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GENESIS: The Method of Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

This Bible is given to us to read. It is a great book, a tremendous book. Let us begin at the first of the Bible and go through it all, book by book – from Genesis to Revelation – and look at the setting, the message, and the relationship of each to the whole. This will be a zoom-lens view, book by book. Such a panorama is one of the most helpful ways to understand and see the divine pattern of revelation. One of the most powerful and unanswerable pieces of evidence for the truth of inspiration is to see the divine pattern that runs through the Bible. How can this be explained apart from God – that a book as diverse in its authorship, written under equally diverse conditions should have such a remarkable pattern of truth unless it comes from one divine author?

We are so familiar with the Bible that we scarcely consider what an ancient book it is. There is a Greek philosopher named Herodotus, a teacher and scholar who lived some three hundred years before Christ, who is called the father of history; he is the first historian whose writings have been preserved to us. Anyone who has studied something of ancient history knows about Herodotus. But the outstanding thing about the Bible is that Moses, who wrote the first five books of our Bible, had finished his books and was in his grave a thousand years before Herodotus saw the light of day.

That's how ancient Genesis is. It is the book of beginnings. It takes us back into the very dawn of human history and yet as we read it, it is as up-

to-date as tomorrow morning's newspaper. That, again, is a mark of the divine afflatus behind this book, the in-breathing of God. The Bible has so much color and life about it in these revelations of early human life. Those who are familiar with archaeology know that these cylinders and slabs and potsherds from the past give us but the faintest glimpse into the bare facts of life in these ancient lands. There is little of human interest about them. There is no color, no life, no flesh. But when you open the pages of Genesis you discover here that these men come alive. Abraham is better known than some of our more distant relatives. Isaac and Joseph, with others, are familiar household names to us. We feel that they're people we use to know back where we came from. They are as close to us as that, because this book has so marvelously preserved for us the color, the depth, the flesh and the tone of life in those days.

Genesis is not only a history. Obviously it would have little significance to us if it were only that. But the book of Genesis is one with a tremendous message which can be declared in one statement: It reveals to us the inadequacy of man without God. That is the whole purpose of the book, and, as such, it strikes the keynote of all subsequent revelation of God. It reveals that man can never be complete without God, that he can never discover or fulfill the true meaning of his life without a genuine personal relationship with an indwelling God.

Now this inadequacy is revealed to us in three realms, realms in which each of us live:

- First, it is revealed in the realm of natural relationships, through what we call the natural sciences: cosmology, the study of the universe, its origin and make-up; then geology, about the earth, all the manifold aspects of it that we think we know so much of today; and biology, the study of life itself in all its manifestations. These natural relationships circumscribe our contact with the physical world around us.
- The second area is the realm of human relationships. This takes in what we call sociology, psychology, psychiatry, along with all the other “psychs” that are made so much of today.
- And then, finally, the realm of spiritual relationships – theology, soteriology and philosophy.

In all three of these vital areas, including many of the particulars with which we are concerned, the book of Genesis reveals that man apart from God is totally inadequate. This one message echoes throughout the book like the sound of a bell.

Let me show you what I mean:

The first two chapters are largely concerned with **the world of nature**. This book opens with the greatest material fact in our life today – the fact that we live in a universe. We become aware of this when we step out under the stars at night and look up. Even the most ignorant of us ponders what is out there – the unending stars, these brilliant lights in the heavens. We wonder at the movement of the heavenly bodies. Man has stood and gazed in awe and wonderment at this sight for centuries.

At last we have begun to probe out into the universe around us and have discovered that we live in a great galaxy, a diffuse body of stars and planets – millions of them. Our own galaxy is three hundred thousand light years across and it’s just the home base of us in the universe. First base is out yonder and center field is *way* out. In this great ball park, we know of over a million bases out there, galaxies like ours. Our minds begin to blow a fuse when we start thinking like that, yet Scripture opens with this – right on that very note.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” {Gen 1:1 RSV} – and man. That is the story of the beginning – of Genesis.

We are in a universe which is mainly mystery to us. We know very little about it, and, in any direction we choose to go, we soon come to a place where we can go no farther. I was talking with a nuclear physicist one time and he was telling me something of the complexity of the nucleus of the atom. He says that it has become so “astronomically” complex that we simply cannot begin to grasp all that we are discovering about the fundamental elements of matter. It is right on this point that the Bible begins – with the answers to questions that scientists cannot answer –

- What is it that keeps the universe going?
- Where did we come from?
- Who made us?
- Why are we here?

Yet, in spite of the fact that the study of the universe is the theme of science today, science hasn’t found an answer to any of these questions.

Now to these questions, Genesis supplies answers, the only answers that fit. It reveals to us that the key to human life (including the material universe and the mystery of our own nature – plus that invisible realm of spirit life we know little about) is spiritual, not physical or material. That is why we can never know ourselves or the universe or God by studying nature. We’ll never understand it that way. Ultimately we run up against a closed door. It becomes so complex we cannot grasp it. Why? Because the Bible tells us the key is in the spiritual realm. When we take this book and open it up, we discover that we are moving past all the discoveries of science today, into a realm to which science has not yet come, where we have answers to these questions.

It was no less a person than Albert Einstein who put his finger squarely upon the inadequacies of science when he said, “Science is like reading a mystery novel.” You go down to the drug store and buy a dime novel (of course they cost more now) and take it home and you go to bed at night. Everybody else has left the house and it is dark. You get into bed, snap on the light, prop yourself up with pillows and start reading. In the first chapter there are two or three murders, with several bodies lying around. The whole of the story begins to fo-

cus on “who done it.” Clues appear as you read on. In about the third chapter you’ve decided that the butler did it. Continuing on, the finger of guilt points more and more to the butler. But then you reach the last chapter in which suddenly all the previous evidence is upset and it wasn’t the butler after all. It was the little old lady in tennis shoes who lives on the third floor. She did it. Now Einstein says science is like that. It is always struggling from hypothesis to synthesis from a few clues here and there, but it never gets the answer. And then suddenly some new light comes along that throws the first estimate all off, and all the previous answers seem of little value.

The interesting thing about Genesis is that it starts right where science leaves off. It gives answers addressed to faith, admittedly, but never faith that is a violation of human reason. Science is always facing the past. Genesis begins where science is seeking. If we look at it this way we see that there is no essential conflict. Here is a book that is simply dealing with matters science has not wrestled with – and, indeed, cannot wrestle with – the key to the mystery of human life.

Now in Chapters 3 - 6 **the realm of human relationships** is seen. Here you have the entrance of man into the picture. This book reveals that the basic unit of society is the family. For ten to twenty thousand years of human history there has been absolutely no variation in that pattern. The family is still the basic element of human life today. When a society forgets that fact and begins to destroy family life, the foundations of the nation crumble because a nation is an extension of the family. The nations of the world are simply great family groups.

