

He Is Able, He Is Willing—Doubt No More

Luke Series # 14

Luke 5:12-32

David Sunday

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God's people say, "Come Lord Jesus. We look forward to Your return." Please turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 5. We're going to look at a section of about 20 verses with three stories that are tied together by a single thread. I believe we see the focal point of these stories illuminated for us in the last two verses of this section, so we're going to read Luke 5:31-32:

And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

Let's pray.

Holy God, You say in Your Word that You resist the proud but give grace to the humble. We would dread to be in a position where You might resist us so we pray that through the outpouring of Your Holy Spirit illuminating Your Word, directing our gaze to Your Son our hearts would be made humble and greatly aware of our desperate ongoing—present, past and future—need for Your Son to be our Savior. We ask this in His holy name. Amen.

In 1988 basketball legend Pistol Pete Maravich went out to play a pick-up game in Pasadena. His last words were, "I'm feeling really good." And suddenly he collapsed on the court at the age of 40.

Flo Hyman was 31 years old when she died just a few years after leading the U.S. Women's volleyball team to a silver medal in the 1984 Olympics.

Sergei Grinkov, the two-time gold medalist for the Russian figure skating team fell to his death while practicing on the ice in November 1995. He was 28 years old.

Each one of these was a model of physical fitness, but each suffered from a serious undetected heart defect. For some of you this illustration strikes close to home because you've suddenly lost a loved one in similar fashion. And you think, "If only we had known what was going on in the heart."

In these verses, Jesus appears as a Great Physician—a gentle, tender-hearted Healer. A Doctor Who is skillful because He loves His patients. A Doctor Who is affordable because He gives His medicine freely. A Doctor Who heals with more ease than any physician—immediately with the word, not through any prolonged and painful course of treatments.

But most of all we find in these verses that Jesus is a knowledgeable, discerning Physician. He diagnoses our deepest need. We come to Jesus with all kinds of problems that appear acute and most pressing to us but He probes underneath the problems that we bring to Him. He goes to the origin of all our misery and finds our undetected heart defect.

It's for this reason that some have called Jesus the "Sin Doctor." He is the world's only Sin Doctor. And He gets to the heart of what's underneath all our other maladies—the dire, deeper, undetected disease of sin.

As we approach these three stories, I want you to consider a question that was first posed by the medieval theologian Anselm, who wrote to a partner of his, "Have you not yet considered what grievous weight sin is?" I want you to think about that as we look at these stories. Have you considered what a grievous weight—what a heavy burden—sin is?

We're going to look at three of the Great Physician's patients:

1. A leper who reveals to us the severity of our condition (12-16).
2. A paralytic who highlights Jesus' greatest concern (17-26).
3. A tax collector who points us to the path of a cure (27-32).

As we look at these three stories, consider what a grievous weight sin is and how Jesus is both able and willing to be our Sin Doctor.

A Leper Who Reveals the Severity of Our Sinful Condition

His Physical Misery -- Luke 5:12-16:

¹² While he [Jesus] was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." ¹³ And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him. ¹⁴ And he charged him to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them." ¹⁵ But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. ¹⁶ But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

That the physical malady of leprosy was severe in this man's case is demonstrated by the words in verse 12. "*There came a man full of leprosy.*" Other versions say he was "covered" with this loathsome disease. We now know that leprosy is caused by a mycobacterium that attacks the nerves in and below the skin, destroying the body's warning system of pain. You might say, "Well, that sounds like a good deal." But in a fallen world, to live without pain is a very dangerous situation. Pain is the warning system for our body.

Leprosy anesthetizes the skin and limbs, bringing numbness to the extremities. It spreads in all directions:

- Eyebrows and eyelashes disappear.
- Eyelids stop blinking, thus causing blindness.
- Fingers and toes get reabsorbed into the body or fall off.
- Bones and extremities can shrivel.
- Because of the loss of feeling and the loss of pain, the person afflicted with leprosy does all kinds of things that are harmful to himself. He might reach into a fire and take out a hot potato because he doesn't feel the heat. He grips it too tightly and holds on to it too long.
- Or she might go to wash her face without realizing that the water is scalding hot and is burning her skin.
- It's been said that rats have chewed off body parts in the middle of the night without the person even knowing.

