

"Where some . . . see defeat, Nancy finds triumph."

TIME MAGAZINE

HOLDING ON TO HOPE

A pathway through suffering to the heart of God

NANCY GUTHRIE

FOREWORD BY ANNE GRAHAM LOTZ

INCLUDES 8-WEEK BIBLE STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JOB



Listen to what people
are saying about
Holding On to Hope

You hold in your hand a treasure that was mined in a dark and frightening place. With transparent honesty, Nancy unwraps the joys and sorrows of her life. This is a book about life and our God, who holds us in all the moments of this life.

SHEILA WALSH

Keynote speaker with Women of Faith

Holding On to Hope reads easy, runs deep, and enriches the heart! If you are stymied about God's goodness amidst life's heartaches, then this book's for you.

JONI EARECKSON TADA

Joni and Friends

Few people have lived—and continue to live—as deep a firsthand experience of pain and loss as Nancy Guthrie. For that reason alone her Christian reading of the story of Job should lay special claim on readers themselves undergoing suffering. But there are other inducements: the clarity, grit, and honesty with which Guthrie explains how she has maintained hope and deepened faith where most would find only heartbreak.

DAVID VAN BIEMA

Time magazine

Only God could orchestrate such events. And only God could give the Guthrie family the faith and courage to live them. May He use this story to strengthen us all.

MAX LUCADO

Nancy Guthrie's faith shines through some of the darkest clouds of human pain. This book and her story will touch your emotions and inspire your mind in an unforgettable way. Seldom will you read anything with such candor and insight, probing one of life's toughest questions: How can grief be a friend along life's journey?

RAVI ZACHARIAS

Nancy Guthrie's book offers hurting people companionship as well as encouragement to pursue God in the midst of their suffering. Pastors can recommend it with confidence that it will make a difference.

DR. ED YOUNG

Pastor of Second Baptist Church, Houston

If you want someone to know they are not alone in their pain and help them understand where God is in the midst of their pain, *Holding On to Hope* is the best resource available. While the world questions why God allows loss and pain, Nancy shows us how to face it. Read this book, recommend this book, and hope that just a portion of her courage and faith rub off on you.

STEVE ARTERBURN

New Life Ministries

It's rare to find a book that combines insight, sensitivity, practicality, and hope. . . . This one does.

H. NORMAN WRIGHT

Author and counselor

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Foreword

By Anne Graham Lotz

ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four airliners, ramming two of the planes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The entire world watched in horror as the towers erupted into gigantic fireballs, then imploded until nothing was left of the 110-story, glass-and-steel structures except soot, dust, and a six-story-high pile of smoldering rubble.

Even before the dust settled, the heroic rescue effort began as thousands of people systematically started combing through the debris to find the survivors. One rescuer told how he had climbed down into a hole in the twisted steel and rubble, extending his arm even farther to shine his flashlight into the darkness, when out of the dusty blackness a hand reached up and grabbed his! He was so startled he almost dropped his flashlight and let go of the hand! But instead, he reached back for someone to grab his hand, then someone grabbed that person's hand, until a human chain was formed and the man trapped in the pile of debris was pulled to safety.

In our world today, there are many people who are trapped in the debris of despair, depression, and doubt; or in the rubble of broken relationships; or in the twisted maze of suffering and pain. God has uniquely equipped Nancy Guthrie as a “rescuer” to shine the light of God’s truth into the blackest night of confusion and grief, hopelessness and helplessness. Framing the testimony of her own suffering within the classic biblical story of Job, Nancy draws a magnificent picture of triumphant victory through faith in Jesus Christ.

In a world where so much attention has been focused on a Christian message of health, wealth, and prosperity, *Holding On to Hope* is like a beacon of Light, drawing the reader to God and God alone.

My prayer is that God will use this book to rescue you from the depths of being buried alive in the debris and rubble of your own life experience. And I pray also that your feet will be planted on the solid ground of his Word, setting your spirit free to soar in the rarefied atmosphere of genuine worship. God bless you as you grasp Nancy’s hand and allow her to guide you on your own path of suffering that leads to the heart of God.