Consider for a moment the uniform reaction of Americans on the day in 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated! There never was a time when the whole American nation felt so like a family as when John Kennedy lay in death. We were all one people. A crisis disclosed that our nation is nothing more than a gigantic family.

Inside the nation, inside the family revealed in the Scriptures is the single individual. But when the family crumbles, the nation begins to fall.

These chapters also reveal the failure of man in this basic relationship, because man tried to be man without God, and the result of course was the introduction of the principle of sin. Sin is the mon-

key wrench which has been thrown into the human machinery that makes us behave the way we do.

As you read the account here you’ll see how Cain rejected God and became a murderer. He went out and founded a civilization that ended in apostasy and the flood. When Lot tried to move away from God, to get away from the influence of God in his life, he wrecked his family as a result. This life pattern in Scripture is given again and again, and though we live some thousands of years after these events, it is the same story today isn’t it?

Every generation has been repeating the same cycle. We see it all around us in our nation of lovely homes, new cars and gimmicks – yet riddled with strife, violence, and almost unmentionable immorality. Increasing crime rates and broken homes on every side all result from, and testify vividly to, man’s failure to live successfully on the level of human relationships apart from God.

Finally then in the last part of the book, which is one large section beginning with the middle of Chapter 6 through Chapter 50, you have **the realm of spiritual relationships**. It is the largest part of this book because it is the most important to man – his spirit and its relationship with God. This is the story of five men. If you remember the lives of these five men and what they mean, you will have most of Genesis right in the palm of your hand. They are Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Genesis reveals in the story of these men what man is always seeking. Do you know what it is?

We think that we are seeking after things. But we know that things aren’t what we really want. All the restlessness and rush of the age in which we live can be understood as an attempt to focus upon three goals:

- First, righteousness, the sense of being right. This is why we are always attempting to justify ourselves. When anyone accuses you of something, what happens? You start justifying yourself. You want to be right. Man is forever seeking righteousness.
- The second is peace. We want a sense of well-being inside. A chrome-plated economy based on *education* leading to *high standards of living* is surely a cheap substitute. How often the word peace is flung at us in these days, leaving

only a hunger for the real thing. Man is ever seeking peace.

- And the third thing is joy. He wants a sense of gladness, of happiness out of life.

Those three are the unseen, almost unconscious, goals of life – righteousness, peace, and joy. Where are they found? Romans 14 says “The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” (Rom 14:17). Only God imparts these things to men, and this is the story of this book.

Now it reveals how men who did not believe or obey God sought these things in vain. Jacob for a time, as you know, refuses to obey God and insists on doing things on his own. Out he goes and becomes a wanderer and a hired servant of his uncle. He ends up being not only a deceiver but deceived, and life falls apart at the seams for him. Even Abraham falters occasionally – he goes down to Egypt and falls into lying and adultery, and again, life falls apart.

But if this book, Genesis, reveals the inadequacies of man without God, it also reveals the adequacy of man with God. That is the great message. In natural relationships you see that man with God is sovereign. If I had only known Adam back in the days before the fall! What a rich character he must have been. What tremendous power and knowledge he must have had of the secrets of nature. When we look at the New Testament and read of the miracles of the Lord Jesus walking upon the water, changing the water into wine, stilling the storm with a word, we say to ourselves, “That is God at work.” But the Old Testament says, “No; that isn’t God, that is man. That is what man was intended to be – the sovereign, the king of the world.”

You find it reflected in the eighth Psalm: David says, as he is looking into the heavens, “What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?” And then he answers his question, “Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet,” (Psa 8:4, 6). You only see that in Jesus. That is why the writer of Hebrews says, “We do not yet see every thing in subjection to him. But we see Jesus...” (Heb 2:8b-9a) who, as a man, is the fulfillment of God’s intention for man to be sovereign of the earth. In the garden before

Adam fell, you see him as the lord of creation. He knew its mysteries, he controlled its activities. Man cannot do that any longer today. We have the urge to do so, but we can do it no longer.

In the realm of human relationships, the book of Genesis reveals that man with God is seen as living at peace and in harmony with other men. One of the most beautiful stories in this book is of Abraham dwelling under the oaks of Mamre with the Canaanites all around him, the men who had for many years been his enemies. But God so worked in the life of that man, Abraham, that even his enemies were made to be at peace with him. The story of Abraham closes with the Canaanite tribes coming to him and saying. “Thou art a prince among us” {cf, Gen 23:6 KJV}. So it is fulfilled what God says elsewhere that when a man’s ways please the Lord he makes even his enemies be at peace with him {cf, Prov 16:7}. This is the key. This is the secret of life in all our relationships.

Then in the spiritual relationship, Genesis declares that man in fellowship with God begins to know supreme happiness – the righteousness, peace, and joy that men always crave. Realization comes only as he discovers that the indwelling God is the answer to all his needs.

This is revealed in the lives of five men. Let us quickly review these:

1. Noah is a picture to us of regeneration. Noah is a man who went through death in a figure. He was on both sides of the flood. He was preserved in the ark through the waters of judgment, through the waters of death, to come out into a new world and a new life. The imaginative writers of our day are always trying to write a book to depict what would happen after an atomic holocaust had completely wiped life off the face of the earth and what it would be like for a new couple to start out in such a world. Yet none of them seem to realize that is exactly what happened in the story of Noah and the flood. None of them seem ever to have caught the romance of Noah and his family starting afresh in a new earth. Nevertheless, they are a picture of regeneration. The beginning of life as a Christian is the passing from death into life (in Christ) just as Noah did in the flood.

2. Then comes Abraham. And what does Abraham teach us? Justification by faith. Here was a man who lived by faith. Everything that he did was given to him – not by any merit of his own, not by any effort of his own. But as God led him along and Abraham stepped out on the promises, he found that God’s promise was true. Eight times that man’s faith was dramatically tried. If you are ever in a trial of faith, read the life of Abraham. You will find in his life similar circumstances to the ones you are going through. Abraham teaches us what it means to be justified, to be the friend of God by faith.
3. Then comes Isaac. Isaac is a beautiful picture of sonship, what it means to be a son of God. If there ever was a boy that was spoiled, pampered, and petted by his father, it was Isaac. He was the son, preeminently so. In the glimpse this book gives of him you see what it means to be the darling of a father’s heart. And I think there is no message more needed in this day than that which is so beautifully exemplified in Isaac, how God looks at us and calls us the darling of his heart. “Beloved, we are God’s children now,” says John, “it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him,” (1 Jn 3:2). We shall be like Christ.
4. The story of Jacob follows. Jacob was the rascal, the schemer, the man who thought he could live on his own, by his wits, and by his own efforts. He went out trying to deceive everybody and ended up being deceived. Jacob is a beautiful picture of sanctification, that marvelous work of God in which we in our folly, attempting to live life in the energy of the flesh, are led into the very situations that drive us into a corner where at last, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, we discover God speaking to us and we give up. And when we give up our trying, we begin to live. That is what Jacob did when he gave up at the Brook of Peniel {Gen 32:22-32}, knowing Esau was waiting with a band of armed men ready to take his life. He wrestled with the angel of God at the brook; it was there that God broke Jacob. And, as a broken man, limping the rest of his life, he became Israel, prince of God. What a lesson that is. Some of

us are going through this very experience right now. What an encouragement to us!

