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Tobit 12:7b King James Version

“Do that which is good, and no evil shall touch you.”

The grateful dead.

There is a small handful of Bible books that are called the “Apocrypha”. They are typically placed between the Old and the New Testaments, that is, when they are included in the Bible. The Apocrypha are, as the name suggests, apocryphal, or hidden – because that is what we have done with them, hidden them. Most Protestant Bibles do not include them. Sometimes their teachings are considered counter to the theological principles present in official Scripture, but in truth, the complaints against them are more complex, and they simply didn’t make the cut when, in 1534, Luther’s Bible was published; they were given the “apocryphal” status at that time. He removed them from their previous place within the Old Testament, saying that they weren’t “held equal to the Sacred Scriptures and yet are useful and good for reading”. This characterization very nicely fits one of these books, the Book of Tobit. It is thought to have been written during the

period between the Old and the New Testament, in particular, early in the 2nd century B.C.

The Book of Tobit is quite short and is written from the perspective of the character Tobit. Tobit is considered fictional, a romantic folktale that at one time was thought to be historically factual. Interestingly, Luther himself left open the possibility that it could be true. Roman Catholic scholars have tended to defend it as accurate, while Jewish scholars simply ignore the book. To compress the story into a single sentence, one scholar described it as *“a delightful story of the afflictions of a pious Israelite and the adventures of his dutiful son, who makes a journey in the company of a disguised angel and returns with a bride and the means to restore the father’s health and wealth”*. Here’s a quick summary:

The story takes place around 725 B.C., in a city called Nineveh, where Israelites are being held in exile by the Assyrians. While most of his fellow Israelites have fallen away from the righteous path and are no longer living by God’s law, he has remained loyal to his Lord. He feeds the hungry, provides clothes to the naked, and even though it could get him sentenced to death, gives proper burials to Israelites who have been executed by the Assyrian king and then had their bodies dumped outside the city wall.

Early in the story, Tobit is outside at night in a courtyard when a sparrow poops in his eyes – blinding him. Yes, in case you didn't know it: bird droppings can cause blindness. Unable to work, his wife Hannah struggles to support them. Tobit ends up praying to God to simply kill him so that his suffering and shame will end. Coincidentally, at the same time, a young woman, Sarah, the daughter of a man named Raguel, who lives in Media, is also praying for death. Her problem is that she has been married seven times, but each time, before the marriage can be consummated, an evil demon named Asmodeus has killed the bridegroom.

(You might be starting to understand why some folks didn't think this tale was entirely true.)

But God is listening to Tobit and Sarah, both of whom are godly people, and God sends the angel Raphael to rescue them. Soon, as Tobit is under the impression that he is about to die, he remembers that twenty years before, he had left ten silver talents with someone named Gabael, who also lives in Media (like Sarah). Tobit sends his grown son Tobiah to go to Media and get the money. Before Tobiah leaves, Tobit urges him to live a godly life and to be sure and marry a woman from their tribe, because they are descendants of very important Israelites and the bloodline should be kept pure. Hannah, by the way, strenuously objects to Tobiah being sent off on what could be a dangerous mission.

As it turns out, Raphael, the angel sent by God signs up as Tobiah's guide, but Raphael is in disguise as a human. When they are approaching the area where the silver talents have been left, Raphael suggests that Tobiah marry Sarah. But Tobias doesn't want to be dead husband number eight and declines. However, Tobiah, before he even meets Sarah, falls in love with her. Later, after Tobiah has met her family, Sarah's father Raguel agrees to the marriage. Under Raphael's guidance – whom Tobiah still does not know is an angel – Tobiah burns the liver and heart of a fish. This little bit of magic drives the demon away to faraway Egypt, where Raphael ties him up. Now, Tobiah will not become the next dead bridegroom. Our quote today, by the way, *Do that which is good, and no evil shall touch you*, are words spoken by Raphael to Tobit and Tobiah just before Raphael reveals that he is an angel.

(Certainly, by now, you are doubting the historical accuracy of this tale.)

Tobiah, Sarah, and Raphael head back to Tobiah's hometown. Tobiah's mother is astonished to see him alive. Tobiah applies some fish guts to his father's eyes, and his vision returns. (And to think, I had to get corneal transplants to fix my vision. I guess my eye doc didn't know about fish guts.) Raphael then reveals himself to be an angel. Raphael explains that God heard the prayers of Tobit and Sarah, and this is why things are working out so nicely. Tobit

has money and his vision and his pride back. Tobiah has an appropriate wife. And Hannah gets her son back in one piece.

