



Ask the clergy

By Pastor David Penn

What is the Bible's take on bankruptcy?

Q: "What does the Bible have to say for people who are so deeply in debt that bankruptcy seems like the only option?"

A: The word bankruptcy does not appear in the Bible, but the concept runs throughout its pages.

The Bible calls us to be responsible. Romans 13:8 is an example of this responsible living, it says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another; for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law." Further in the book of II Thessalonians 3:10 Paul the writes, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

This is a principle that covers those who are able bodied and capable of work. One of the tragedies of our society is that we have lost the value of work. Colossians 3:23-24 says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. ... It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

The Bible clearly speaks of our responsibility to work for God first, while we are doing that, we also have the privilege of working for others and allowing them to pay us for the work we do for God. Whether or not we are well employed is not the key issue, working for God is.

The Old Testament also picks up the same theme in the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy 5:6-21, gives the charge to not lie, steal and or covet. In fact the first three commandments constitute our relationship to God, calling for us to honor him with our entire being, Matthew 22:37-40. The rest of the Ten Commandments spell out the details of what that would look like.

The Bible further acknowledges that people will, for whatever reason, fall into financial crises of such severity that the only way out is for a combination of forgiveness and responsible engagement.

Jesus spoke in the parable of the unforgiving servant, Matthew 18:22-35. Here he shares the story of the person so hopelessly in debt that if he had 10 life times to repay the debt it would not have been long enough to deal with his obligation.

When the person to whom he owed the money made the normal demand that he and his family be placed in the debtors prison till the entire debt was paid, he pled for his family's life. Instead of demanding the payment the man was forgiven and released.

Upon his release he left and found some one who owed him a few dollars, pocket change by comparison. The person not having the money pled for more time, but the callus man refused to have mercy and threw him into the debtor's prison.

When word got back to the man who had forgiven him more that he could ever have repaid he became angry and had the merciless man arrested and thrown into the debtor's prison till he could repay what he owed, which would be never.

The lesson Jesus was sharing is that we who have been forgiven much should be forgiving others just as we have been forgiven.

So the Bible teaches forgiveness and responsibility. Without these two we have no way of dealing with the issue of bankruptcy.

BY ROGER BERG
of Apple Valley

I read with interest the answer Rev. Jim Dallas made in the Jan. 6, issue of Religion Section of the Daily Press, to the question, "What does God know, and when did he know us?" He quotes the Bible several times so I'm assuming he is a Christian and it seems to me that by definition God has all knowledge, has all understanding, all wisdom, is infinite, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent and created all things. Rev. Dallas mentions that "We relate to God by faith," but how do we have absolute faith in a being unless that being has all knowledge and all power? If Deity does not have all power and doesn't know all things, then there

GOING COPTIC

By **ERIK DERR**
Staff Writer

In the city

where Father Michael Ibrahim was raised, many believe people in the United States are too focused on material gains to care about things spiritual.

"They think Americans are not close to God," he said.

So, the native of Cairo, Egypt, was happily surprised when he arrived in California three years ago and people frequently stopped him in public to ask about his clothes, the religious articles he wears — and the faith for which he gave up a career in international business.

"I found many are aware of and interested in learning about the Bible," said Ibrahim through an Arabic interpreter.

Ibrahim, 40, is the presiding priest at St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church in Victorville, part of an ecclesiastical lineage that dates back to the Church of Alexandria, Egypt, which was established by Jesus' apostle Mark around 55 A.D.

Ibrahim, who was born into the faith, wears a long black robe, a rounded black cap, a silver crucifix and small wooden cross, which he keeps on his person and holds in his hand whenever performing formal duties. He sports a mustache and beard, as all the church leaders do, to demonstrate his abandonment of more materialistic desires.

Five years ago, Ibrahim, a married father of two, was asked by the church if he would become a priest — one cannot pursue service in the clergy, as they might in other faiths.

After his wife, Olivia, and he agreed on the appointment, Ibrahim spent about two years in intensive training and then was assigned to St. Mary, which originated in the late 1980s, when about 10 local

families be decided to meet for local study sessions at each other's homes.

Mona Selim, an aerospace engineer, said her desire to attend a local church peaked after she had her two sons and realized driving two hours to attend services in Los Angeles was too much for her new family.