5. Now the last picture is Joseph – glorification. The man loved of his father and mistreated by his brethren. While living through this earthly relationship he is suddenly lifted from the darkness of a prison house into the glory of Pharaoh’s throne to reign and rule as the second person in the kingdom. Now this is the picture for us of truth for the believer: What do we look forward to as death comes upon us? Isn’t it that we are translated out of the darkness of this earthly existence, from the prison house in which we have lived our years, suddenly to the very throne and presence of God himself.

It is all there, isn’t it? The pattern fits so beautifully. We discover what God intended for the believer and the method by which man reaches God and appropriates all this. It is revealed in this book as the method of faith. “Without faith it is impossible to please God,” Hebrews reminds us (Heb 11:6). As you believe, it all becomes true. Not as you intellectually give credence to it, but as you step out on it and act upon it, it all becomes true in experience.

The final message of Genesis is that **God is absolutely necessary for the completeness of life.** Without God you cannot understand the world around you. You can’t understand yourself or your neighbor or God himself. You will never have any answers without God, but if you have fallen away or excluded God and found misery and heartache and darkness and futility and emptiness and boredom – all the things that are a result of man attempting to live without him, Genesis declares that if you return on the principle of faith in God you will find help, spiritual health, and happiness, in every realm of life. God is the secret of human life. This is the first note in the Bible and it is also the last.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that you will give us the urge and the motive to give ourselves to the writings before us. How many difficulties and troubles we could avoid, how

many heartaches we could pass by if we only knew what you intended us to know in this book. May our hearts be open with a readiness to seek and to search and to find and know that we are in a universe – not silent, not mechanical, not empty in which

there is no echo to our cry – but a universe uniquely disposed by a Father, with a father's heart. As we believe this and learn to walk by faith, you fill life for us to the full. We ask that this may be our experience in Jesus' name. Amen.

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EXODUS: Design for Deliverance

by Ray C. Stedman

The Old Testament is particularly designed of God to make the great truths of the New Testament come alive for us. We need this to happen in our Christian experience. So many of these truths are simply academic knowledge, as far as we are concerned, until they come alive when we see them interpreted in the dramatic presentations of the Old Testament. This is especially true of the first five or six books of the Old Testament, for here God lays out the foundational pattern of his workings. In a panoramic view of Scripture, the first six books, Genesis through Joshua, trace out God's pattern of working in human life. His pattern will be exactly the same in your life as it was in the lives of Adam, Abraham, Moses, David and all the others. It will follow the pattern that is developed for us in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua. In these books we will see how God moves in our lives.

It is necessary therefore when we are studying in these books to relate each one briefly to the others.

- Genesis is the book that reveals the need of mankind. Genesis is all about man – man's creation, man's sin, the new world that followed the flood, and man's slow journey through time, groping after God. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph – four men who followed God – set forth the need of men for justification, sonship, sanctification, and glorification. Most significantly, Genesis ends with the words "a coffin in Egypt." All you can say about man when you have said everything there is to say, is that he lives in the realm of death.

- But Exodus is all about God. Exodus is God's answer to man's need and God's supply for man's sin. It begins immediately with God's activity and throughout the whole course of the book you see God mightily at work. The book is the picture, therefore, of redemption, of God's activity to redeem man in his need, in his sin, in his degradation and misery. As such, it is a beautiful picture and contains tremendously instructive lessons to us of what redemption is; that is, what God has done, is doing, in our lives, and what he intends to do with us – the steps that he will be taking.

Now redemption isn't complete in this book. You will never get the full story of redemption in Exodus. You must move on into Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Then the full picture develops as you come into the book of Joshua, where you find Israel brought into the land and into the place of triumph and victory over their enemies – a picture of the triumphant, victorious Christian experience.

Israel, then, is a picture of the people of God, of the church of God, and of you as a child of God. These books are marvelously designed of the Holy Spirit for they describe actual historical events which occurred in such a way under the overruling government of God that they act out for us great redemptive truths. This is why Paul says in writing to the Corinthians, "These things happened to them as a warning [literally, types] but they were written down for our instruction," (1 Cor 10:11a RSV). Therefore, it is well to give heed to them.

The book of Exodus opens with the birth of a baby. God's finger is in evidence at the very beginning of this book for this is the story of a baby

born under the sentence of death, but whose life was marvelously preserved by the intervening hand of God. With a delicate twist of irony that is wonderful to observe – I hope none of you miss it – God the Holy Spirit moves in such a way that, despite the law of Pharaoh to put all the Hebrew male babies in Egypt to death, Moses is not only saved, but Pharaoh hires Moses' own mother to take care of the baby! Such a design is surely one of those delightful expressions of the humor of God. If you haven't yet discovered that God has a sense of humor, there is a great discovery in store for you. Humorous glimpses appear throughout the Old and New Testaments. I can't read my Bible without occasionally breaking into gales of laughter over some of the clever ways in which God, through these ironic twists, adroitly turns the tables on someone. Such is the case in the story of Moses.

The interesting pattern is that when God wants to do something, he almost invariably starts with a baby. We don't. We think babies aren't very important. Back in 1809 the whole world was anxiously awaiting the news of the battles of Napoleon who was threatening to be the world dictator. He was the Hitler of his day. Napoleon held the whole world in fear of his tyrannical desires and egomaniacal impulses. But that same year there were babies being born in houses and families around the world – and what babies! In England there was Tennyson, Charles Darwin, and Gladstone, who was later to become prime minister of Great Britain. Over in this country, in a Kentucky log cabin, Abraham Lincoln was born. Also Oliver Wendell Holmes and still other men who, upon coming to manhood, were giants who shook and changed the world. All this is to say that when God wants to change history, he doesn't start with a battle, he starts with a baby.

