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Down-to-Earth Obedience

We have travelled a long way in this book—from the original creation of the world to its final end, and beyond to the creation of a new heaven and earth. The world's history is encompassed between Point 1 and Point 6 of our diagram, but our main focus has been on what it means to live at Point 5, in the tension of the old and new ages.

The insights we have gained provide a framework for understanding how we are to live in a fallen world as children of a righteous and holy God.

RELATIONAL IN OUR THINKING—FAITHFUL IN OUR LIVING

At Point 1, we developed the idea that the best way to understand ourselves is by reflecting on the relations in which God has set us. These relations are the starting points for our decision-making and living.

Because we exist in the midst of constant change, it is impossible for us to pre-think our responses to every situation. (In fact, it would be a lack of trust and freedom to even attempt to do so.) Nonetheless, God has provided some basic

building blocks to shape our thinking and deciding and thus lay the framework for our action.

These basic relational building blocks form a solid foundation which frees us to be really involved in moment-by-moment living. We live in the present moment, but we are not imprisoned in it, for we do not believe the moment is all there is. We have data to build our moment-by-moment living on—we bring to the moment a framework of basic relational insights which are valid for all living.

This understanding reminds us that, as we approach any situation in life, we must be clear about the relation involved in it—whether it be our relation to God, to the world and the animals, to our neighbour, to the state, to the local community. We always begin with the orientation God has pre-given. This relational understanding has a way of forcing the priority of God's basic 'givens' on us, wherever we are.

This perspective also accords with the life of faith. Faithful living is the moment-by-moment decision to be obedient to the relations we perceive. This book has not worked out those relations in fine detail; that would require a full 'ethics'. But our diagram reminds us of the basic theme: that the Word of God calls us to approach all our decisions from a relational standpoint. This is why we need a framework for our thinking and information about our time and place.

AWARE OF THE TIME AND PLACE

One of our continual emphases has been the need to know where we stand *right now*. This need has driven us to think of ourselves as being in a peculiar position of tension.

Christians are called to live at Point 5, a time and place typified by the pressure of the world and the difficulty of living in the 'body'. Practically, this challenges us to make realistic evaluations about the proper tensions of the age.

The whole New Testament is cast against this backdrop. The constant underlying theme of the early Christians' writings was this understanding of place and time.

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKERS

We have also seen that to be faithful to God at any given moment in life, we must do two things: first discern where we are and what specifically we are to do at that moment, and then decide to do precisely that. Our Creator will call us to account for these actions of will. Consequently, we must not balk at the full life God offers us, but before all else make up our minds to be decisive people for God.

The importance of this active resolve cannot be over-emphasized. Much of the inactivity and powerlessness in Christians' lives really stems from guilt felt at the prospect of being decisive. Somehow the idea has developed that it is not 'spiritual' to be responsible and to take initiatives. This has partly grown out of the 'blue-print' mentality we examined in Chapter 15, which either leads to a fatalistic acceptance of circumstances or renders us powerless to act because we are afraid of disturbing God's as-yet-hidden plan for our life. What we need to see is that God's purpose for our life relies on and takes into account our freedom to decide. He has given that significance to us.

In the face of this, the gospel insists we take seriously that God is our God. He has His hands on us for 'good'. We have a freedom to live decisively precisely because God's purposes *cannot* be disturbed. They are certain; He guarantees them. Further, all living at Point 5 is done under the constant experience of forgiveness. If we do sin, we have the security of knowing God has us in His hand.

This does not mean we have a licence to maintain a ruthless egocentric grasp on our own lives, making decisions in a rebellious and autonomous way. Decisive living is faithful living. Its aim is to be an obedient servant. Living decisively is not living outside the relation God has set for us; rather, it is emphasizing that, while we are servants of God, we are also *responsible* servants who will be held to account for what we do.

The life of God's people always shows this double reality.

On the one hand, our obedience is God working through us. On the other, it is our action, for we cannot dissociate ourselves from what we do.

DOWN-TO-EARTH, BALANCED REALISTS

Throughout this book we have noted the constant presence of the baseline which began at Point 2, signifying the fallen world. We do not have a rosy view of the world: we are all too aware of its rebellion. We have learned that it is no longer the same as when it came from God's hand, but we have also learned not to despair of it, because God loves it. And we understand that the mess was not God's doing.

The presence of the baseline enables us to understand the need for emergency martial law at Point 3. It also enables us to understand the arrival of the Saviour at Point 4, and His preoccupation with the rule of God, with dealing with the disease of man's rebellious heart, and with the need for a substitute to bear God's wrath against us by dying in our place. And the baseline is still with us, forcing us to expect a struggle in our life now—the battle that comes to the reconciled, redeemed people of God as they live in the midst of the fallen world.

This helps us hold in tension a faith-based optimism, born of our trust in the God who cares for the world, and a realistic lack of surprise at all the unlovely and tragic things the world contains. This optimism is not some sunny wishfulness born of faith in humanistic values. Such a stance we unhesitatingly label unrealistic, for it fails to come to grips with either the real power of sin to enslave mankind or the wrath of our holy God. Our decision-making, rather, occurs in the context of a realistic balance between our understanding of the sadness and difficulty of the world, and our powerful hope based on the One who made it and will redeem and remake it.

All these insights argue for a very strong commitment to the particular place in which God has put us. Much of the inability of our mobile generation to make decisions arises

because we are so often disconnected from the stable things of life, where being positioned in God-given relations would provide a firm base for decision-making. This does not mean we opt for 'settling-down' in the world, but we watch our mobility to make sure it is not a way of failing to genuinely engage in life where God has placed us right now.

We are to be deeply enmeshed in our times—not so much in the sense of being up to date with what is going on around us (although that too is fundamental to decision-making) but in understanding the meaning of our times on God's scale of things.

This is basic to deciding our priorities. A good example is evangelism. Jesus' command to His disciples, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation' (Mk 16:15, RSV), is given in the context that we are now in the next-to-last age. This makes the dominant theme of our times the urgency of repentance: we are being approached by a deadline which could be 'today'. It is very significant that the apostle who wrote most of the New Testament's instructions on church life and decision-making for living was consumed with the pressing need to make Christ known. As Paul was in his day, so should we be in our time. One of the 'givens' of Point 5 is that the command to preach the good news of Christ is always appropriate and mandatory.

READING THE BIBLE NOW

The framework developed in this book also gives us the ability to move around the Bible and read it for practical living. Keeping its ideas in the back of our mind as we read provides a basic approach for translating what we read for the twentieth century.

It prevents us from reading in a loose 'devotional' manner which makes us slaves to whatever 'hits' us at the moment of reading—a practice which subjects the Bible to the tyranny of whether we are tired or have indigestion at the time of study. This is not to be confused with the way the Holy Spirit

'quickens' the Scriptures to us, making them come alive in our spirit in a fresh and compelling way.

In this way, from the Bible itself, we have learned to be better students of the Bible. And most importantly, we have learned to read it to *obey God*, not simply to discuss Him or to know the book in a clever academic way which for all its impressiveness really lands us in disobedient living. If the framework equips us with such hope and ability, it will have served its purpose.

If this book has given you a way to think about the Bible and God's action in the world, do not for a minute imagine that by intellectually understanding you have grasped knowledge of God's *Person*. We have been thinking *about* God and His action. This is not the same as knowing Him. We know Him only as we personally relate to Him.

I hope *The Framework* has helped you see where you are in God's drama and what part He wants you to play. But do not rest in mere knowledge, or put this book down and rejoice about knowing something better in your mind. Decide, in the Holy Spirit's power, to go on to obey God.