St. Mary broke ground at its present location, along Bonanza Road, in May of 1995 — with the personal blessing of the Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III.

"We 'immigrant' Copts are very well taken care of," said Selim.

The word "Coptic" comes from the Greek word for Egypt. Members of the church, referred to as "Copts," are predominantly ethnic Egyptians but draw from many other cultures. The Coptic Church claims over 10 million members worldwide.

One of a handful of orthodox branches of the Christian faith, the Coptic church started during the Roman Empire and continued through the Byzantine Empire and Islamic rule thereafter.

Early in the history of Christianity, Coptic Orthodox

Work of Egyptian priest helps members, community draw strength from church's history



Michael Stenerson / Staff Photographer
Father Michael Ibrahim serves communion to Augenie Khalil during mass on Friday morning at Saint Mary Coptic Orthodox Church in Victorville.

leaders split from those of the Roman Catholic church over changes in Christian doctrine and papal authority, which they felt did not stay true to the words of Jesus.

Copts believe in strict adherence to several sacraments, which include baptism, confirmation, communion, confession, matrimony and giving comfort to the sick. To show their submission to the will of God, Copts fast over 210 days a year.

The Coptic tradition honors the work of saints but does not believe in worshipping them. Nor does it believe its Pope or priests are infallible.

Ibrahim says church members derive their greatest inspiration from church's history itself, which includes centuries of severe persecution, particularly at the hands of the Romans.

"The Coptic traditions have continued, unchanged, for over 2,000 years," Ibra-

him said.

When he arrived in Victorville, he was heartened to see so many members who held onto their religion even when keeping church contact was so hard.

"You feel something here that stems from the history ... the atmosphere," he said.

"I know," said Ibrahim, "the Church is not going to end."

Erik Derr can be reached at 955-5358 or ederr@vvdailypress.com.

More Americans drawn by liturgy and theology

Those looking for answers finding them more through Orthodox Christian churches

By **TOM BREEN**
Associated Press Writer

Greg Mencotti worried he would never find a spiritual home.

The Sunday school teacher grew up Roman Catholic, lost his faith and became an atheist. Eventually, he returned to Christianity, this time as a born-again Christian, spending years worshipping in a Methodist congregation. Still, he felt his search wasn't over.

That led him to the Holy Spirit Antiochian Orthodox Church in Huntington, W.Va. a denomination with Mideast roots that, like all Orthodox groups, traces its origins to the earliest days of Christianity.



The Associated Press
The Rev. John Dixon is dressed in the traditional vestments he wears during services at Holy Spirit Antiochian Orthodox church in Huntington, W.Va.

Today, Mencotti is one of about 250 million Orthodox believers worldwide — and among a significant number of newcomers attracted to this ancient

way of worship. The trend is especially notable since so few in the United States know about the Orthodox churches here.

"I was like most Americans,"

said Mencotti, who was urged by his wife to explore Orthodox worship. "I didn't understand anything about Orthodoxy."

Orthodoxy was born from the Great Schism of 1054, when feuds over papal authority and differences in the liturgy split Christianity into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox halves.

In the United States, Orthodox Christians are a fraction of religious believers, numbering about 1.2 million, according to estimates by Orthodox researchers.

In the past, their growth had been largely fueled by immigration, with churches forming mainly along ethnic lines. Some converts came to Orthodoxy through marriage to a church member.

But now about one-third of all U.S. Orthodox priests are converts — and that number is likely to grow, according to Alexei D. Krindatch, research director at the Patriarch Athenagoras Or-

thodox Institute in Berkeley. A 2006 survey of the four Orthodox seminaries in the country found that about 43 percent of seminarians are converts, Krindatch said.

There are no exact figures on the rate of conversion across the 22 separate U.S. Orthodox jurisdictions. But when Mencotti began attending Orthodox worship, the church was packed with converts, including the church's pastor, the Rev. John Dixon.

The Rev. John Matusiak, pastor of St. Joseph Church in Wheaton, Ill., part of the Orthodox Church in America, said his parish has grown from 20 people in the early 1990s to more than 600 today, with the overwhelming majority of new members younger than 40.

Krindatch's research found that one-third of the more than 200 U.S. parishes in the Antiochian Orthodox Church were founded after 1990.