Introduction

MY HUSBAND, DAVID, and son, Matt, and I were working around the house on a Saturday morning when we heard the sound of helicopters and looked out the window to see black smoke billowing from somewhere in our neighborhood. A house, two cul-de-sacs away, was on fire. David walked over to the house, checked it out, and came back sobered by what he had seen—the house had burned to the ground in a matter of minutes.

When you witness something like that, you can't help but think, *How would I respond if that happened to me? What would I do if I drove up to the house I had left that morning, and it had been destroyed?*

It reminded me of a story I had read that week—a story of loss so astounding that most of us can hardly imagine it. It is the ancient story of a man named Job, a man known, perhaps, as history's most significant sufferer. Job was sitting at home one day when a series of messengers came and told him that all of his livestock and servants had been slaughtered and

then that all of his children had perished as the building they were in collapsed. Then, as if losing everything he had and nearly everyone he loved was not enough, Job was stricken with painful sores all over his body.

As I read his story, I was amazed by Job's response to pain and loss. *Would I respond that way to tragedy?* I wondered. I also noticed that Job was specifically chosen to experience great suffering. Evidently he was chosen not because he deserved to suffer or because he was being punished, but because of his great faith. And I wondered about my own faith—if I had the kind of faith that could withstand extreme, undeserved affliction. A faith that would remain when all hope was gone.

But that was before the affliction came. Before the devastating news that changed everything about my life. Before the painful anticipation of death. BEFORE HOPE.

LOSS



THERE was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless, a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters. He owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred teams of oxen, and five hundred female donkeys, and he employed many servants. He was, in fact, the richest person in that entire area.

Every year when Job's sons had birthdays, they invited their brothers and sisters to join them for a celebration. On these occasions they would get together to eat and drink. When these celebrations ended—and sometimes they lasted several days—Job would purify his children. He would get up early in the morning and offer a burnt offering for each of them. For Job said to himself, "Perhaps my children have sinned and have cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular practice.

One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan the Accuser came with them. "Where have you come from?" the LORD asked Satan.

And Satan answered the LORD, "I have been going back and forth across the earth, watching everything that's going on."

Then the LORD asked Satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and will have nothing to do with evil."

Satan replied to the LORD, "Yes, Job fears God, but not without good reason! You have always protected him and his home and his property from harm. You have made him prosperous in everything he does. Look how

rich he is! But take away everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face!"

"All right, you may test him," the LORD said to Satan. "Do whatever you want with everything he possesses, but don't harm him physically." So Satan left the LORD's presence.

JOB 1:1-12

TWO WEEKS AFTER the neighbor's house burned down, I gave birth to a daughter we named Hope. For years we had planned on that name for a daughter, but I never could have dreamed how meaningful it would become.

The doctors were immediately concerned by several "small" problems evident at birth—Hope had club feet, she was very lethargic and unresponsive, she had a flat chin and a large soft spot, she had a tiny indentation on one earlobe, she would not suck, and her hands were turned slightly outward.

On Hope's second day of life, a geneticist who had examined her came to our room. He told us that he suspected Hope had a metabolic disorder called Zellweger Syndrome. Because she was missing something in her cells called peroxisomes, which rid cells of toxins, her systems would slowly shut down.

And then he dropped the bomb that most babies with this syndrome live less than six months. No treatment. No cure. No survivors. I felt like the air had been sucked out of me. While he was talking, I let out a low groan.

To be honest, it just didn't seem real. Sometimes it still doesn't. My husband, David, crawled into the hospital bed with me and we cried and we cried out to God. The next morning when I woke up, I was hoping that perhaps I had dreamed the whole thing—but I hadn't.

We called our pastor and asked him to come see us that morning. I looked at him and said, "Well, I guess here is where the rubber meets the road. Here is where I find out if I really believe what I say I believe." I knew I had to choose how I was going to respond to this incredible disappointment and sorrow.