Doctor Paul Brand, one of the world's leading experts in leprosy in the 20th century, tells of a boy who opened a rusty padlock that would not yield for anyone else. But because this boy couldn't feel any pain, he turned the key so hard it gashed his finger open to the bone and the boy was completely unaware of it.

Kate encouraged me to keep this rated G, and I'm afraid I've already gone too far. So, let's move on from the physical pain to the social isolation of leprosy.

His Social Isolation

It was a highly communicable disease with no cure so the only way to protect the community was through quarantining the leper. Josephus says lepers were treated as if there were in effect dead men.

This is borne out by Scripture itself. In Leviticus 13:45-46, we read that lepers were to be isolated and segregated from society:

The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.

So this disease not only makes the leper ill, this disease also robs him—in one commentator's words—"of his name, his occupation, his habits, his family and fellowship, and his worshipping community." In a word, a leper was untouchable. Untouchable.

His Spiritual Alienation

Not only was it socially isolating, it was spiritually alienating because it was assumed that leprosy was a curse from God as a result of sin. Leprosy contaminated Israel's status as a holy people. When we read in verse 12 that in one of the cities a man comes to Jesus who is covered with leprosy, you can imagine the shock and the horror that filled the people as they saw this man approaching. You could see people running away, mothers grabbing their children and saying, "Stay away from that man!" But he burst through every proper protocol of society and falls down on his disfigured face before Jesus and cries out, "Lord, if You are willing You can make me clean."

His Bold Approach

He doesn't try to cover up the seriousness of his situation. His very words indicate that he knows he is ritually impure. He is unclean. He doesn't ask Jesus to heal him. He asks Jesus to cleanse him—to make the unclean acceptable in God's presence. When something touches the unclean, it is thought to contaminate the person who is clean. So what happens next is astounding. The leper has no doubt that Jesus is able to cleanse him. His question is would He be willing to do so?

His Complete Cleansing

In verse 13, all doubts vanish when Jesus does what no one has ever done to this man since he got leprosy. Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him. This is the first time he's felt the touch of a human being since he contracted this deadly disease. This is the first time he's felt the nearness of someone who loved him, who had compassion on him. Jesus didn't need to touch this man to heal him. But because Jesus loved him, because Jesus felt such compassion for him—and feels such compassion for us—Jesus does what no one else could do. He touches this man.

Instead of being contaminated and contracting the contagion of both the physical and the spiritual uncleanness, Jesus communicates His holiness to the leper. When Jesus touches our uncleanness, He makes us whole and clean and it does not contaminate Jesus.

John Calvin said,

“There’s such purity in Christ He absorbs all uncleanness and pollution. He does not contaminate Himself by touching the leper, nor does He transgress the Law... He stays whole, clears all our dirt away He pours out upon us His own holiness.”

Praise the Lord for that! And He does it, friends, with a word. Just a word. Look at verse 13. He says, *“I will; be clean.”* In the original language it’s just one word: be cleansed. Instantaneously this leper is cleansed. If fingers had fallen off and become stubs, suddenly they grew back. Putrid blotches of skin that covered his whole body were now covered with brand new baby-like skin. He’s not itching anymore. He doesn’t stink any longer. His sight is restored. He can hear, he can see, he can smell, he can taste—he can touch! And he can feel again. *“Immediately,”* God’s Word says, *“the leprosy left him.”*

His Parabolic Significance

Now this is a sign of what the new heavens and new earth are going to look like. All the miracles of Jesus give us foretastes of that Kingdom that we’re waiting for, that we long for His return to consummate. But this also serves as a parable for us. One biblical scholar (R.C. Trench) puts it like this: “Leprosy is an outward and visible sign of innermost spiritual corruption.” The reason God has put stories like this in the Gospels—in the Bible—is to help us perceive what a heavy weight sin is.