So God began with this baby. As Moses grew up he was raised in the court of Pharaoh and had access to all the learning of the Egyptians; he was trained in the best university of the greatest empire of the world of that day. He was the foster son of the king himself and every privilege, every advantage was his. But when he came of age, God spoke to him and he realized that he was intended to be the deliverer of Israel. So he went out, trying to do his job, he thought, and ended up murdering a man and having to flee into the wilderness. As you trace the story through you find that Moses left the land of Egypt and herded sheep for forty years in the

wilderness. Here it was that God found him and dealt with him in the remarkable confrontation of the burning bush. God called him back to his original task, for which he was completely unprepared until he learned that God himself is all it takes to do anything in his name.

Coming back to the structure of Exodus, you can understand the story of the book if you remember four things. The whole book centers around four great events:

- The first one is the Passover. Chapter 1 through 14 lead up to it and climax in that great event.
- The second event is the crossing of the Red Sea, which is described for us in Chapter 14.
- The third great event is the giving of the Law at Sinai, and
- The fourth is the construction of the tabernacle in the midst of the camp of Israel.

These four events sum up the book of Exodus.

The first two events relate closely to each other, as do the last two. The Passover and Red Sea are but two aspects of one great truth – the deliverance of God's people from the bondage of Egypt. They portray in the Christian experience one great thing, that which we call conversion or regeneration, the deliverance of an individual from the bondage of the world; and if you want to know what God did with you when you became a Christian, study the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. We'll explore these in a moment.

The other two events also tie together. The giving of the Law and the construction of the tabernacle are absolutely inseparable. Remember that the pattern of the tabernacle was given to Moses when he was on the mountain with God, at the same time that the Law was given. We must understand why these two are inextricably linked together – the Law and the tabernacle. We shall see why shortly.

First, let's come back to **the Passover**. You know the story – how God called Moses, challenged him, and sent him back to Egypt. At first he was reluctant to go. There are wonderful lessons in

all of these stories. Here, for example, when God said to Moses, “Moses, I want you to go down and deliver my people.” Moses said to God, “Oh, Lord, I can’t do that; I can’t speak; I am not eloquent; I am not able to talk. I can’t stand before Pharaoh.” God didn’t rebuke Moses for saying that. He wasn’t angry because that was merely Moses’ human inadequacy displaying itself. There is nothing wrong with that. We were made to be that way. God never holds us guilty for feeling inadequate when he asks us to do something. But then God said to Moses, “I know you can’t talk but here’s what I will do. I’ll be a tongue for you. I will speak through you. You go down to Egypt and I will be your tongue and I will speak through you.” And Moses said, “Well, Lord, I think you had better get somebody else.” Then it says, “The anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses” (Exod 4:14a RSV). The first time Moses was saying, “I can’t do this. I am just a man.” And God says, “Yes, I know, I made you that way. But I will do it through you.” When Moses, the second time, said, “Well, Lord, you had better get someone else,” what he was really saying was, “Lord, I can’t do this and I don’t think you can do it either.” When Moses challenged God like that, the anger of God was kindled against him.

Now that is a good point to remember whenever God challenges you to do something. He is never concerned when your initial reaction is to draw back. But after he has reminded you that he is with you to do this thing in you and through you and then you draw back, you have insulted God because you have said, “I don’t think you can do it either.”

Now Moses went on. He went down to Egypt, taking the rod of God with him, and immediately came into conflict with Pharaoh. Nothing is more dramatic in all the Old Testament than this tremendous conflict of wills between Pharaoh and Moses, the representatives of Satan and God. God had to move in mighty power against Pharaoh and it is almost incredible to read the story of how God would send some dreadful plague throughout the land of Egypt. And then we read, “Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to let the people go.” Again and again this took place.

There were nine plagues in all, and Dr. Graham Scroggie points out that each one of those plagues was directed against one of the gods of Egypt. God was ruling in judgment against the

gods of Egypt by these terrible catastrophes that gripped the land. If you are interested in the scientific aspects of this, I recommend that you read a most fascinating book, *Worlds in Collision*, by the Russian scientist Emmanuel Velikovsky. He has some very interesting theories as to why these plagues and other stirring events of Moses’ day occurred. I am not saying that everything in his book is true, but it is a fascinating approach to the story.

As we move on, God has all the people together. He has sent Moses to them and at last Pharaoh’s heart is overcome. His will is overwhelmed by the display of the power of God. He consents, after the death of his first-born, to let Israel go. It is very important to notice that when Moses went down to Egypt, the people of Israel were not a nation. They became a nation when they passed through the Red Sea. That is the meaning of those words from First Corinthians, “all were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea,” (1 Cor 10:2 RSV). They were made a body in the sea. They were a disorganized mob before. They came out a unit, a unit in Christ, when they passed through the Red Sea.

This is a beautiful reflection of the truth that every Christian discovers. Before he becomes a Christian he is simply an individual struggling to make his way through life. But when he has gone through the experience of the Passover, when he has seen the blood of the Lamb nailed to a cross for him – sprinkled on a cross for him – and has rested in the fact as the people of Israel rested in the symbol of the blood of a lamb sprinkled on the doorposts of their houses on the night of the Passover, and until he has passed through a Red Sea experience, burning his bridges behind him and moving forward onto a Christian stand, having declared himself for God – thus symbolically passing through the waters of the Sea – he will never fully understand that he has now become part of a body, the body of Christ, and that he is joined together in a living unit with all other Christians. This is pictured for us in the book of Exodus.

The Passover is a picture of the cross of Christ. What a beautiful story it is! How the angel of death passed through the land and all the first-born were slain, all but those Israelites who by faith – simply by faith – took the blood of a lamb and sprinkled it on the door-posts and lintels of their houses. They were then perfectly safe within the house. This

pictures for us the simple act of faith by which we rest on the fact that Jesus Christ's dying has settled our guilt before God. The angel of death passes over us. The angel of judgment will never pass our way because we are resting under the blood of the Lamb of God – a wonderful truth.

But that is not the whole story. Remember the Passover is never of value until the Red Sea experience is linked with it. **The Red Sea** experience immediately followed the Passover. They left the safety of their homes, went out into the wilderness and came to the shore of the sea. They were still in Egypt when they got to the edge of the sea, and the case looked hopeless to them. It looked as though there they would lose all they had gained. The people began to cry out to Moses and ask him why he had brought them here to die in the wilderness. Moses' answer is wonderful. He says, "Stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord," (Exod 14:13b RSV). It was a cry of faith. But God's word came immediately and said, "Go forward. Don't stand still, this is not the time for that. Go forward." "Well," they said, "where? The water is in front of us, the Egyptians are behind us. Where can we go?" And Moses said, "Never mind, God says go forward, now go forward."

