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*Bound Together*

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# Strange and Troubling Truth



The funny thing about the truly strange is that sometimes it's real.

Alan Jacobs, *Wayfaring*

Everyone will have noticed how the Old Testament seems at times to ignore our conception of the individual.

C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

And Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver and the cloak and the bar of gold, *and his sons and daughters and his oxen and donkeys and sheep and his tent and all that he had.* And they brought them up to the Valley of Achor. And Joshua said, "Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today." And all Israel stoned him with stones. They burned them with fire and stoned them with stones.

Joshua 7:24–25, emphasis added

**I didn't understand the principle of the rope** was at work when I saw Stevie Baxter drunk. As far as that goes, at first I didn't even know he was drunk. I was only ten at the time. Stevie was eleven. I was playing with friends in a green meadow by the muddy Des Moines River. Stevie was sipping what appeared to be orange pop and acting stupid. I figured he was staggering around and slurring his words to entertain us.\*

My friends, Stevie's cousins, were far more knowledgeable about the effects of alcohol than I was, and they immediately understood that Stevie was three sheets to the wind. They laughed and poked one another. I sensed I was missing something, but I couldn't quite figure it out.

Even when I saw Stevie getting sick, I didn't know what was going on. It wasn't until Stevie's mother showed up and figured out that Stevie's older brothers had spiked her eleven-year-old's Orange Crush that I put two and two together.

Mrs. Baxter lit into Stevie's suppliers with the unmitigated fury of a tornado. I was scared just *watching* her scream and yell. The objects of Mrs. Baxter's wrath hung their heads and took the verbal pummeling. They were too drunk themselves to be much offended. All the while, Stevie was bent over, hands on his knees, continuing to vomit on the banks of the muddy river.

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\*I've changed some of the details of this story so it does not precisely correspond to one situation.

I didn't tell my parents that Stevie had been drunk. But if I had shared it with them, despite the fact that he was eleven years old at the time, they would have been only mildly surprised. Stevie was a Baxter. Baxters drank. It was expected. Your average Baxter child was regularly in trouble by the end of junior high and had crashed at least one car by the time he was in his late teens. Of course, not *every* Baxter was drunk *all* the time. But most were. Stevie was just the latest in a long line of drunken dominoes to topple over.

Like I said, I didn't understand at the time that the principle of the rope was at work. If you had asked me at ten years old what had happened, I would have said that Stevie chose to be "bad," that it was his decision to drink. And if you had asked me why I wasn't drunk, I would have told you it was because I had made better decisions than Stevie, that somehow my ability to say no to alcohol was stronger than Stevie's, that I was a better person in some way.

Even without knowing any of the people involved in this story, you can tell this is an overly simplistic evaluation. The reality — a truth we will be unpacking in greater detail in this book — is that Stevie's decision to drink at age eleven was not merely the result of his choices as an individual. Yes, at some point Stevie chose to drink. But a large part of the reason Stevie guzzled whatever was mixed with his orange pop was that the people in his family had shown him by their words and examples that this was the only choice he *could* make. Stevie's family had jumped into the river of alcoholism. And when they did, they pulled Stevie into the current after them.

Families like Stevie's are but one sad example among billions. And the reality that underlies this experience — that our lives, our decisions, our choices, our actions are directly and indirectly affected by the decisions and choices of other people — is one of the defining realities of life. Yet much of the time, we forget about



it. We act as if we are the captains of our own ships, as if somehow our lives and decisions as individuals can remain unaffected by our ethnicity, our family background, and our nationality.

In the case of families, we might even say that “they are we and we are they.” Our future and our place in this world aren’t *simply* the sum of our own individual choices. On varying levels, we are roped together with others. When someone we are roped to is lifted up, we are lifted up with them. When he or she jumps off a figurative cliff, we are pulled down with them. This is what I refer to as the “principle of the rope” — the simple truth that our lives, choices, and actions are linked to the lives, choices, and actions of other people. To put it simply, as I have done in the title of this book, we are “bound together,” tied to others in our good and bad choices.

There are endless illustrations of this principle, and not all are so dramatic. We talk a lot about the principle of the rope in our church and at home. Recently, when I was out for a walk with my ten-year-old son, I asked him, “Benjamin, what do I mean by the principle of the rope?” He responded quickly. “Oh, I think about that a lot. Here’s the best example I can give. Today a couple of kids in my class got in trouble. So none of us got to go out for recess. That’s the principle of the rope.”