Letters to the editor

exists the possibility that some new element, some new law of physics or chemistry or astronomy or some mathematical equation might come to light and some being with greater knowledge could emerge. If Deity is not all powerful, then the possibility exists that some being with greater power could overthrow Deity and the rules, commandments or the requirements for salvation could change, and if another should emerge with even greater knowledge or power then things could change again, and how could we have faith in a being that might be defeated by some being with greater knowledge or great power then the God we worship today? We would not know from one day to the next, what is expected or even required of us if our God does not

have all knowledge and all power today. One cannot have sufficient faith unto salvation in a God who does not have all these attributes, for we would fear that a day will come when He would be dethroned by someone with more knowledge and more power.

Rev. Dallas then answers the next question, "when did He know us" by suggesting that God doesn't know everything, but created us and allows us to "help decide what we will become. Only then does God know what we are." Therefore, I must conclude that Rev. Dallas does not believe that God is all knowing. According to my Bible, we read in Acts 17:28-29, that we are the offspring of God, "and verse 29, "Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God..." we

must conclude that God has known us from the beginning. He created us, He has all knowledge and just as we as parents can predict with amazing accuracy what our children will do in certain situations, God, who has all knowledge knows exactly what we will do. How does Rev. Dallas conclude that we do not have "eternal souls"? In the very first couple pages of the Bible we read in Genesis 2:7, "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the go-round, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." As God's offspring, and having all knowledge and power, He has known us from the beginning and as the scriptures state, God himself breathed into Adam the breath of life and Adam became a living soul, as each of

us as offspring of Adam are living souls as well.

BY VICTOR R. CLAVEAU, M.J.
Member of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars

In Saturday's "Ask the Clergy" column Rev. Jim Dallas denied two of the basic tenets of Christianity and incorrectly defined another:

- That God is all-knowing.
- That the soul is immortal, and
- He incorrectly defined faith as "being grasped by the power of love, trusting that what makes God God is infinite mercy and not infinite control." Faith, in the sense that I believe he is referring to, is defined "the subjective acts and dispositions by which doctrines are believed."

Rev Dallas' religious affiliation was not disclosed, so I do not know of he considers himself a Christian or if he belongs to some pseudo-Christian group. If the latter is so, he is entitled to believe whatever he wants, and write accordingly. But if he identifies himself as a Christian, he demonstrates an ignorance of basic Christian principles, and misinforms the reader.

My suggestion is to identify the writers religious affiliation so that your readers might better evaluate and understand where the writer is coming from.

Do you have a response to an article, letter or commentary appearing in today's religion section? If so, please write to Justin Beckett at jbeckett@vvdailypress.com

Just what are Oprah Winfrey's core beliefs?

By **TERRY MATTINGLY**
Scripps Howard News Service

Faithful members of Oprah Winfrey's TV flock know what's happening when guests start talking and their leader keeps interjecting the occasional "Amen," "Preach it" or even, "Sister, I understand the whole God connection!"

The host wants the guest to start "testifying," a confessional process in which believers look for God's healing hand in life's hard lessons. Winfrey learned all about this process as a girl back in the Faith United Mississippi Baptist Church, where jealous peers often called her "Miss Jesus."

But here's the irony, noted journalist Marcia Nelson, author of "The Gospel According to Oprah:"

Winfrey has become a billionaire and one of world's most powerful women by baring her soul and urging millions of others to follow her example, resulting in what some critics call the "Oprahfication" of America. However, it's almost impossible to answer this simple question: What does Oprah believe?

"She sounds like a person who was raised in a Baptist church," said Nelson, who spent months digging into Winfrey's beliefs on suffering, gratitude, generosity, forgiveness and other spiritual topics.

"Still, it's hard to put a label on Oprah because she refuses to let people do that to her... You'd have to say that she looks a lot more like a Protestant than she does a Catholic, but what does that mean? It's hard to say what a person needs to believe these days to be called a 'Protestant.'"

Winfrey retains the ability to slip smoothly into the "mother tongue" she learned as a child in black churches, noted Nelson. For a few years as an adult, she attended the Trinity United Church of Christ, a progressive congregation in Chicago known as Sen. Barack Obama's home church. Then, during her "Remember Your Spirit" period in the 1990s, conservatives criticized her ties to Marianne Williamson ("A Return to Love") and other New Age writers who blurred the lines between Christianity and other faiths.