The Lord had told him to stretch out his rod over the sea and when he did, the waters rolled back and they passed through safely onto the other side while the Egyptians, following them, were caught in a rush of the waves and were drowned in the sea.

What does the Red Sea typify in your life? Well, it typifies your break with the world. Egypt is now on the other side. Once they got through the Red Sea they were in the wilderness, true, but they were out of Egypt. Now there was a river of death that had rolled between them. Exactly the same river of death that has rolled between you and the world when you claimed Jesus Christ as your Lord.

Now, notice something about this. When they were going through the Passover, they rested in their houses. They didn't do a thing. They simply sat there. They were depending upon the work of another. When they came to the Red Sea, though, it was God's power and God's might that rolled the waters back and made the escape possible, but activity was demanded of them. Their wills were challenged. They were asked to move through.

Here is the reason why many professions of Christian faith never materialize into anything. There are people who are willing to sit under the Passover blood, who are willing to receive Jesus Christ as Savior, but they are not willing to walk through the waters of the Red Sea. They never take that step which burns their bridges, cuts them off from the world. In their mind and thinking they are still back in Egypt. They will not move forward through the Red Sea, and until that happens they are still under the bondage and control of Egypt.

Notice, in Chapter 15, that it was only as Israel came through the Sea that they began to sing. The first thing they did when they walked through on the other side was to break into song. There had been no songs in Egypt. That was a place of bondage, of heartache, of misery, and of unremitting toil and danger. But when they came into the wilderness and onto the far shore of the Red Sea, they broke into song. Real deliverance brings a song. Have you a song of deliverance?

I see this pattern worked out so frequently in life today. A young man came to me not long ago. He was having a struggle with drinking and evidently had come to a crisis in his life. He wanted to be set free. Somehow he realized that there was strength in Christ to set him free. He came to me and we talked together. He bowed his head at last and received the Lord. But about three weeks later, I got a telephone call from him and he was back in the same old mess – exactly the same. I called him over and we sat down again together. I said, "What happened to you when you went home three weeks ago after you said you had received the Lord? Did you do anything about this?" He said, "No, I didn't. I just went home." I said, "What were you expecting to happen?" He said, "I don't know. I just went home and I guess I just forgot about it." I said, "If you had made a decision to enter into some business relationship, if you had decided you wanted to get into a certain job and there were certain necessary steps to take, would you then go home and forget about the whole thing?" "Oh, no," he said, "I would start moving in that direction." "Well," I said, "do you think you can convince me that you have really made a decision for Jesus Christ and that your life is going to be under his control, if, when you have made it, you go home and sit down, fold your arms and forget about it." He replied. "No, I guess not."

Decision is one thing – decision brings the power of God to bear on our lives and sets us free from the guilt of the past and we can rejoice in that. God’s word is true. But there is also the experience of passing through the Red Sea, that call to move forward, and cut off your ties with the world, and take steps that will allow the river of God’s judgment to flow between you and the ways of the world. When you take that step, you move out into that place where God dwells within you. As you see here in Exodus, Chapter 15, God never touches his people, or comes among them, until they have passed through the Red Sea. When they have passed through, then God dwells among them.

Annie Johnson flint wrote a beautiful poem that says,

Have you come to the Red Sea place in your life?
Where in spite of all you can do,
There is no way out, there is no way back.
The only way out, is through.

Have you come to that place? Well that is where many need to come, because until they do, they can never really know the dwelling of God in their life.

As we read on in Chapter 15 a most interesting picture develops. We have the story of the waters of Marah, the place of bitterness. This immediately follows the crossing of the Red Sea. In order to cure these waters, Moses cut down a tree which the Lord showed him, threw it into the water and the water became sweet (Exod 15:25). In terms of the picture of our lives that this story portrays, you will see that this comes in just the right place. What it is telling us is that the cross, the great tree upon which the Lord Jesus hung, is God’s answer to the bitterness of life:

- When we have been through the Passover, trusting in his blood,
- Then through the Red Sea, cutting ourselves away from the things of the world,
- We discover then that the cross is forever the answer to all the bitterness that sin may have brought into our life in the past.

God’s answer to bitterness in any person’s experience is this experience of the cross – cutting away

all the unhappiness of the past and all the frustrations of the present by sweetening the waters of our life.

Immediately following this they came into the wilderness, and there the manna falls. Here is the beginning of God’s fatherly care. Didn’t you discover that when you became a Christian? The minute you became a Christian, and cut off your former life, and had passed through the Red Sea, didn’t you immediately discover God’s fatherly care? He watched over you. He fed you and bore you on eagles’ wings, as he did here to these Israelites. But, even so, there was the murmuring of the people. There is so much of that in our lives, complaining against God, isn’t there?

Then comes the battle in Chapter 17, the first battle with the flesh. This is always a startling thing to new Christians. After then have gone through the glory of the Passover, the Red Sea, the mighty deliverance from sin in their lives, the sense of his fatherly love in the giving of the manna, and have found fellowship with Christ in the new life, they discover they still have a battle with the old flesh. It can be a shocking realization. But here it is. Amalek comes and fights with Israel, but God declares unending war with Amalek (Exod 17:10), “For the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other” (Gal 5:17a RSV). You can never make peace with Amalek.

So, as we come through the typical teaching of this book to Chapter 19, we arrive at Sinai; that is, **the Law** and **the tabernacle**, the third and fourth major sections of Exodus. Let us bring these two together. At Sinai we have, of course, the giving of the Law. Now what is the Law? It is simply a picture of the holiness of God, that is, the character of God. Let me put it another way. It is the unchangeability of God, the unrelenting character of God. This is why the Law and the giving of the Law is a time of terror, because there is nothing more terrible to human beings than to face squarely up to the fact that God is absolutely unchangeable, that nothing will change him. This gives wonderful comfort to us when we think of his love and care and grace, but it is frightening when we think of his holiness, his anger, and his wrath. This means that God can never be talked out of anything. God can never be bought off. We cannot get him to lower his standards in any degree. The Law is the absolute, irrevocable standard of God’s character,

which is what we discover as we come into the experience of the Lordship of Christ – he is absolutely unchangeable. He will never lower his demands in our life.

Now the Law by itself, therefore, is a frightening thing. God’s holy character terrorizes us. Do we really take seriously what God says to us about himself? Listen: “You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (cf, Matt 5:48 RSV). Do you take that seriously? Well, most of us spend a lot of time trying to water it down somehow. Be perfect! That is frightening! How can I be perfect? God’s answer to that question is the tabernacle – the ritual and the sacrifice connected with it. That is why on the mountain, yes, the very same mountain on which he gave the Law, which is the revelation of his character, he also gave the tabernacle, his provision for dwelling with man. For in the tabernacle, God dwelt among his people.

