

CHAPTER 1

Bible Customs and Manners

Introduction

Some of the things we read in the Bible seem very unusual and strange. In many ways, the people that we read about in the Bible seem very different--they live differently, they act differently and they do things in different ways. Why is this so?

As we read the Bible, many things are mentioned that we are not very familiar with: pottery, camels, chariots, cubits, the washing of feet, Baal, olive trees, publicans, Pharisees, the Passover and the Tabernacle. These things seem strange to us. We have heard of Republicans, but what are publicans? We know all about Christmas, but what is the Passover? We know what a church building is like, but what is a Tabernacle? We know what inches and feet are, but what are cubits? We know many things about God, but who is Baal? We see maple trees and oak trees all the time, but what do olive trees and cedar trees look like? We know what it is like to brush our teeth, but has anyone ever washed our feet after we have entered their home? We see dogs and cats almost every day, but how often do we see camels or hedgehogs or leviathans? We use dishes at every meal, but what is pottery? We have seen pictures of army tanks, but what do chariots look like and what were they used for? We have heard of Catholics and Protestants and people who call themselves "priests," but what are Pharisees?

Suppose a young girl from China were to come to live with your family for one year. Do you think there would be some things that she would do differently? How do you think she would eat her food? Would she dress differently? Would she talk differently? Even if she knew English, do you think she would have a different accent?

What if you were able to spend a year with a missionary in a jungle tribe of Africa or a jungle tribe of Brazil. Would these people act differently in some ways? Would they eat the same kinds of food you eat? Would they travel in the same way that you traveled where you were back home (car, bus, bicycle, rollerblades)? Would they talk differently? If you were to spend a year in England, France, Germany or Spain, do you think you would notice many unusual customs and things that seem very different to you?

Can you imagine what life would be like without cars, airplanes, tractors, television, radio, newspapers, computers, telephones, cell phones, refrigerators, toasters, soft drinks (soda), hamburger restaurants, elevators, wristwatches, disposable diapers,

baby bottles, electronic games, flush toilets and washing machines? How well would you be able to get along without these things? In the Bible we read about men and women and boys and girls who had **none** of these things, and yet they had to communicate, travel, tell time, eat, wash and raise their children just as we do today! They did all these things without any of the modern conveniences which we depend upon each day. When Paul sent a letter to the Philippians, it did not go by AIRMAIL! It had to go by land or by sea, carried not by a postal worker, but usually by a trusted friend.

Two Great Gaps

A gap between two mountains is that great space which separates the two mountains. There is a great gap or separation between the people who lived in Bible times and the people who live today. First of all there is a great **TIME GAP**. The people we read about in the Bible lived thousands of years ago. For example:

Abraham lived about 4000 years ago.

Moses lived about 3500 years ago.

David lived about 3000 years ago.

Peter and Paul lived about 2000 years ago.

Time makes a big difference. Suppose you were to enter a time machine and go back a few hundred years to the time when our country was first being settled. Do you think you would notice some differences in the way people lived back then and did things? We should not be surprised to find differences and unusual customs in the Bible, because the Bible describes people who lived **THOUSANDS** of years ago.

There is also a **DISTANCE GAP**. The people that we read about on the pages of the Bible did not live in North America. They did not live in the woods of Connecticut and they did not sail in the Atlantic Ocean. The people described in the Bible lived in the **MIDDLE EAST**, around the Mediterranean Sea. The land of the Bible is thousands of miles away from North America where we live.

Even today, if you could visit the Middle East, you would be able to see some people living in much the same way that the people lived in Bible times. You would still be able to see shepherds watching their flocks and nomads wandering about the desert with their tents. There are some modern cities in Israel and in the other countries of the Middle East, but there are many people who are still living in much the same way that their ancestors did thousands of years ago.

TIME GAP

Separated by years

→ The people described in the Bible lived thousands of years ago.

DISTANCE GAP

Separated by miles

→ The people described in the Bible lived thousands of miles away from North America on the other side of the world.

This is why the people we read about in the Bible lived differently, acted differently and did many things differently than we do today.

Not Everything Is Different

Think again about that girl from China who might live with your family for one year. Even though she would be different in many ways, there would also be many similarities. She is a person just like you are. She knows how to laugh and cry just like you do. She has different feelings just like you do (she can feel sad, mad, glad, etc.).

There are other similarities as well. Even though her eyes might be shaped a little differently than the eyes of American girls, she has the same kind of body everyone else has (complete with brains, heart, liver, lungs, skin, hair and everything else that is needed). She has the same red blood flowing through her body. The same God that made you is the same God that made her. She also has a sinful heart just like we all do (Jeremiah 17:9), and at times she does the same kind of wrong things that we do: she worries, she becomes afraid, she gets angry, she becomes jealous, and so forth. The same Christ who died for you is the same Christ who also died for her.

Think again of a man living in the jungles of Africa or Brazil. Even though this man is different from us in many ways, can you think of some similarities? Can you think of some things that are true of ALL PEOPLE, regardless of race or culture or country?