So it is. While my son’s fourth-grade class is comprised of individuals, they are not islands unto themselves. When Ben’s classmates misbehaved, they were “roped” to the rest of the class. Two jumped off the behavioral cliff. And, at least for one recess, they pulled the rest of the class down with them. As this classroom example implies, the principle of the rope — our solidarity with one another as human beings — is not confined to our family relationships. It applies to institutions like the church and the government as well. When Hitler chose to be an evil dictator, he pulled the entire nation of Germany over the cliff with him. Of course, specific *individuals* were complicit in this evil. But can we

blame young children who happened to belong to German families during this time in history for the sins committed by their parents? Surely it was just their misfortune to be “roped” to the Third Reich. And yet the fact remains that these children, however innocent they may have been, still faced the consequences of decisions made by those who came before them. Though not directly responsible for the crimes committed, their lives were linked to their national identity, and the choices and decisions made by their parents and leaders changed their future.

I use the phrase “the principle of the rope” to help people picture this reality of how connected we are to one another. Theologians refer to this principle in several different ways. Sometimes they speak of “corporate identity” or of “the one and the many,” referring to how the actions of one individual can affect many others. Just as often, the principle of the rope is referenced by the word *solidarity*—one of those words we often hear used without considering what it means. *Solidarity* refers to a union of interests, purposes, or sympathies among members of a group. It speaks to the ties that bind a group together. You may have heard the word *solidarity* used in the context of labor unions. When union leaders appeal to their members to show solidarity during a labor dispute, they are calling for members to show that they are bound together as a unified whole.

In this book, I will be using phrases like “the principle of the rope” and “corporate solidarity” and the word *solidarity* interchangeably. As a pastor, I try hard to make abstract theological concepts concrete and accessible to people, so I often prefer the simpler phrase “the principle of the rope.” But at times, I will use the more technical language for precision. In every case, these phrases refer to the same reality.

I am not the first person to use the image of rope as a picture of the invisible connections that exist between human beings. In the great American novel titled *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville’s Ish-

mael reflected on these realities as well. Two men named Ishmael and Queequeg are cutting up a whale they have just killed. Ishmael remains on the boat, but he is “roped” to Queequeg, who is down in the water on the back of the mostly submerged whale. Should Queequeg begin to be drawn under the whale, it is Ishmael’s job to jerk his comrade upright. But this is a precarious connection. If for some reason Queequeg is pulled under the whale, Ishmael will inevitably be pulled along with him, and they will both drown. Reflecting on his state of being roped to another man, Ishmael comes to see that the literal rope connecting them pictures a far older, much stronger rope that connects all people together:

I say, I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases he, one way or other, has this . . . [roped] connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die.<sup>1</sup>

Melville’s Ishmael didn’t like the principle of the rope. He felt there was injustice in the principle, that it was wrong for some to suffer because of the poor decisions of others.<sup>2</sup> And yet he could not escape the clear truth that he saw: for better or for worse, we are roped together.

Like Ishmael, I struggled with the fairness of the principle of the rope. How could it be right that when a grown man chooses to be violent, a three-year-old little girl suffers? For me, this idea didn’t sit very well. But this was before I realized that this principle, which seems so terrible on the one hand, is our lifeline to joy. I’ll get to why the principle of the rope is such glorious news. At this point, my goal isn’t to convince you about whether or not the principle of the rope is fair or whether it’s good news. Instead, the first objective is to establish agreement that solidarity is an undeniable aspect of reality.

We could draw a parallel between the principle of the rope and the law of gravity. With regard to gravity, it doesn’t seem

fair to me, and I don't understand it. Gravity has been hard on me since I was a youth. Growing up, it was my life's dream to become a star basketball player. I lived on a farm, and like a scene out of the movie *Hoosiers*, my parents set up a hoop for me to practice on. Even though our driveway was gravel and it was hard to dribble the ball, I would shoot baskets for long hours each day. Eventually, I could knock down shots from all over the driveway.

Yet, despite my hours of practice, the law of gravity brought an early end to my basketball-playing career. I was around four foot ten at that time, and though I would try as hard as I could to jump, I could never quite leap high enough off the hardwood to slam the ball through the hoop. As a matter of fact, my vertical jump was so pathetic that I had a hard time even touching the net. In the sixth grade I signed with the Parsons Chevrolet franchise in Keosauqua, Iowa, and we struggled through a mediocre season. Padget's Gadgets crushed us in both the regular season and the play-offs. To this day, I blame our dismal season on the law of gravity.

Eventually, I went to college and took physics, where we spent a great deal of time *studying* gravity. We learned about a brilliant British guy named Henry Cavendish, who was the first to accurately measure the gravitational constant. Our class experimented with dropping objects off tall buildings. I memorized formulas and figured out the mass of the moon and earth based on the gravitational pull. To this day I don't understand how gravity works. And as I have gotten slower and even more vertically challenged in my old age, I continue to resent it.