I like to visualize the camp of Israel. You remember they were divided up, all the tribes; some on the east, some on the north, some on the west, and on the south. They were arranged in orderly fashion. Right in the center was the tabernacle. Over it, and over the whole camp, was the great cloud by day and the fiery pillar by night. I have often thought the camp of Israel must have looked very much like the city of Los Angeles, lying out there in the desert, spread out in a fashion, and over it a cloud – of smog, of course, in Los Angeles – but in Israel it was a cloud which betokened the presence of God. Here was God dwelling among his people. He could do it only by a most intricate system of sacrifices and rituals and a very complicated procedure of bringing the people into his presence.

If you went into the camp of Israel, you would pass through all the tribes on whichever side you entered and find your way at last to the center of the camp, where the Levites were. As you continued through the Levites you would come to the tabernacle. At first you would pass through a great gateway into the outer court where you would find certain articles – the brazen altar and the brazen laver – and then there was an inner building with a veil across the entrance into which no one dared enter unless he were a priest. The priests alone went into the holy place. Behind another veil inside the holy place was the Holy of Holies. The only piece of furniture in it was the ark of the covenant including the cherubim of mercy with their wings

touching each other over the ark. Into that place, we are told, only the high priest could go, and he only once a year, under the most rigid and precise conditions.

Now what does all this teach? Simply that God is absolutely changeless and holy. He can dwell among people only under the most rigid conditions. The trouble with the tabernacle was that it only permitted the people to come before God representatively, but, actually, they were excluded from his presence. The common people could never come before him. Only the high priest could, and he in fear of his life, and only once a year, that’s all. That is the restriction of these Old Testament rituals.

You see, the trouble with the Old Testament and the saints of that time was not the Law. There was nothing wrong with the Law. The Law is absolutely good. Paul says so. Sometimes we speak of the Law as though it were wrong, but it isn’t. The Law was absolutely good. It still is. The trouble was with the tabernacle, and the system of sacrifice. It wasn’t complete enough. It wasn’t real enough. It was only shadows, just pictures. It could never really do anything. That is why, when we come to the book of Hebrews, the whole book is dedicated to teaching us that the Law of God is still unchanged, but the approach is completely different, for we come to the One who is the antitype, the reality, symbolized by all these shadows. We read in Hebrews, “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary” (Heb 10:19b RSV) without any fear whatsoever, for in the blood of Jesus and by means of the cross, God has set aside all that separates, and has brought us near to himself.

The great message of the book of Exodus is that by means of the cross, God has made it possible for a holy, unchangeable God to dwell with us. The whole of the tabernacle is a picture of God’s dwelling with his people. The great truth for us here is that God has now settled so totally the problem of sin in us, absolutely settled it, that as Paul says in Romans 8, “There is now no condemnation” {cf, Rom 8:1}, none whatsoever. None whatsoever! We have perfect access to the Father through the Son, and God’s indwelling Spirit will never leave us or forsake us. He has taken up his tabernacle in our hearts and lives.

One of the things I am in perpetual enmity against is the practice among Sunday School teachers (for they are the ones most guilty of this) of

teaching children that a building is the house of God. The reason I don't like that is primarily because it is not true. There was a building which was the house of God in the Old Testament, the tabernacle, but it was a mere shadow. The temple in Jerusalem took its place. It, too, was a shadow. But when you come into the New Testament you never find a building designated as the house of God. The house of God in the New Testament is a human body. "You are the temple of God," Paul says (cf, 1 Cor 3:16). Therefore, you are never out of church. I think we have taught our children one of the most deadly of errors when we teach that a building is the house of God. When we say that, it is very difficult for them to grasp the idea that their bodies are the temples of God.

That is what God wants us to learn – that we are never out of church. That Jesus Christ himself is dwelling in your body which is his temple, and it is built exactly like the tabernacle. It has a three-fold structure:

- The outer court is this body of flesh and bones which we see.
- The holy place is the soul – the realm of emotions, mind and will. That area in which we have free intercourse one with another as we talk and share experiences together.
- But deep at the center is the Holy of Holies, your spirit; in that place the Spirit of God dwells.

So each of us is a walking tabernacle. This whole book of Exodus is to impress upon us, as we read it through, that great New Testament truth – the glory of living with God himself in the midst of our life and the demands that truth makes upon us, the responsibilities it brings upon us and the privileges it gives us. The great need is for a walk resting upon the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, alone, making this all possible for us.

Still, Exodus isn't enough. We need to go on into Leviticus and see what this demanding Law does to us in its effort to correct us and guide our lives. In Leviticus you will find another great truth which, if you have not yet learned, will explain why you find yourself bound, hampered, and fettered in a continual up-and-down experience.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, how much we thank you for this mighty word of truth. When we think, Lord, how it has come to us through the instrumentality of prophets and apostles, of fishermen, of common, ordinary men like ourselves, who wrote by your inspiration, and how it has been protected and passed on to us at the cost of blood and toil and sweat and tears and death, we are amazed. Lord, help us to value this word and to believe it and to walk in its light, knowing that here is the word of liberty, the word of knowledge that can set us free. We thank you for it in Christ's name. Amen.

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LEVITICUS: The Way to Wholeness

by Ray C. Stedman

Have you ever embarked on a journey through the Bible, only to get bogged down in the book of Leviticus? You go through Genesis in fine style, learning about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the things that happened to them. Then you get into Exodus where you have such dramatic incidents as Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh in the court of Egypt, the opening of the Red Sea, and the giving of the Law. Then you start into Leviticus. After you have plodded through the offerings you get into the priesthood, the ceremonies, all the restrictions of diet and specifications for the dress of the high priest, and various other strange functions and feasts. About that time, your interest evaporates, you run out of gas, and that is the end of your reading through the Bible. Isn't that right?

I know this book is a bit difficult. It does appear to be very dry. It could be called "the dryness barrier," but if you can penetrate the dryness barrier, you will find the Bible a fascinating book indeed to read all the way through.

Leviticus reminds me of visiting a factory without a guide. When I first came to this area, I went to San Francisco where a friend of mine had a large steel products factory. I went into the factory to see what they were doing. My friend was busy at the moment and couldn't come with me, so I went by myself. My first impression as I stepped into the huge building was one of tremendous clamor. The noise was fantastic! Great machines were pounding away, big trip hammers were smashing down, and other machines were grinding up metal and spitting out parts. I couldn't even hear myself think. My second impression was of mass confusion. Nobody seemed to know what they were doing. Men were running here and there, paying no attention to one another, some getting in the way of others, and the machines were all working away with no apparent harmony or con-

nection at all. Then my friend joined me and began to take me through the plant. First, he showed me one area and explained what they were doing there, and then a certain machine and what it did. We continued in this way until we ended up in the shipping department. When I saw the final product, I understood the factory. It all made perfect sense. I was no longer confused.