In the days following the diagnosis, we learned how to feed Hope with a tube and awaited the anticipated onset of seizures. As we began to accept the reality that she would be with us for only a short time, I returned to the story of Job. I wanted to look more closely at how Job responded as his world fell apart.

Perhaps you've experienced your world falling apart. Maybe your marriage has ended, or your parents' marriage has ended. Maybe financial disaster has come your way and you're trying to dig your way out. Maybe your child has rejected your values and rejected you. Maybe you've received the diagnosis you didn't want. Or maybe, like me, you have faced the sorrow and loneliness of losing someone you love.

Do you feel as if your world has fallen apart? If so, you know what it is like to feel hurt and helpless and hopeless in the midst of loss. And perhaps you, too, are wondering if you will ever find your way out of this place of pain.

Throughout the pages of this short book, we're going to look carefully at Job's experience, because Job shows us how a person of faith responds when his world falls apart. We know Job was a great man of faith because the writer tells us so in the first verse of the first chapter, describing Job as a man of complete integrity who feared God and stayed away from evil. And, later in the same chapter, God himself uses these same words to describe Job.

This introduction shows us that Job was devoted to God. He had impeccable character. We could even describe Job as God's friend. In fact, when God endeavored to choose one person he knew would be faithful to him no matter what, he chose Job—with complete confidence. Job must have proved himself faithful over and over for God to have had that kind of confidence in him!

But Satan was skeptical. Satan thought Job was faithful only because Job was supernaturally protected by God and had such a comfortable life, and that if his comfortable life were taken away, Job would turn on God.

At that point, God gave Satan permission to hurt Job. We don't want to hear that, because it just doesn't square with our understanding of a loving God. But it is clear. God gave the permission and set the parameters for Job's suffering.¹

“All right, you may test him,” the LORD said to Satan. “Do whatever you want with everything he possesses, but don't harm him physically” (Job 1:12).

Do you wonder why God would give permission for Satan to harm Job? More importantly, do you wonder why

God has given Satan permission to bring so much pain into *your* life?

Before we try to answer the question “Why?” let’s look closely at how Job responded as everything he had and everyone he loved were abruptly ripped away.

We’ll see that Job’s story is about much more than his suffering. Somehow, along the way, he discovered God in a way he had never known him before. And when his story comes to a close, we see that “the LORD blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than in the beginning. . . . He died, an old man who had lived a long, good life” (Job 42:12, 17).

Isn’t that what you and I want, even now, in the midst of our painful circumstances—to understand God like we never have before, to see him as we’ve never seen him before, to emerge from our days of suffering with God’s blessing and with a life that can be described as good?

How did Job move from profound pain to profound blessing? Let’s follow Job’s steps closely to discover his secret. Let’s examine each stepping-stone along the way. Let’s follow him on the pathway of suffering so that he might lead us to the very heart of God.

TEARS



ONE day when Job's sons and daughters were dining at the oldest brother's house, a messenger arrived at Job's home with this news: "Your oxen were plowing, with the donkeys feeding beside them, when the Sabeans raided us. They stole all the animals and killed all the farmhands. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "The fire of God has fallen from heaven and burned up your sheep and all the shepherds. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, a third messenger arrived with this news: "Three bands of Chaldean raiders have stolen your camels and killed your servants. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "Your sons and daughters were feasting in their oldest brother's home. Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the desert and hit the house on all sides. The house collapsed, and all your children are dead. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

Job stood up and tore his robe in grief.

JOB 1:13-20

SHORTLY AFTER HOPE DIED, I was at the cosmetics counter buying some mascara. "Will this mascara run down my face when I cry?" I asked.

The girl behind the counter assured me it wouldn't and asked with a laugh in her voice, "Are you going to be crying?"

“Yes,” I answered. “I am.”

We had Hope for 199 days. We loved her. We enjoyed her richly and shared her with everyone we could. We held her during her seizures. Then, we let her go.