You know where I am going. Regardless of whether or not I agree with the fairness of the law of gravity, or understand it, I still live in light of it. I'm not planning on walking off the fourth floor of a building anytime soon, and it isn't up to me to decide what is fair. This is our Father's world. The principle of the rope is part of it. I rest in his justice.

Of course, if we are really going to consider the validity of the point, we need to look at the Bible. What does God's Word say about the principle of the rope? Are people treated as individual units? Or are they roped to one another?

## The Principle of the Rope in the Bible

Time and again, as we read through Scripture, we find examples that validate the reality of the principle of the rope. In fact, when I first began to study the Bible, one of the most difficult things to accept was how often innocent people, particularly young children, suffered because of the decisions made by someone else.

For example, consider the story of the flood in Genesis 7:9–19. We read that God destroyed all people on the earth through a flood, with one notable exception—the family of Noah. Apart from Noah's immediate family, every single person on earth died in a disaster that made Hurricane Katrina look like a spring shower. Genesis 7:22 tells us that “everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died,” and this includes all the small children who were not part of Noah's family. Please understand, I know the Bible tells us these people were wicked and corrupt. But how much chance did the three-year-olds of that day have to turn things around before they drowned? Why didn't God have the toddlers walk up the ramp of the ark, two by two? The only answer that makes sense is that young children drowned in the flood *because they were roped together with their parents and their culture*. In other words, when God punished people in the flood, he wasn't just dealing with them as individuals; he was treating them as people corporately accountable to him.

In a similar manner, we see that the children of Sodom and Gomorrah were roped together with their cities in judgment. In Genesis 19:23–29, we read that God wiped Sodom and Gomorrah off the face of the map. After God's judgment, when Abraham

looked toward the land of the valley, he saw that “the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace” (Genesis 19:28). Everyone in those cities, with the exception of Lot’s family, burned — children included.

Later, in the book of Exodus, we read that God punished the entire nation of Egypt because of decisions made by their representative leader, Pharaoh (Exodus 7 – 14). When the Nile turned to blood, three-year-olds were thirsty. Swarms of gnats descended on four-year-olds. It was not only Pharaoh and his minions who got boils, but *all* the Egyptians (Exodus 9:11). Firstborn sons died, regardless of their age during the Passover, from the firstborn of the pharaoh who sat on the throne to the firstborn of the prisoner in the dungeon (Exodus 12:29). There was loud wailing in the land because there was not one household where there was not someone dead. When Egypt pursued the children of Israel into the desert, soldiers drowned in the Red Sea while following orders (Exodus 14:28).

Or consider God’s command to the Israelites to completely wipe out the people of the land of Canaan. Of Israel’s first battle with Jericho, we read, “Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword” (Joshua 6:21). If you are like me, you may read this and object: “Surely there must have been varying degrees of wickedness in Jericho, at least by human standards. Why was everyone destroyed?” Yet the Bible is clear on this matter. With the exception of Rahab and her family, everyone and everything in Jericho was destroyed. Have you honestly considered what it looked like and felt like for the Israelite soldiers to execute entire families? How could God hold the children accountable for the sins of their parents?

Lest we accuse God of favoring his own people over others, we should note that we find evidence of God’s own people suffering for the sins and choices of others in the story that follows the battle

of Jericho. When Achan, an Israelite, violated the covenant and stole some of the devoted things following the battle of Jericho, God allowed the entire nation of Israel to lose the next battle they fought against the city of Ai. In Joshua 7:1, we read, “The people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the LORD burned against the people of Israel.”

To be clear: as the result of what *one man*, Achan, did, *many* Israelites died when they took up arms to fight, as God had commanded them, in the next battle of the military campaign to take the Promised Land (Joshua 7:2–5). It was not until Joshua inquired of the Lord as to why they had lost the battle that the Lord informed him of the problem. Because Achan had taken the things devoted to destruction, God punished Israel as a whole (Joshua 7:10–11). In other words, thirty-six soldiers died in that battle, not because of their own sin, but because they were roped together with Achan. The reality of their corporate solidarity as a nation—the principle of the rope—meant that the sin of one man had a direct effect on the rest of the nation. Mothers had to explain to children that they would never know their father, all because someone *else* had sinned.