This is what you may experience with the book of Leviticus. You come into it and find many strange ceremonies and sacrifices, many odd restrictions, diet problems, and various other difficulties which all seem to be so meaningless. But then you discover that they have a very complex, intricately articulated relationship moving toward a purposeful end. That end is stated clearly in this book, and if you want to understand Leviticus, one verse right near the center of the book will help you:

You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine. (Lev 20:26 RSV)

That is the purpose of the book of Leviticus. God is saying to these people of Israel, "I have separated you from all the nations around you in order that you might be mine." When we Christians read his, we must understand that we are the people of God today. What God said to Israel he also says to us, for in the new relationship we have in Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile; there is but one man, one body in Christ. The promises which appear in picture form in the Old Testament belong also to us who live this side of the cross.

Perhaps you were turned off right away by the word *holy* in this passage. I don't know what you think *holy* means, but you probably read into it

things from your past experience which make it unpalatable to you. Most of us associate it with some kind of grimness. We think “holy” people are those who look as if they have been steeped in vinegar or soaked in embalming fluid. I used to think of the word that way, and holiness was not attractive to me at all. It repelled me. But I ran across a verse in Scripture which spoke of “the beauty of holiness,” (Psa 29:2 KJV) and I asked myself, “What in the world is beautiful about holiness?” When I found out, I had to agree that holiness is indeed a beautiful thing.

But most of us react initially to this word as did the little girl who happened to see a mule looking over the fence at her. She had never seen a mule before, and she said to it, “I don’t know what you are, but you must be a Christian – you look just like Grandpa.” Others associate it with strangeness, apartness, as though holy people are weird, peculiar individuals who live out in the desert somewhere, remote from the rest of us. They are *different*.

But the Bible itself suggests none of these ideas concerning holiness. If you want to get at the meaning of this word, you must go back to its original root. This word is derived from the same root from which a very attractive English word comes. This word is *wholeness*. So *holiness* means “wholeness, being complete.” And if you read *wholeness* in place of *holiness* everywhere you find it in the Bible, you will be much closer to what the writers meant. We all know what wholeness is. It is to have together all the parts which were intended to be there, and to have them functioning as they were intended to function.

That is what God is talking about. He says to this people, “you shall be whole, because I am whole.” God is complete; he is perfect. There is no blemish in God; he lives in harmony with himself. He is a beautiful person. He is absolutely what a person ought to be. He is filled with joy and love and peace. He lives in wholeness. And he looks at us in our brokenness and says to us, “You too, shall be whole.”

That word *wholeness* has power to awaken desire within us. We long to be whole people. Don’t you? Don’t you want to be what God made you to be, with all the ingredients of your personality expressed in balance? That is what the book of Leviticus is all about. In fact, so is the whole Bible.

We are so aware of our own brokenness, of our lack of wholeness. We know how much we hurt ourselves and each other. We are aware of our inability to cope with life. We sometimes put up a big facade and try to bluff our way through as though we are able to handle anything. But inside, half the time, we are running scared. That is a mark of our lack of wholeness. We also know our diabolical power to irritate, to enrage, and to inflame others – and ourselves. But this great statement in Leviticus 20:26 declares that God knows all about human brokenness and hurt. He knows that we are that way. He sees this in sharp contrast to his own wholeness. And his love reaches out and says to us, “You shall be whole; for I am whole. That is my purpose,” he declares to his people.

Man has lost his way. He was made in the image and likeness of God. When man first came from the hand of God, he was whole. Adam functioned as God intended man to function. He was functioning in the image and the likeness of God. But now we have lost that likeness. We still have the image, but the likeness is gone. T. S. Eliot says,

All our knowledge brings us only closer to our
ignorance,
And our ignorance brings us closer to death.
But closeness to death does not bring us closer
to God.

And then he asks this question:

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Isn’t that the question so many millions are asking today? Where is the life I have lost in trying to live? Why don’t I know the way out? How come I am so up-tight, so hurting, so broken?

God determines to heal man’s brokenness and to make man whole again. And he knows how to do it – he says so: “I have separated you from the peoples.” (cf, Lev 20:24 RSV). It is a process of separation. The reason we are so broken is that we are involved in a broken race. Our attitudes are wrong. Our vision of life is twisted and distorted. We believe illusions, take them to be facts, and act upon them. We are following phantoms and fantasies and delusions. So God must separate us. He has to break us loose from conformity to the thought patterns and attitudes and reactions of

those around us. He has to deliver us from all that, straighten out our thinking, set our minds and hearts aright, and correct our tangled, fouled relationships.

This is a process which takes infinite patience and love, because it is voluntary – God never forces us into it. It can occur only to those who trust God enough to respond to his love. When I was a boy in my early teens, I once tried to entice a female deer out of a thicket into a little clearing to get her to take an apple from my hand and eat it. She was a wild doe, and very much afraid. She saw the apple and obviously wanted to come and take it. She would venture a few steps toward me, but then would become frightened and retreat into the woods. Then she would come out again, stand still and look around for a minute, then start grazing as though indifferent. I stood perfectly still, holding out the apple. She would come a bit closer – then a twig would snap and she would disappear back into the bushes.

Now, it was perfectly possible for her all along, if only she had known it, simply to walk right up and grab the apple and start eating it. I would not have hurt her at all. I wouldn't have tried to capture her nor do anything else to her. But she didn't know that.

I was there a long time, at least half an hour, trying to get her to come out of the woods. Finally, she came about halfway toward me and stood there with her neck stretched out, trying to muster the courage to reach for that apple. Just as I thought she was going to do it, a car passed nearby and she was gone. I had to eat the apple myself.

That strikes me as such an apt picture of what God contends with in reaching out toward man. It takes infinite patience and love to impart the necessary understanding to fearful, hurting men and women like us.

That is why God gave us his book. He starts in kindergarten with us. He starts with pictures and shadows, with visual aids, in order to show us what he is going to do some day. All the ceremonies and offerings of the Old Testament are shadows and pictures of Jesus Christ. So Christ is here in the book of Leviticus. God shows us, through his people Israel, his way of healing human hurt. This is God's way to wholeness.

“Well,” someone might say, “I thought Jesus Christ was God's way to wholeness.” That is exactly true. He is. But his availability is not limited

to us, you see. Men and women before the cross were also hurting and broken and fragmented, just as we are. They needed Christ also and he was available to them. The way they saw him was through these pictures. Thus, as they understood what these pictures depict, and laid hold of that, they came to the same joy and peace that we have.