The key is that Winfrey has been a trailblazer who symbolizes many contemporary religious trends.

— Many Americans, said Nelson, are drawn to a "practical, how-to, self-help, just-do-it" approach to faith and personal growth that meshes smoothly with the parade of counselors, doctors, writers and ministers — of every conceivable faith — featured on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." It's crucial that the host looks straight into the camera and says: "This works."

Thus, noted Nelson, Winfrey has "been roundly criticized for making the spiritual too psychological, too therapeutic, too soft, too easy, too self-centered. The gospel according to Oprah doesn't appear to require some kind of doctrinal commitment or a community to ensure that the life-changing 'Aha!' moment of decision is more than a new year's resolution that is quickly made in isolation and broken two weeks later."

— The public loves complex, conflicted celebrities and Winfrey is the spiritual superstar. She quietly supports humble projects near home, yet courts publicity by flying off to start gigantic projects around the world — such as the new \$40-million Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy near Johannesburg.

She tells women to love themselves they way they are, but keeps offering weight-loss tips. She urges viewers to give to others, but also to pamper themselves. Winfrey says women should embrace their maturity, but shows them how to look 10 years younger. She advises women on private moral dilemmas, but fiercely guards her own privacy.

— One of the fastest growing segments of the population consists of people who call themselves "spiritual," but not "religious," noted Nelson. Winfrey clicks with media-driven, postmodern believers who stress the importance of personal experience and storytelling over the authority of religious institutions and doctrines. Meanwhile, many churches are trying to shed old names and labels, calling themselves "community churches" and adopting other post-denominational names.

The bottom line, said Nelson, is that for generations Americans were able to rally around a kind of tame, "nominal" Judeo-Christian faith that lets them affirm a few common traditions and many old-fashioned values. But this has become harder after waves of immigration from the Middle East, Asia, Africa and elsewhere.

Talking Kabbalah over yoga

Synagogues embrace unique methods of spreading wisdom to a new generation

By **SARAH PRICE BROWN**
The Dallas Morning News

When Jews went to synagogue at Congregation Shearith Israel in Dallas on a recent morning, most of them didn't sit through the typical three-hour prayer service, conducted mostly in Hebrew.

Instead, they went for a bike ride, talked about Kabbalah or took a yoga class.

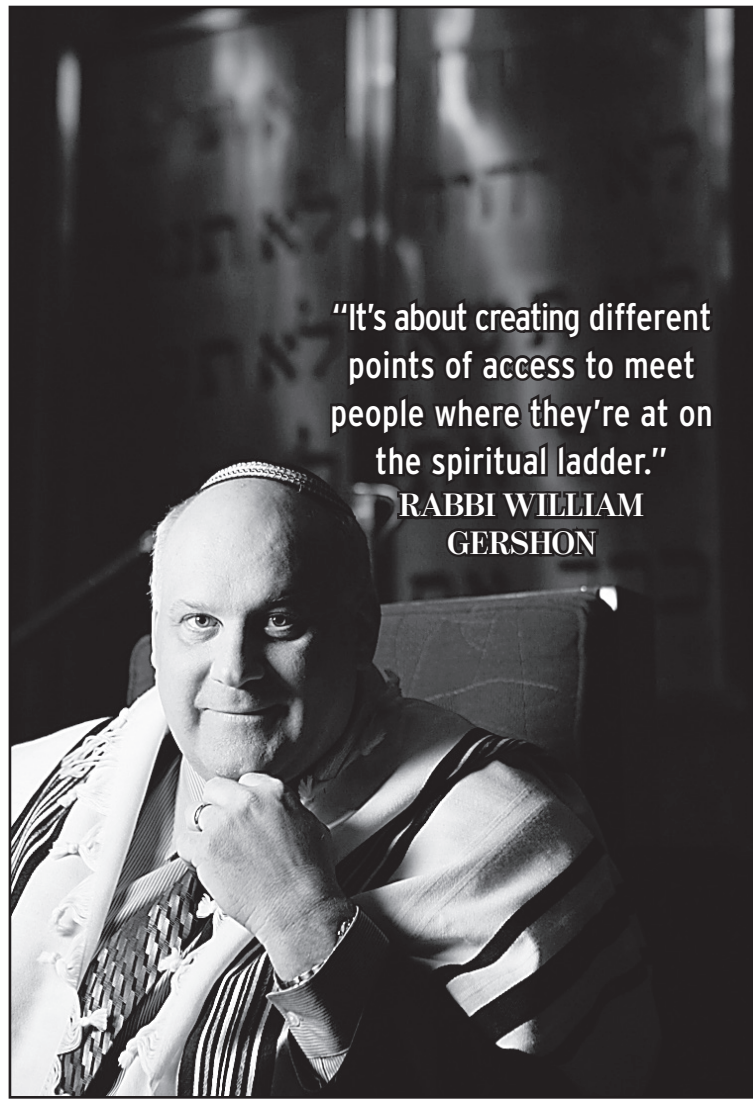
Congregation Shearith Israel is one of many synagogues around the country to adopt a new program called Synaplex Shabbat. Just as a cineplex theater shows multiple movies, the synagogues offer a variety of programs catering to individuals' diverse needs.