The day after we buried Hope, my husband said to me, “You know, I think we expected our faith to make this hurt less, but it doesn’t. Our faith gave us an incredible amount of strength and encouragement while we had Hope, and we are comforted by the knowledge that she is in heaven. Our faith keeps us from being swallowed by despair. But I don’t think it makes our loss hurt any less.”

It is only natural that people around me often ask searchingly, “How are you?” And for much of the first year after Hope’s death, my answer was, “I’m deeply and profoundly sad.” I’ve been blessed with many people who have been willing to share my sorrow, to just be sad with me. Others, however, seem to want to rush me through my sadness. They want to fix me. But I lost someone I loved dearly, and I’m sad.

Ours is not a culture that is comfortable with sadness. Sadness is awkward. It is unsettling. It ebbs and flows and takes its own shape. It beckons to be shared. It comes out in tears, and we don’t quite know what to do with those.

So many people are afraid to bring up my loss. They don’t want to upset me. But my tears are the only way I have to release the deep sorrow I feel. I tell people, “Don’t worry about crying in front of me, and don’t be afraid that you will make me cry! Your tears tell me you care, and my tears

tell you that you've touched me in a place that is meaningful to me—and I will never forget your willingness to share my grief.”

In fact, those who shed their tears with me show me we are not alone. It often feels like we are carrying this enormous load of sorrow, and when others shed their tears with me, it is as if they are taking a bucketful of sadness and carrying it for me. It is, perhaps, the most meaningful thing anyone can do for me.

Our culture wants to put the Band-Aid of heaven on the hurt of losing someone we love. Sometimes it seems like the people around us think that because we know the one we love is in heaven, we shouldn't be sad. But they don't understand how far away heaven feels, and how long the future seems as we see before us the years we have to spend on this earth before we see the one we love again.

Fortunately, we are not alone in our sadness. In Isaiah 53:3, the Bible describes God's Son as “a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (NKJV). And so it is in our sadness that we discover a new aspect of God's character and reach a new understanding of him that we could not have known without loss. He is acquainted with grief. He understands. He's not trying to rush us through our sadness. He's sad with us.

The day after we buried Hope, I understood for the first time why so many people choose to medicate their pain in so many harmful ways. That day I tried to sleep it away. And in the days that followed, I discovered that I could not sleep it away, shop it away, eat it away, drink it away, or travel it away.

I just had to feel it. And it hurt. Physically.

I realized I had a choice—I could try to stuff the hurt away in a closet, pretend it wasn't there, and wish it would disappear, or I could bring it out into the open, expose it to the Light, probe it, accept it, and allow it to heal. I chose to face it head-on, trudge through it, feel its full weight, and do my best to confront my feelings of loss and hopelessness with the truth of God's Word at every turn. Even now I can't say I'm healed. Part of my heart is no longer mine. I gave it to Hope and she took it with her, and I will forever feel that amputation.² But embracing my grief means allowing it to do its work in me.

That's what Job did. Out of the deepest kind of agony and pain from loss, Job openly mourned. He didn't cover up his sadness or put on a happy face or offer religious-sounding clichés. He tore his robe and shaved his head. He hurt. And he was not ashamed to show how deeply he hurt.

Do you know what it is like to groan with sorrow? Part of being human is that when you lose something or someone that is valuable to you, you agonize over that loss, and there is nothing wrong with that. Your tears do not reflect a lack of faith.

Rather than running from or trying to ignore your grief, would you lean into it? Would you allow it to accomplish its healing work in your heart?

Would you be willing to invite God to walk with you during this sorrowful time so that you might experience his healing presence?

Would you confront your feelings of hopelessness and heartache with truths from God's Word so that it can become a healing power in your heart and mind?

WORSHIP



JOB stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground before God.

JOB 1:20

I HATE TO admit it, but for some reason, church has often been one of the hardest places to be since Hope's death. I suppose part of it is the people. Even though they are so kind and caring, there is something inexplicably difficult about a crowd when you are grieving, isn't there? At times I've headed into the building with completely conflicting feelings. Part of me can't stand the idea that perhaps no one will say anything about Hope, while another part of me dreads that so many people will say something to me about her.

