin that "leads to death" is, and for which no prayer may effectively change God's mind. Early on in the Church of the first couple of centuries there were many who believed this mortal sin was that of apostasy. This was the sin that could never be forgiven, for Jesus had taught that "Whoever shall deny me before men, him will I deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:33).

The apostle James seems to agree that if a Christian "brother ... strays from the truth", then "he who turns [this] sinner from the error of his way" --- presumably by intercessory prayer and loving persuasion --- "will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5: 19-20). The implications are clear. Failure to return to "the truth" puts one in danger of premature death. Apostasy persisted in is deadly!

The book of Hebrews also warns that those who were "once enlightened" and who have "tasted" the saving grace of the Lord, but who turn back to relying on the shadows of the Law, that they are "sinning wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth" and that "there no longer remains a sacrifice for [their] sins". The only thing left for such wilful apostasy is "a certain terrifying expectation of judgment ..." (Hebrews 10:26-27).

I however, am not so convinced this is what John is talking about, because after all, even the apostle Peter had been guilty of *denying his Lord with blasphemous oaths*, but Jesus restored him to fellowship. It appears that Jesus was more sympathetic and gentler with apostates than his own Church later became! Space must be allowed for repentance.

We can be sure these passages are talking about seeing our "brother committing a sin ... leading to death ..." (I John 5:16). By definition a "brother" is a Christian who believes Jesus is the human Messiah, miraculously begotten by the power of God (Luke 1:35), and who trusts him as Lord and Saviour.

Without digressing into the whole question as to whether a Christian may lose their salvation or not, I will simply say here that the danger John seems to be discussing is the possibility that Christians may die prematurely if they persist in known sin. Christians may have their allotted years cut short --- when they would normally be expected to serve the Lord for many years longer --- by ignoring the warnings of the Spirit of God in their consciences. <sup>7</sup>

So, it does not appear that we are in any position to identify what this mortal sin is. Which raises the question, did John deliberately leave the space blank, so to speak? Perhaps part of the reason why John does not specify what "the sin that leads to death" is, is that it may be a different sin for each individual? A particular sin for one Christian might prove mortal, but for another Christian that might not be the sin that leads to premature death. And *vice versa*.

The reason for the differences in each case is that each of us is at different stages of faith and light received. Each Christian has a different position of influence and is at a different stage in the journey with God. So God makes a difference. What might prove fatal for one believer, will not so prove for another Christian guilty of the same sin. Let me show you this principle from some examples in Scripture.

The people of Israel committed a sin leading to their deaths at Kadesh (Numbers 13:25-14:12). They had actually tempted the LORD many times before (Numbers 14:22). And God had till now always forgiven them. But this time, He caused them to die in the wilderness (Numbers 14:32). This time their sin was a mortal sin. They died early, never entering the Promised Land.

When Moses was provoked to speak "rash words" at the Waters of Meribah, he crossed the line, and this proved to be his "mortal sin" for he also died outside the Promised Land (Ps. 106:33). (Aaron too, committed the same offense as Moses, and he likewise was denied entry to the Land, dying early.) Perhaps Moses died prematurely because of his leadership position and that he was known as a "very humble" man, indeed "more humble than any man who was on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3). Therefore, his sin God could not overlook.

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<sup>7</sup> John's context here is not about whether "once saved" the Christian is "always saved". The Lord's sheep will not perish --- as long as they continue to "hear his voice"! Scripture is clear in many places that saving faith is the faith "that endures to the end". However, I John 5: 16 -17 is talking about intercessory prayer for our Christian "brother" who is in danger of dying prematurely.

In the NT Ananias and Saphira, two Christian believers, were struck dead early because they committed, what for them proved to be, their sin leading to death (Acts 5: 1-11).

Some of the believers in the Church at Corinth died prematurely because they were adjudged as guilty of profaning the Lord's Table (I Corinthians 11:27,30). This for them, was "the sin unto death". As Paul wrote this, he mentions that other believers were currently weak and sick. The implication is that unless they repented, unless they learned from the premature deaths of their fellow believers, unless they started participating in the communion supper appropriately, then they too could expect the Angel of Death to knock early on their door!

In the same Corinthian Church there was the case of the Christian man living with his step-mother. The apostle Paul told the church to pronounce judgment on the man by excommunicating him, thus delivering him "over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh", which is to say, that he might die (I Corinthians 5:5). This man had committed what for him, was to be a mortal sin. (More on his case shortly.)

Other examples might be given. But the point is sufficiently made: If we would live long, useful lives in service to the Lord, we must persistently examine our lives and turn from whatever evil the holy Spirit shows us in our consciences. We must be careful not to wilfully practice known sin. Negligence here, according to the Bible, has brought many Christians to their early graves!

### **PROS THANATON**

Before going on, we must look at the phrase, "the sin unto death" a little more closely. The Greek reads that it is the sin which is *pros thanaton*. This does not so much mean "the deadly sin" but rather means "the sin which is going towards death". This is the sin whose end and destination is death, the sin which if continued in, must finish in death. And in this case, it is sin leading towards the premature death of the believer! In other words, *John is **not** so much talking about **what** the sin is itself, but rather **where** it will end if persisted in.*

### **A TALE OF TWO CHRISTIANS**

How does this work out in our experience? How is it possible for the Christian to commit "the sin that leads to death"?