"It's about creating different points of access to meet people where they're at on the spiritual ladder," said Rabbi William Gershon, senior rabbi at the Conservative temple.

Synagogues across the country are looking to programs like Synaplex as a way to combat a disturbing trend that sees fewer and fewer Jews attending services on a regular basis. If Jews go to temple at all, they typically go only a few times a year, for the High Holidays. In a recent Gallup poll, Jews came in second-to-last in weekly worship attendance, ranking higher only than those claiming no religious affiliation.

Only 15 percent of Jews worship weekly or almost weekly, compared with 68 percent of people who identify with the Church of Christ, 67 percent of Mormons, and 65 percent of Pentecostals, according to the poll.

Ultimately, efforts like Synaplex are about sustaining Jewish life in



"It's about creating different points of access to meet people where they're at on the spiritual ladder."

RABBI WILLIAM GERSHON

Cheryl Diaz Meyer/Dallas Morning News/MCT

As attendance at synagogue services decline, Senior Rabbi William Gershon of Congregation Shearith Israel recently signed on to a national program that offers services to attract younger audiences including yoga classes, bike rides, fun runs and lectures on Judaism and sex.

America at a time when the Jewish population is shrinking. The number of American Jews has dwindled

from 5.5 million in 1990 to 5.2 million, according to the latest National Jewish Population Survey. Fertility rates are below population-replacement levels, and the rate of intermarriage — which often produces children not raised in the faith — is at an all-time

high of 47 percent.

Synaplex is one of a growing number of national programs trying to reverse those trends. The programs are all different, but they share a common goal: revitalizing the American synagogue.

Synaplex's approach focuses on "doubling, tripling, or even quadrupling" the number of people who attend synagogue on the Sabbath, by

offering a menu of options for non-traditional forms of worship, such as yoga and bike rides.

"Synagogues have the potential to really change people's lives in a way that no other Jewish institution can," said Rabbi Hayim Herring, executive director of Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal (STAR), the Minneapolis-based philanthropic partnership that started Synaplex four years ago.

"A lot of synagogues are perceived as cold and unwelcoming," Rabbi Herring said. The challenge, he said, is not to get people to go to the traditional prayer services that they find boring and unappealing but to create new kinds of Jewish experiences that foster a sense of community.

Shearith Israel is one of more than 120 congregations in the United States and Canada experimenting with Synaplex as a way to attract more people and build community. It's a large congregation, serving nearly 1,400 families. Still, only about 150 "regulars" show up for Sabbath services on Saturday morning.

"The synagogue has got to reconfigure itself," Rabbi Gershon said.

"Synagogues have the potential to really change people's lives in a way that no other Jewish institution can."

RABBI HAYIM HERRING

Executive director of Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal

McGwire and the Hall of Fame

Like many lifelong baseball fans, I'd been losing interest in the sport because of player strikes and poor behavior of self-centered stars.

Then came the 1998 home-run derby between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. It wasn't just their quest to break the home run record that re-engaged millions, it was the unusually classy way both players dealt with the phenomenal pressure.