But it is not just the people I will encounter that makes going to church so difficult. It's God himself. It's the words we sing during the service that get choked in my throat:

*Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul." . . .*

Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me. . . .

*I sing for joy at the work of your hands,
Forever I'll love you, forever I'll stand. . . .*

It is one thing to go to church; it is another thing to worship. To be honest, sometimes I just don't feel like it. Sometimes I just don't feel like praising and adoring God for who he is and what he has done, which is the essence of worship. To offer up thanksgiving and praise to him sometimes feels dishonest or insincere.

That's why I am so amazed when I consider the story of Job. There was more to Job's initial response to his loss than just mourning and agony. As Job responded to calamity in his life, he fell to the ground before God in worship.

Do you find that an odd response? He'd just lost everything, and yet he fell to the ground to worship God. When I read that I wonder, *How could he have done that?*

Only a person who understood the greatness of God could have worshiped at such a time. This was, perhaps, the first of many times over the coming months and years that Job chose to do what was right rather than to focus completely on his feelings.

Even though Job felt crushed, perhaps even betrayed, he did what he knew was right—he worshiped almighty God.

Job obviously knew how to worship. He didn't have to go to a temple. His faith was so genuine and permeated his life so completely that he recognized he could worship God right where he was, just as he was. For Job, worship was a way of life.

When our skin is pricked by a thorn, what comes out is what's inside: blood. When our lives are pricked by difficulty, what comes out is what's inside. For some of us, it is selfishness, pride, bitterness, and anger that come seeping out. For others, it is the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). What came out when Job was not just pricked, but pierced, was worship.

Often, worship is a matter of obedience. At least it is for me. But, as in many other areas, when I make the choice to be obedient, God changes my feelings, and I come to the place of passionate worship.

You see, we worship because God is worthy, not necessarily because we “feel” like it. In the midst of a crisis, if we only do what we feel like doing, we could remain stuck in a cycle of self-pity. But when we worship, we get our eyes off of ourselves and our sorrow or problems. We focus them on God, and this puts our difficulties into proper perspective.

Most of us think of worship as a Sunday-morning activity in which we gather in a church, sing some songs, and listen to a preacher. Genuine worship, though, is when the words that flow out of our lips and the works that flow out of our lives glorify God and honor him for who he is and what he has done. We worship when we reflect his glory—his character and likeness—to others in the way we live. And doesn't it seem that everyone around us is watching especially closely when tragedy strikes in our lives?

Surely our worship in the midst of pain and sorrow is particularly precious to God—because it costs us so much. Worship is not made easier, but it becomes all the more meaningful when offered from a heart that is hurting.

The truth is, worship during these times can be some of the most meaningful worship we ever experience. Perhaps we are more fully equipped to worship than ever before because we are acutely aware of our desperate need for God and our own incapacitating weakness. We have our helplessness and inadequacy in proper perspective to God's power and sufficiency.

Do you want to find the heart of God in the darkness of your suffering? In the brokenness of overwhelming grief, would you set aside your feelings of disappointment and confusion—and even anger—and begin to worship God?

When you can't find your own words, would you open to the Psalms and use the words of David in praise and confession and lament?

Would you determine to worship God's worthiness and trust in his faithfulness even when the confusion and disappointment do not immediately disappear?

*Come, Thou Fount of ev'ry blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise:
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise His name—I'm fixed upon it—
Name of God's redeeming love.*

*Hitherto Thy love has blest me;
Thou has bro't me to this place;
And I know Thy hand will bring me
Safely home by Thy good grace.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wand'ring from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Bo't me with His precious blood.*

*O, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wand'ring heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it;
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O, take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

ROBERT ROBINSON

adapted by Margaret Clarkson

GRATITUDE



HE said, "I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be stripped of everything when I die. The LORD gave me everything I had, and the LORD has taken it away. Praise the name of the LORD!"