One Example of an Unusual Custom

Suppose you were watching a football game--the most important game of the season. Your team **must** win. The championship depends on it. In the final seconds of the last quarter the situation looks quite favorable. Your team is ahead by three points; they have possession of the ball and the game is nearly over. Victory seems to be guaranteed! Suddenly, however, and quite unpredictably, your team's quarterback fumbles the ball, it is picked up by a player on the other team, he runs 80 yards for a touchdown and all is lost! **WHAT WOULD YOU DO IN A SITUATION LIKE THIS? Well, if you were living in Bible times you would probably TEAR YOUR CLOTHES!!!**

When a person would **TEAR** his clothes (or **REND** his clothes) this was an *outward sign* that something terrible had happened--some disaster or some calamity had taken place. It was also a sign of deep sorrow and mourning over someone who had died. Sometimes a person would do this when he was very sad and angry because of sin. As they would tear their clothes, they would not usually tear the entire garment into shreds, but they would tear a slit or a series of slits in the bottom of the item of clothing. Is this something that you do when something terrible happens?

See 2 Samuel 1:11 which tells us what David did when he learned that King Saul was dead (the word "rent" means "tore"). What did David do?

_____ Even though Saul had wickedly tried to kill David on several occasions, was David happy that Saul was dead or did he think that this was a terrible thing that had happened?

What did Reuben do when he found that Joseph was missing from the pit (Genesis 37:29)? _____ Did he think that this was a terrible thing that had happened? _____

Read 1 Samuel 4:10-17. If you were living in Bible times and you saw a man running in your direction with his clothes torn, would he be bringing good news or bad news?

In Acts 14:11-14, the people of Lystra thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods, and they were about to worship them and offer sacrifices to them. Were Paul and Barnabas happy about this (verse 14)? _____ Did they say, "We feel quite honored that these people should think so highly of us!"? No, they thought this was terrible! They knew that they were mere men (mere creatures) and they knew that creature-worship was a great sin!

In Ezra chapter 9 Ezra learned that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord by marrying the heathen people of the land (verses 1-2). When Ezra heard about this great sin, was he concerned (Ezra 9:3)? _____ What did he do to show how grieved he really was (Ezra 9:3)?

[Keep in mind that in Bible times clothes were more valuable to people because they had fewer clothes, and they had to be handmade.]

Even though we do not tear our clothes today, we need to learn a lesson from this. How concerned are we about sin? Do we really believe that sin is a **terrible** thing?

Is it a terrible thing when people tell dirty jokes or dirty stories? Is it a terrible thing when people swear or use the Lord's Name in the wrong way? Is it a terrible thing when a student cheats on a test and gets the right answers in the wrong way? Is it a terrible thing when someone takes something that does not really belong to him?

Does sin make me sad? Does it bother me when I see people doing what is wrong? Most of all, does it bother me when I see myself doing wrong? When there is sin in my own life, do I feel terrible about it, and am I really sorry about it? Am I concerned when I do things that harm and hurt others? Am I concerned when I do things that hurt God and make Him sad? Remember, when a believer sins, who is grieved (Ephesians 4:30)? _____

I might not tear my clothes like people once did in Bible times, but there is something that still should be torn. In Joel 2:13 we read these words: "And _____ (tear) your _____ and not your _____ and turn unto the LORD your God: for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness." When there is sin in my own life, do I have a TORN HEART about it?

Sometimes we are not as concerned about sin and wrong as we should be, but there is SOMEONE who is **very** concerned about sin. The living God is very concerned about sin. How do we know this? Did God do something to prove that He is very much concerned about sin and that He hates sin and that He wants to save men from sin? What did He do (see 1 Timothy 1:15 and 1 John 4:9-10)?

After Peter sinned against Christ by denying Him three times, did he have a "TORN HEART" (Luke 22:61-62)? _____

After David sinned greatly against God, did he have a "TORN HEART" (see Psalm 51 which David wrote after he sinned a great sin)? _____

Most people in the world today are not very concerned about sin. We know this because if they really were concerned about sin, then they would do something about it. Day after day they go on in their sinful ways, and it seems that they have no desire to change. They are not sorry about their sin and they do not really care that Christ went to the cross because of their sin. Sometimes they even seem proud of their sin and they parade their sin (see Isaiah 3:9) and do not hide it!

We cannot make others be concerned about their sins. We can pray that God will do a work in their hearts. Most of all, we should be concerned about the sins in our own life. "If others want to stay dirty that is their business, but I hate dirt, and I'm concerned about the dirt on me and I'm going to get clean!" This should be our attitude when it comes to the filth of sin.

For the unsaved person, the way to get clean is found in Acts 10:43; for the saved person the way is found in 1 John 1:9. See our study called Two Aspects of Forgiveness which describes the kind of forgiveness that the unsaved person needs (for salvation) and the kind of forgiveness that the saved person needs (for the restoration of fellowship).