Yes, both men obliterated the record, but what will always stand out in my mind was the spirit of sportsmanship that pervaded their conduct. Mark McGwire was particularly superb as a much needed role-model.

This week, McGwire was denied entry into the Baseball Hall of Fame, receiving less than 25 percent of positive votes. The argument that this was justified — based on performance statistics — is absurd.

In 1987, McGwire's first year, he set the record for home runs by a rookie with 49. He ended his career with 583, then the fifth-most in history, compiling



Character Counts

by Michael Josephson

the best at home run-to-at bats ratio ever. He hit 50 or more home runs four seasons in a row, and his clouts often went colossal distances, several more than 500 feet.

What kept this outstanding athlete out of the Hall was overwhelming evidence that his feats were enhanced by steroids.

It's sad, but I think it was the right result. Any other outcome would send such a negative message about fair play. Yet I think we can hold McGwire accountable for his deficiencies and still feel and express appreciation and admiration for the good things he did and, in my view, for the fundamentally decent person he is.

Spurred by Shiavo, Catholics turn to church for legal help

By **RAY HENRY**
Associated Press Writer

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Thomas Kelly embraces life, having survived two bouts with cancer. But when the end comes, the retired nurse is leaving nothing to chance.

Appalled by seeing swollen hospital patients on feeding tubes and respirators during his career, Kelly, 78, signed a legal document with the encouragement of his Roman Catholic priest. It permits his wife to stop those treatments once death is imminent — and not any sooner.

Catholics around the country are turning to their churches for similar fill-in-the-blank documents that turn Catholic teachings into legally binding agreements about how they want to die. Many signers cite Terry Shiavo, whose case sparked a 15-year legal battle that grew beyond her family all the way to the White House over whether she should be allowed to die.

In a persistent vegetative state, her husband ordered her feeding tube removed against her parents' vehement opposition, and she died in 2005. Some, including the Vatican, likened her death to murder.

"I don't think I have any right as a Catholic to say when my life should end," Kelly said.



THOMAS AND JANET KELLY

"I don't think I have a right to take my own life, a right to take anyone else's life, and I certainly don't want anyone taking my own life."

Troubled by the Shiavo case, Kelly attended a seminar organized by the Rev. Christopher Mahar, associate pastor of Our Lady of Mercy parish in East Greenwich to help guide his parishioners following Shiavo's case.

Mahar said he intended to hand out a legal form the diocese produced about a decade ago, but stopped when he realized it was more permissive than more recent guidance from the Vatican about when feeding tubes should be removed.

"To remove it would be considered passive euthanasia," said the priest.

IN BRIEF

Billy Graham sells summer camp for \$5M

SWANNANOVA, N.C. (AP) — A local foundation has bought the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's summer camp here for \$5 million and plans to revive the facility with a similar religious focus.

The Peter J. Fontaine Foundation purchased the camp and about 300 acres of land just east of Asheville in December, according to a Jan. 3 announcement. The foundation wants to reopen the area this summer under the name Camp Cedar Cliff, maintaining focus on evangelism and traditional summer camp activities.

Slovak Jews, Gypsies protest pro-Nazi comment

BRATISLAVA, Slovakia (AP) — Slovakian Jewish and Gypsy communities have sharply criticized a Roman Catholic archbishop for praising the country's authoritarian wartime rule by pro-Nazi priest Jozef Tiso.

Archbishop Jan Sokol said in a TV interview Jan. 4 that Tiso's rule was a "time of well-being."

"I remember him from my childhood. We used to be very poor and under his rule, the situation greatly improved," the archbishop said on Bratislava's TA3 TV.

Most of Slovakia's Jews perished in concentration camps during World War II.

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Facts About The BIBLE

BY JOHN ZEHTI

This is a dramatized version of facts taken from the book of I Samuel intending to show some of the customs of these ancient and traditional times.

DAVID AND SAUL
DAVID AND ABISHAI, IN THE DARK OF NIGHT, HAVE COME TO SAUL'S CAMP AND NOW THEY HAVE FOUND OUT THAT ALL OF THE Sentries ARE SOUND ASLEEP.

...QUIETLY, THEY STEAL PAST THE SLEEPING SOLDIERS INTO THE CENTER OF THE CAMP!

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