Because the problem is we are afflicted with a condition far more dire, far more devastating, than leprosy—but we don’t feel it. We don’t perceive what a grievous burden this condition is. Our sin makes us insensitive to God’s glory. It makes us deaf to His Word. It makes us blind to His beauty. It makes us unfeeling toward His love and mercy. It makes us impervious to the dangers of His judgments.

Like leprosy, this sinful condition spreads and infects every part of our being. Isaiah 1:6 says from the head to the sole of the foot, we are corrupted; we are polluted. There’s only rottenness within us, it says in God’s Word (Isaiah 5:24). We are totally, entirely, utterly depraved as a result of sin. There’s not a single part of our being that has not been tainted, polluted and corrupted by our sinful condition. This, friends, is even a greater concern to Jesus than leprosy.

We see in the story itself two hints that Jesus' main agenda is not to heal lepers. The first is what He says to the leper when he's healed in verse 14: "Go and tell no one." How are you going to do that? You've just been healed of leprosy. Jesus says, "I don't want you to go and report this right now because I don't want the word going out that this is My main agenda—My main mission." This healing is a sign of a greater mission that Jesus came to accomplish. So He tells him, "Go. Obey the Law of Moses," showing Jesus is perfectly submissive to and fulfills the Law (Luke 5:14).

In spite of Jesus' command, the word starts to spread and we read in verse 15 that great crowds are gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their infirmities. So the second thing we see Jesus doing that indicates He has a greater mission—a deeper agenda than just healing leprosy—is in verse 16. He withdraws. He goes away to a lonely, secluded place and He prays. That's worthy of a sermon in itself that I hope to do one of these days—on the prayer life of Jesus and how He drew His strength from His communion with the Father so He could fulfill the greater mission He came into the world to do.

It's interesting, isn't it, that at the end of the story this leper—who was on the outside looking in at the beginning—is now on the inside. He's acceptable again in the community. And who is on the outside? Jesus. Alone in a desolate place, praying. God wants us to understand that through Jesus Christ we have been delivered from a more devastating, more dire condition than this leper was of his leprosy, and He doesn't want us ever to forget it.

I want to read one passage from Ephesians 2:12-13 that underscores this. God's Word says, "*Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*" That's what you were and don't forget it, God says. Remember that you were alienated from God—cut off. You didn't have any hope. You were without God in the world.

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." Don't forget that! Let this leper serve as an illustration of the dire condition from which you have been delivered if you have trusted in Jesus, or from which He is willing to deliver you now if you will put your trust in Him.

A Paralytic Who Highlights Jesus' Greatest Concern (17-26)

The Setting

Let's move on to the second story. A paralytic—again, a desperate condition. The setting is pictured for us in verse 17: *“On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem.”*

So religious leaders have come from all over the place and they're just sitting there, the way we sometimes do in church. I've heard sometimes visitors will come into a church, sitting down in available seats and one of the church members will come and say, “You took my seat. That's where I sit.” Not very welcoming, is it? And that's the way these Pharisees and religious leaders are going to be.

Notice the atmosphere seems to be charged with electricity. Something is about to happen because look at what the end of verse 17 says: *“And the power of the Lord was with him to heal.”* So Jesus has been out there in the wilderness communing with God. He comes back in for ministry and God's power is with Him. Jesus derived His strength for His ministry from His communion with the Father. This is very instructive for us.

In verses 18 and 19 we find some great friends. These are the kinds of friends I love to have. This is the kind of friend I would love to be. They want to help their friend who is paralyzed and they're ready to burst through every obstacle to bring him to Jesus. They're great models to us of compassion and evangelistic zeal. Verse 18: *“And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus.”* They're looking for any way to get inside.