We see additional examples throughout the Old Testament, and in many cases they also reflect a cultural concept of solidarity. In the ancient world, the idea that families were bound together seems to have been assumed. We see it in the book of Daniel when, after Daniel is rescued from the mouths of lions, the men who maliciously accused Daniel are fed to the lions instead (Daniel 6:24). But there is a detail you might be inclined to read past or ignore when you share this story with your children. Not only were the evil men punished, but their *wives and children* were fed to the lions as well. God spared Daniel, because Daniel “trusted in his God” (Daniel 6:23). But no angel showed up

to close the jaws of the lions before they devoured the children of the guilty. The text reads, “The king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions — they, their children, and their wives. And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces” (Daniel 6:24).

A friend of mine told me recently that a third grader in a Sunday school class at her church had pointed this out. The teacher, at a loss as to how to respond, simply let the class know they weren’t going to discuss that today. While I don’t blame the teacher for avoiding that difficult conversation, at some point we should stop and ask, “Why *do* such things happen?”

Throughout the Scriptures, we also see that the principle of the rope is repeatedly observed when *the decisions and choices made by God’s representative leaders have consequences for their people*. Consider 2 Samuel 24:1 – 17. Seventy thousand Israelite men died because King David sinfully decided to count his troops. It is hard to comprehend exactly why David’s census was so evil, though it may have been evidence of pride or arrogance in David’s heart. Yet regardless of why it was wrong, we can tell, based on the severe judgment inflicted by God, that it was truly awful in God’s sight. God’s anger against Israel was kindled, and seventy thousand Israelite men died (2 Samuel 24:15). And all of this happened, not because these people had sinned in any particular way, but because David, their king, had sinned. David understood this, and he even pointed it out as he pleaded with God for mercy (2 Samuel 24:17).

Time after time in the Scriptures we see a common principle at work: *the choices, words, and actions of one person represent many others*. Solidarity has always existed among groups of people, from the beginning of the world. We see this in God’s judgment against sin and in his decision to destroy the world by flood. We see it in his punishment of the Israelites, the Egyptians, and the people of



Jericho. Apart from the idea of solidarity, how can we explain what we see, either in Scripture or in the common experiences of life?

No doubt, you can easily list any number of examples. You probably know someone whose children have made terrible decisions, and now, in some measure, the entire family has been affected. You may know of someone who married, and over time the decisions of their spouse have done great damage to them and those they love. As much as we may like to believe we are individuals responsible solely for our own decisions, our experience tells a different story. We observe the principle of the rope in life, and it is evident in the Bible.

## If You Still Struggle to Accept the Principle of the Rope

Not everyone is willing to accept something as true just because they find it in the Bible. I recall reading a post written by a young mother whose eleven-year-old daughter was very upset that all of Achan's family was stoned when he sinned at Jericho:

We've been reading through Joshua in school (we home-school). Last week, when my eleven-year-old daughter read about Achan's sin and his punishment in chapter 7, she burst into tears. The thought of God killing Achan's wife and children as a result of HIS sin did not sit well with her. We talked about God's reasons for it, but they were insufficient for her. It didn't seem fair, and I had to agree with her. She confessed that serving, believing in, following a God like that didn't appeal to her. Our discussion and my husband and my answers didn't seem to clarify or comfort her.

Honestly, we were both at a loss for a clear answer . . .

How do you respond to an eleven-year-old who doesn't care about wrath, holiness, etc., and sees God as a big bully and unjust? I would really appreciate any responses and insight.<sup>3</sup>

The last time I checked, there were sixty-eight comments weighing in on how this mother should respond to her daughter. The options recommended included:

- *Deny the authority of the Bible.* Several comments suggested that the events didn't really happen the way they are recorded in the Bible.
- *Ignore the Old Testament and focus on the New Testament.* One father commented, "I don't tend to spend a great deal of time with my children on the Old Testament."

For those who believe in the authority of Scripture and the ongoing importance of understanding both the Old and New Testament writings as the inspired Word of God, neither of these options is good. If we hold that the Bible is God's Word then we believe it has something to teach us, that it contains truth we need to understand. The most self-defeating thing we can do is to deny the grace God has extended to us through his precious, authoritative Word.<sup>4</sup>

Let me give you a different alternative. Rather than being driven away from God by our discomfort with something we encounter in life and his Word, we should run to him. God is not only just; he is also loving, merciful, and gracious. We need not fear those portions of his Word that seem difficult to understand.

Indeed, it may even be that our discomfort indicates a place where our understanding needs to be corrected the most. This may well be the case with the idea of solidarity. It is a basic aspect of the biblical worldview largely misunderstood by the modern Western mind. This is a point that Michael Horton makes. He writes, "The concept of solidarity . . . is basic to the biblical worldview, however alien to our own."<sup>5</sup> We hesitate to consider solidarity because it seems so strange. Yet, if it is basic to the biblical worldview, we must study it, and do so thoroughly.

My challenge is that you will make it a goal to understand