JOB 1:21

DAVID STAYED HOME with Hope on Wednesdays so I could go to Bible study. One morning in January, I got in the car after class and called him from my mobile phone. He didn't answer, which I thought was strange. So I tried his mobile. He answered.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"We're all fine," he said.

(Now, you know when someone starts with that, we're *not* all fine, right?)

"We're at Dr. Ladd's office, but not for Hope," he continued. "Matt fell in PE this morning and broke off his front tooth."

I took a deep breath and just couldn't say anything for a minute. I guess it hit me in the area of my greatest fear—that Hope wouldn't be our only loss.

That night, as David and I talked about the day, we realized that we both had an unspoken agreement with God that

went something like this: “Fine. We will accept losing Hope and all that this brings. But we don’t lose Matt. We don’t lose each other. No car accidents. No cancer. No financial collapse. This is it!”

But as we voiced our deepest feelings and fears out loud, we realized that we had to let go of those things too. We needed to trust God with everything we had, to open ourselves and say, *God, it is all yours to do with as you will!*

Some days I wonder if the letting go is ever going to stop. Since Hope’s death, I have had to let go of her physical body, my dreams for her, and many of her things. I have had to let go of her room and turn it back into a guest room. I have a sweet friend who put together a beautiful scrapbook of Hope’s life. Another friend who saw the scrapbook said to me, “I know what you would grab first in a fire!” Then I noticed the pages have already started to become dog-eared and discolored. I feel so protective of the book, but I’ve realized that I have to be willing to let go of that book, too. To some that may seem a silly sacrifice, but the book represents all my memories of Hope. I have to hold on to those loosely as well.

You see, Hope was a gift. And the appropriate response to a gift is gratitude.

That’s what we see in Job. As he fell to the ground to worship God, even though he had just lost everything, Job was thanking God for everything God had given him. When Job said, “The Lord gave me everything I had, and the Lord has taken it away,” we see that Job recognized that everything

he had was a gift from God and that Job had learned how to hold on to those gifts loosely. Evidently Job, long before, had figured out that his extreme wealth and blessing not only *came* from God but also were *still* God's, while Job himself was just a steward.

How about you? I know you can barely stand to think about being grateful in the midst of your loss. You probably think I'm crazy to even suggest that you could be grateful as you face the empty chair, the empty bank account, the emptiness.

God gives, and God takes away. But let's be honest: We just want him to give, don't we? And we certainly don't want him to take away the things or the people we love.

We tend to think the money in our bank accounts and the possessions we have are ours—that we've earned them. That we deserve them. But the truth is, everything we have is a gift.

There's an old book called *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*,³ written by John Claypool, who lost a daughter to leukemia. He tells a story of growing up during World War II. When one of his father's business associates went off to war, the man's family went to live elsewhere, and they left behind their washing machine for the Claypool family to use.

Two years passed. The war was over, the friends returned, and they wanted their washing machine back. When they came and took it, young Claypool openly expressed his resentment. His family had grown accustomed to having the washing machine, and it seemed so unfair to have to

give it back. His mother wisely pointed out that the washing machine was never theirs in the first place. It was a gift for as long as they were able to use it, and the proper response to a gift is gratitude.

When you come to the place where you recognize that everything you have and everyone you love is a gift, it becomes possible to enjoy those gifts—not with an attitude of greed but with one of gratitude. You and I, like Job, know that God gives and God takes away. And when he takes away, if we're able to focus on the joy of what was given, if only for a time, we take another step down the pathway toward the heart of God.

Would you be willing to thank God for a gift he gave you and has now taken away? Maybe it was your spouse, your reputation, your financial security, your health, your home. . . . *Thank you.*

Would you ask God to help you to loosen your grip on the gifts he has given you so you can feel the freedom of entrusting everything to his care?

Would you welcome God to have his way with your possessions, your position, the people you love? Would you accept his promise that *he can be enough*?

Always be joyful. Keep on praying. No matter what happens, always be thankful, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

I THESSALONIANS 5:16-18