But the Pharisees and the scribes, they're just sitting there. They're not going to move. They're not going to get out of the way for this paralyzed man. But the friends won't give up. Look at verse 19: *“But finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus.”* Buildings were constructed differently in those days than they are now so this effort caused some commotion. If someone started digging a hole in our roof and all of a sudden someone landed in the middle of this room, everything would change. The order of worship would suddenly be adjusted. It would be alarming and you'd never forget it.

In this situation too, you can imagine that there was debris falling down on those Pharisees. Charles Spurgeon said, “I hope some of the dust fell in the eyes of the Pharisees because they had been accustomed to throwing it in other people's eyes all their lives.”

So these self-righteous men are getting hit in the head with debris and dirt. There are all kinds of commotion and the next thing they knew, there is this paralyzed man right there in front of Jesus—let down by his friends who wouldn't give up. These friends know

no one but Jesus can do this helpless man any good and they're determined to get him there; undeterred by obstacles.

The Surprise

When we see Jesus' response in verse 20, it comes as a great surprise. It should come as quite a shock because Luke's been setting up the scene. The power of the Lord is with Jesus to heal. This whole section in Luke is about Jesus' healing ministry and we're expecting Him to do that again.

But look at what verse 20 says: *"And when he saw their faith..."* I think that's inclusive of both the friends and the man on his bed, *"...when he saw their faith he said, 'Man, your sins are forgiven you.'"* We're supposed to think, "Wait a minute Jesus. You missed Your lines. That's not what You were supposed to say. You're supposed to say, 'You're healed. Get up and walk.' I mean, that's what the guy came to You for—to be healed of his paralysis. That's what he's expecting from You. He did not come asking for the forgiveness of his sins."

But this is a revelation of Jesus' agenda and priority. Remember back in Luke 4:43 when people were seeking Him and coming to Him? He said to the people, *"I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose."* In other words, "I have good news to preach that's better than a cure for paralysis. I have good news to preach that's better than the cleansing of leprosy."

Jesus has good news to preach to a world that's better than a cure for cancer. He's going to bring all those things about in the new Kingdom, but that's not His first agenda. It's not His most important priority. His most important priority is not the things that often torment our lives and fill us with anxiety— financial troubles, physical maladies, sicknesses. As much as He cares and feels compassion for these things, Jesus is intent on addressing first and foremost a far more dreadful condition than leprosy. He desires to cure the condition that ruins our lives worse than paralysis—the dreadful condition called sin. Until we consider what a grievous weight sin is, we're not really going to be in sync with what a precious Savior Jesus is. Through these words— *"Man, your sins are forgiven you"*—Jesus exposes our greatest need.

Charles Spurgeon said, "Pardoning mercy is of all things in the world most to be prized for it is the only and sure way to happiness." More than anything else in the world, prize God's pardoning mercy, the forgiveness of your sins. When Jesus says, *"Man, your*

sins are forgiven you,” instantaneously he’s forgiven. He’s acceptable to God. He’s justified in God’s sight right then and there. Past, present and future sins are forgiven for this man.

Jesus doesn’t speak these words lightly. They’re not spoken apart from the great cost to Himself. As these words depart Jesus’ lips, imagine the shadow of the cross looming larger and darker on Jesus’ horizon. Jesus knows in order for this promise to be fulfilled, He’s going to pay a great price on Calvary’s cross. His promise to this paralytic for the forgiveness of his sins is like a down payment on Calvary from Jesus. It’s through His blood that those sins are going to be forgiven.

The Scandal

This brings us to a great scandal. In verse 21, the scribes and Pharisees start grumbling. *“Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”* Jesus doesn’t dispute that fact. He understands sin is an offense against a holy God and only the One Who’s been offended can forgive sins.