Well, here is the believer who loves the Lord, who hates the sin that grieves the Spirit. But, in the moment of temptation, and against his own desires, he falls into temptation and then hates himself for it. This believer is ashamed, and like Peter, goes out and weeps bitterly for his failure. He knows he has wounded that great heart of Love. Deep down he wants to return to the Lord. He is therefore not beyond repentance. And this is where our intercessory prayers for that failed Christian can come to the rescue. We may for our Christian brother or sister pray for God to give them renewed life in their spirits. We can "ask life for him".

On the other hand, here is the believer who fails to judge his sin. His conscience at first disturbs him terribly. He fails to judge himself and to heed the voice of the Spirit of God. He knows the teaching of the Scriptures concerning his failure. But he ignores the voice of God within. He continues to practise that sin. More and more he is hardened, thinking he can compromise and God will still love him and accept him. But over time, his conscience becomes hardened. Finally his conscience is "seared", until he is now able to sin with no compunction, no regret. His sinning becomes easier and easier (1 Timothy 4:2).

He is now in a state where he can even feel satisfied with no sense of shame or unease whatsoever. No amount of pleading will register. Sinning is now his custom, his practised state, and he feels no shame nor remorse. He is on the way to death, and God may very well judge him by a premature death. (Would Judas Iscariot fit this case, for it seems he pilfered from the treasurer's bag continually during his days as an apostle? Finally, "the Devil entered his heart" and he sold Jesus for a few paltry pieces of silver. This habit of sinning led to Judas' untimely death, albeit by his own hand.)

Thus, "the sin that leads to death" is the state of a believer who has listened to his own desires so often, and refused to listen to God so often, that he finally comes to a place where he just doesn't care anymore. He has made "shipwreck" of his faith. The time has probably come for concerned Christians to realise their intercessory prayers will in all probability not be heard by God. God's mind will not be able to be changed in this case, for God cannot

condone sin even in His own. He will respect the free will He has given all souls, and if they are hell-bent on sinning, then that's their choice.

We note that Jesus prayed for Peter and the other apostles that their faith might not fail. But Jesus did not pray for Judas, knowing his heart was committed to "the sin that leads to death".

Thus, the mortal sin is not specified by John. It is not necessarily immorality, or idolatry, or unfaithfulness that leads to early death, as it was for the children of Israel in the wilderness. It is not necessarily angry, rash tempers and words as it was for Moses and Aaron, either. It is not necessarily greed (which is idolatry) as for Ananias and Saphira. It is not necessarily absorption by the world and a desire for men's approval and acceptance as for Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Timothy 1:20). It is not necessarily a love for "worldly and empty chatter that lead to further ungodliness" spreading "like cancer" leading others from the faith (2 Timothy 2:16-18).

I do not know what sin in my life might lead to an early grave, except I speedily judge all known sin and genuinely repent. God is rich in mercy and waits to forgive us when we genuinely seek to please Him. The man in 2 Corinthians 2:6-7 is the very one who had lived in sin with his step-mother earlier in 1 Corinthians 5. Evidently, his excommunication under threat of an imminent visit from the Angel of Death led to his speedy repentance and recovery. Even though he had committed the sin that would inexorably lead him to his early death, he was given space for self-judgment. And probably in answer to the prayers of Paul and the church, this man's repentance evidently led to a 'change' of God's intentions. The sword of the Angel of Death was sheathed. Paul then instructs the Corinthian church to receive this chastened man back into their fellowship.

Oh, may God grant each of us a heart to judge the sin in our lives as soon as we become aware of it, for if we are heavy with ourselves in this way, God will be merciful. True, none of us will ever reach a state of sinless perfection in this life, but frequent confession of sin once it is revealed to us, and constant looking to God cannot help but ensure His favour, which includes long, fruitful lives for His glory.

#### PROMISES FOR A LONG, FULFILLED LIFE

The Bible is full of promises that if we listen to the word of God, if we keep his instructions, we shall find "length of days and years of life and abundant peace they will add to you" (Proverbs 3:1-2), it will "be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones" (Proverbs 3:8), "the years of your life will be many" (Proverbs 4: 10), "your days will be multiplied and years will be added to your life" (Proverbs 9:11). Those who refuse to listen to the word and ways of God and persist in their error, will find "the way of error leads to death" --- an early grave (Proverbs 12:28).

These are promises for the believer's physical life in this world! Disobedience causes our lives to ebb away, and in some circumstances to a premature death. If we would love life, we must learn keep God's word and to obey His precepts. We must treat our bodies as His holy temples: Eat a balanced diet, with no over-eating; trust the promises of God's care, with no anxiety that can cause ulcers and high blood pressure, strokes and heart attacks; rejoice always in the goodness of our Father, for this is the antidote to depression that saps our lives.

Doing this, our inner life in Christ will be invigorated daily. Walking with Christ Jesus will enable us to taste the powers and the glory and the life of the coming Kingdom Age (Hebrews 6:5).

I have met saints like that. Men and women whose faces and lives shone from the light of that distant shore. They already knew and tasted the powers of that coming Glory, where there will be no more weakness, sickness or death. They reigned in life through to a good old age. And when they failed, they confessed their sins, knowing "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he himself is the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 2:1-2).

In Christ I have a picture of the Angel of Death being dragged kicking and screaming --- just like in that rabbinic story where Aaron brought him against his will right up to the door of the Tabernacle --- all the way to the Throne of Grace where our Advocate Jesus has settled his claim on our lives once for all! Having judged all known sin, we know that in Christ, God has forgiven and cleansed us, and is minded to give us life. The plague has stopped!