Tobit composes a hymn of thanksgiving to the Lord, thanking God for his mercy. Although the Israelites are scattered, Tobit expresses confidence that God will eventually bring them back to their holy land and rebuild the Temple, which had been destroyed. In the end, Tobit, who is sixty-something at the beginning of the story, lives to be a hundred and twelve. He dies a very righteous and charitable man. As he is dying, he urges his son to take Sarah, his mother Hannah, and Sarah's and Tobias' children to Media, where Sarah's family lives. There, Tobit tells Tobiah, he will be safe until the land of Israel is restored. Tobiah dedicates his life to carrying for his mother, until she dies, and then he cares for his wife's parents. Tobiah dies at the age of a hundred and seventeen, five years longer than his father. He dies a very wealthy and very righteous man. Most importantly, he lives to see the Assyrians destroyed militarily and publicly shamed.

I hope you have enjoyed this summary of the book of Tobit. Now, the name of this sermon is "The grateful dead", and you might be wondering why. It is *not* named after the rock band, at least not directly. You see, there is an ancient pagan folktale that is commonly called "The Grateful Dead". In this story,

a man goes to great expense to bury a corpse he comes across, and the dead man subsequently rewards the man who buried him. It's believed that this story inspired the author of the Book of Tobit to put in that part about Tobit running around risking his life burying dead Israelites that have been murdered by the Assyrian king. The Grateful Dead, that is the rock band, apparently found the words Grateful Dead in some dictionary, liked the sound of it, and used it as the name of their band. Perhaps that dictionary had an entry about this old folktale. I don't know.

So, why did I choose this non-scriptural book to talk about today? Before directly answering that, I'd like to talk about a police officer I met recently. (I'm deliberately changing some of the details of this story, to protect the privacy of the people involved.) I was called into the trauma area, the emergency room, at Boulder Community hospital late one night recently. A man had been working on an old American car, a muscle car of some sort, but I don't remember the make. Something from the sixties. He was a man somewhat younger than me. He was on a piece of land somewhere just outside Boulder that he rented. He was by himself. While he was under the car, he must have kicked the jack that was holding it up, or something like that, and the car fell on him. He was trapped for

quite some time. Eventually, a friend of his discovered him and got the car off of him. To be honest, he was badly hurt, although he did survive.

But it's not the man who was trapped or his friend that made the biggest impression on me. It was the police officer who was, I believe, the next person to find him. This man, while trapped under the car, had managed to call 911, and the officer had gotten there just after the friend. The officer ended up in the trauma bay, while the medical team desperately worked to save the injured man's life. I was there, too, standing by the man's mother, as she comforted her wounded son. The woman became very worried about her son's car, not the one he was working on, but his own car, which was presumably out where he had been working on the muscle car. The mother was sure that her son's computer and other valuables were in his car, and that he generally did not lock his car. The area was apparently prone to theft. So, hours later, after her son was stabilized and moved to the ICU, she was determined to go out there, in the middle of the night, alone, in the dark, to find his car and lock it up.

The officer, who had just said that his shift was ending, and he was going home, volunteered to go out there, find the car, and lock it. This was a simple thing to do, take an hour or so, and do this woman a favor. He didn't have to do it. I was just struck by the officer's care for this woman. She was upset about her

son being hurt, it was extremely late, and the officer didn't want her driving around when she was exhausted and upset; nor did he want her out walking around in the dark. The entire time that this officer was dealing with the injured man's mother in the ER, which took several hours, he was like that: genuinely concerned about the welfare of the injured man and his mother. He wasn't just doing his job. He was doing his job with love. He made me think of Tobit, the righteous, unassuming man.

That's what the Book of Tobit is all about. It's a tale that is intended to instruct. The lesson is a simple one, and it is at the core of Judeo-Christian morality. We should be good people. We should serve one-another. There's something very important about the historical context of this story. It was written, not around 725 B.C., when the story takes place, but a half millennium later, during the period between the Old and New Testaments, what's often called the Maccabean period – which is a reference to a couple of other books from the apocrypha. During this time, Jews weren't focused on a belief in the afterlife, and in the Book of Tobit, the main character, Tobit, isn't doing good deeds because he's going to be rewarded. The officer, likewise, wasn't motivated by any kind of reward. I imagine his bosses are completely unaware of what he did.

That's what the Book of Tobit is all about: being decent and good, simply because that is the way we should act. Tobit is indeed rewarded for what he does – but he isn't expecting it and isn't motivated by the thought of any reward. The angel Raphael remains under cover until the end of the story.

This is something that means very little today. The people we see on TV shouting loudly and angrily about the rights of others often seem to be doing it so that they will be seen as being important, so that they will get attention for themselves. We live in a very in-your-face age, where people are confrontational, even violent while supposedly standing up for something just because it is the right thing to do. Being quiet about being good just isn't hip anymore. We've forgotten the lesson of the Book of Tobit. He does the right thing because it is the right thing to do – and for no other reason whatsoever.

Tobit has very little in the world, but he feeds and clothes the poor. He buries the dead, even though it could get him killed. He lives for his wife and his son. He doesn't let up, even after some bird craps in his eyes and makes him go blind. He's just plain a good man.

Imagine if people today lived like Tobit did. Yes, he's a fictional character, but his story is one that our culture could dearly learn from today.