Back when my kids were little, if Rebekah (our oldest) would have hauled off and clobbered Nate, and I walked up to Rebekah and said, “I forgive you for hitting your brother,” Nate would have probably said, “Dad, you can’t forgive her. She hit me, not you. I’m the one who was offended.” That’s the way it is with sin. Sin is an offense against God and therefore only God can forgive sins. The scribes and the Pharisees understand this and so does Jesus.

The Sign

Some people argue that Jesus never claimed to be God. That’s so foolish and wrong. Look at what He does right here. He claims to be able to forgive sins. He’s claiming to be God.

Jesus sets up a sign to validate His authority to forgive sins. Let’s read at verse 22. *“When Jesus perceived their thoughts [another indication of His divinity], he answered them, ‘Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’”*

Jesus isn’t asking which is easier to do—to forgive sins or to make a paralytic walk. He’s asking which is easier to say. I suppose anyone could say, “Your sins are forgiven,” because there’s no visible way to prove it. But to say to a paralytic, “Rise up and walk”—right then and there you’re going to have proof of whether this man has the authority to do that. So He says to the paralytic in verse 24, *“But that you may know...”*

Underline those words because remember the theme of Luke's Gospel? Luke 1:4, *"That you may have certainty (know) concerning the things you have been taught."* Now Luke is saying, "Theophilus, get this." And now in 5:24 Jesus says, *"...that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..."* Jesus said to the man who was paralyzed, *"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home."*

Look at verse 25. It's like an echo. *"And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God."* Clearly God is at work through Jesus. Clearly Jesus is endowed with God's authority to not only heal paralysis, but to forgive sin—to give us that which is more to be prized than anything else in all the world.

The Searching of our Hearts

Now this is the sign that searches our hearts. What are our priorities? What do we prize more than anything? I heard Mike Bullmore drive a point like this home to his congregation. He said,

"Imagine that the angels would be kind enough to let this paralytic come back to us today and address us. Imagine what he would say to us as a congregation. I think he'd say something like this:

'I want to tell you what a wonderful day it was when Jesus told me to get up and walk. You can imagine the ecstatic joy that flooded my heart as I walked home that day. Actually, I lived another 25 to 30 years as far as I can remember, had a family, enjoyed my life like so many of you, and I am so thankful for that blessing.

'I've been allowed to come down and talk to you this morning, to tell you that I've been with Christ now for almost 2,000 years. And I now realize that what He first said to me was the most important thing He said to me. If I had had to choose between those two blessings I received on that day, in light of what I now know—this may seem strange to you—but I don't have the slightest doubt what I would choose now. I would ask Jesus to forgive my sins. It would be better to live as a paralytic for the rest of my life with my sins forgiven, than never to have been forgiven but to be cured of my paralysis.'"

Friends, have you considered what a grievous, heavy burden sin is? If on one hand you could have the forgiveness of all your sins and on the other hand the fulfillment of all your earthly dreams—financial security, great relationships, a wonderful home, a great car,

maybe a boat, a cottage, all the things you've ever dreamed for here—which would you choose?

Young people, I really want you to consider this because rightfully you have a lot of dreams for your lives. If you could have all these physical things on one hand but no forgiveness—and over here the forgiveness of all your sins but not all these things—what would you choose?

For those who know what a heavy weight sin is, what a severe condition it is, it's a no-brainer. More to be prized than anything in the entire world is this gift that Jesus—the Sin Doctor—came to give: the forgiveness of sins. There's no question as we read the Gospels that pardoning mercy is man's greatest need and the provision of that pardoning mercy was Jesus' highest priority. That was the first thing on His agenda. So it's good news here—He is able and He is willing. Doubt no more.

So the last question is, “How do I position myself to be in the path of His grace? How do I come under this Great Physician's cure and treatment?” And that brings us to the third story.

A Tax Collector Who Points to the Provision of a Cure (27-32)

The Crook

Look at Luke 5:27: *“After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth.”* Tax Collectors were of course despised by most of society because they were crooks—it was a crooked profession. Just like we call it the “Infernal Revenue Service,” it was even worse in this time.

The Call

Levi was very corrupt but Jesus calls him, *“Follow Me.’ And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.”* Later we see that Levi becomes Matthew, the great disciple and apostle.

The Crisis

Then in verse 29 we read that Levi made a great feast in his house, *“...and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’”*

In that culture, to eat and drink with someone was to say, “I’m welcoming you into my life. I want to have fellowship with you.” The scribes and Pharisees can’t figure out why Jesus wants to fellowship with sinners.

“And Jesus answered them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.’” There you have it. There you see the path to the cure. It’s in recognizing that you need Him. It’s in seeing how heavy a weight this sin problem is for you and recognizing He is able and willing to cure you. When you feel your need of Him, He is willing and able to help you—to instantaneously cure you.

The problem is many of us don’t see our need. It’s not our badness but our goodness that keeps us from Him. It’s not our sin but our righteousness—our own perceived righteousness—that keeps us from Jesus. It’s not our sickness, it’s our healthiness—our own sense of fitness—that keeps us from recognizing we need Him.

There’s an old tombstone in England that reads like this.

Here lie the earthly remains of
John Berridge, late vicar of Everton...
I was born in sin, February 1716
Remained ignorant of my fallen state till 1730.
Lived proudly on faith and works for salvation till 1754.
Was admitted to Everton Vicarage, 1755.
Fled to Jesus alone for refuge, 1756.
Fell asleep in Christ, January 22, 1793.

So John Berridge was ignorant of his sin until he was 14 years old but then lived “proudly on faith and works” for another 24 years, trusting only in himself. One year later he became a minister and then after preaching the gospel for a year, he finally sees the truth. None but Jesus. None but Jesus can do this helpless sinner any good. He “fled to Jesus alone for refuge.”

The way to come under the Sin Doctor’s cure is to see that you need Him. Jesus says, “If you think you’re healthy, I cannot heal you. If you think you’re righteous, I cannot save you because I am a Savior for sinners. I am a Doctor for sin-sick souls. That’s why I’ve come.” If you think you can get along without him, you have an undetected heart defect. You are not as fit as you think. But Jesus can heal you before it’s too late.

Isn’t it alarming in this passage how it was the people who knew their Bibles best who loved Jesus the least? Somehow it’s alarmingly possible to sit there like the Pharisees, listening to Jesus teach, knowing His Word and yet not realizing your need for Him; not

prizing and accepting the forgiveness He came to bring. That's alarming! May it not be true of us.

How do you position yourself in the path of His grace? How do you come under His care and treatment? You fall at His feet like the leper; you break through every obstacle like the paralytic; you bring your desperate need to Him and say, "None but you, Lord Jesus, can do this helpless sinner good." And He will say to you, "I am able; I am willing—be clean! Your sins are forgiven you!"

An old eighteenth century hymn states:

All the fitness He requires
Is to feel your need of Him...
None but Jesus, none but Jesus
Can do helpless sinners good.

(Come, Ye Sinners by Joseph Hart)

That's the way to come under His cure—to feel your need for Him.

Let's pray.

Lord, I pray that by the working of Your Holy Spirit You would make us see the desperateness of our need and esteem the One Who has come to make provision for that which is most to be prized in all the world. Thank You for Your pardoning mercy that flows freely to everyone who says, "Lord Jesus, if You are willing You can make me clean." Thank You that for those who fall at Your feet and plead for Your mercy, Your response is always the same as it was to that leper: "I will; be cleansed." Your response is always the same as it was to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven."

Oh Lord, for those who don't know that forgiveness, I pray that You would open their eyes and sensitize their hearts to their need for You. Thank You that right this very moment we can call out to You, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner," and You hear us and receive us. And for those who have experienced that forgiveness, we pray that You would intensify our joy, delight and gratitude now as we sing, "It is well with my soul." Thank You Lord. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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