If you do not believe that, read the Psalms and see how much David understood of the presence and the grace of God in his life. He was a man who was healed by God. He came to understand that God was his strength and his very life, and that God could meet every need of his heart and work out all the tangled relationships in his family and in his personal life. All this is reflected in the Psalms he wrote.

Leviticus, then, is full of Christ. All the sacrifices, the rituals, and the ceremonies pictorially describe Jesus Christ and his work, and how he was available to men and women then. And as we read this book from our vantage on this side of the cross, we will learn a great deal about how Jesus Christ can meet our needs now. Therefore, this is not just a historical book. It isn't just for “news.” It is a tremendously practical manual on how to live as a Christian.

But there is even more: when you read the book of Leviticus and understand what it is saying, it will help you to understand yourself. You see, in Jesus Christ God took upon himself the form of man. Jesus came to this earth, God in the flesh, and dwelt among us as man – man as God intends man to be. He came to where we are. And everything that he was and did as man is what we also are or can be. So, as you read this book, you will understand more about yourself, and about what your great, crying needs are, and about how you operate.

We are a mystery to ourselves. We don't even understand how we think. We are baffled by our own experience. Don't you feel that way?

Remember the way Paul expresses this in Romans: “The good things that I want to do I cannot do; and the evil things that I don't want to do are what I do,” (cf, Rom 7:19). This is a picture of life. It is a very penetrating, probing analysis of what is going on in your life and mine. This is what the book of Leviticus shows us – the reasons why, the understanding of ourselves. It is designed to meet the hurt of man, just where we are. And as

we learn how to accept the healing of God, it will show us what we can be.

Because that is true the book falls into two basic divisions:

- The first part speaks to man's need. It reveals where we are as people, and sets forth God's answer to that need.
- The second part reveals what God expects from us in response.

First comes God's provision, and then the performance which results from that provision.

In the first sixteen chapters, there are four elements which set forth **man's need** and reveal what we are like:

1. The first is a series of five offerings. I am sure that God gave us five fingers on each hand so that we can remember the five offerings:
 - First is the burnt offering,
 - Then the meal offering,
 - The peace offering,
 - The sin offering, and
 - Finally, the trespass offering.

These are all pictures of what Jesus Christ does for us, but they are also pictures of the fundamental needs of human life. They speak of the two essentials for human existence – love and responsibility. We can never be complete persons if we are not loved, nor if we do not love. Love is an absolutely essential ingredient of life. Nothing harms or distorts or disfigures or blasts a person more than to deny him love. But there is another essential too. In order to be whole, in order to have self-respect and a feeling of worth, we must have a sense of responsibility. We must be able to accomplish what is worthwhile. So, we need both: love and responsibility.

2. The second element in these chapters is a priesthood. This priesthood is provided to help us handle the emotional and intellectual problems we face in trying to work out the relationships involving love and responsibility. We

constantly run into emotional and intellectual problems; we get upset, turned off, or turned on, excited or depressed – we have all kinds of emotional problems. And we get puzzled and bewildered, baffled and uncertain as to what to do – all kinds of intellectual problems. So, a priesthood is provided to help us with these problems.

In the Old Testament this priesthood was the sons of Levi. That is where Leviticus got its name. But for us, the priesthood is not only Jesus Christ, our Lord and High Priest to whom we can freely come, but it is also each other. In the body of Christ we are all made priests, one to another (cf, 1 Pet 2:5). That is why we need each other. Basically and fundamentally we cannot get along without each other, because we have these problems with which we must have help.

3. The third element is the revelation of a standard by which we can tell the difference between the true and the false, the phony and the real, the helpful and the hurtful – between death and life. Isn't it strange that man in his natural condition cannot tell the difference? That is why there are thousands and thousands of people who are doing things which they think are helpful but which end up to be very hurtful – and they do not understand why! When the results begin to come in they cry out, "What happened, what has gone wrong? Why am I in a mess like this?" It is because they could not tell the difference. So, a God of love tells us the difference. He sets forth a standard by which we can distinguish between that which is essentially hurtful and that which will actually help us.
4. Finally in this first section there is an opportunity to respond – voluntarily. We need that, too. God never imposes his will upon any of us. We constantly need help. We need to be brought to a place where we can recognize this. Then we have to answer in some way; we must give a response. This opportunity was provided in the Day of Atonement. If, when we thoroughly understand our need and God's provision to meet it, we then say "No" to him, he will let us do so. We might never return to that point again. But God always gives us a

long period of preparation in which he leads us into a full understanding before our rejection of him can become final.

The second section of the book, Chapters 17 through 27, describes **the performance which is possible** on the basis of the provision God has made, the kind of a life that can be lived on this basis. But notice the order! God never mentions performance to us until he has fully discussed provision. He never speaks about our behavior until he has made clear the power by which we are to act.

I must admit that we in the church often get this backwards. And a great deal of damage has been done to people by insisting that they act according to a certain behavior pattern without giving them any understanding of the power by which to do so. There are times when, in all sincerity and because the Scriptures are not understood very well, people are taught that they must live up to a certain standard before God will accept them; that they must produce, come through, or God won't love them. That is totally wrong! That is the lie of Satan! That is deadly legalism – yet we have all had our part in it.

But that is what God is here to correct. He never does that. He always helps us first, and once we understand the basis upon which to act, then he sets forth for us the pattern, the standard of performance.

Here again there are four elements:

1. First, there is a need to understand the basis for wholeness. This basis is blood. Anyone who has read the Old Testament knows that it is full of blood. There are all these strange sacrifices, thousands of them offered every year – bulls and calves and goats and sheep and birds of all kinds, offered up all the time – a veritable river of blood flowing through the Old Testament.

Many people, looking at this, say, “Christianity is nothing but a slaughterhouse religion.”

Why all this bloodshed? Because, by this means God is trying to impress us with a fundamental fact. He is telling us that the issues of our life run very deep, that they can be solved only by a death, that the basis for wholeness is a life given up, that we will never

make it merely on the basis of our natural life. We must somehow discover a new kind of life. And we have to give up the old before we can have the new! That is what he is telling us. We can't have both! The struggle of the Christian life is that we keep trying to hang on to the old way of life and refuse to accept the new. This is what the blood speaks of.

2. The second element is the practice of love in all the relationships of life. The Bible is intensely practical. It is not nearly so concerned about what you do in the temple as about what you do in the home as a result of having been to the temple. So this book goes into the relationships within the family, among friends, and with society in general. It shows us exactly the kind of love relationship that God makes possible for us in all these areas.
3. The third element in this last section is the enjoyment of the presence and power of God – man in relationship to God, worshipping God, and turned on by a living, exciting God! We can learn here what the temple portrays about our relationship to God and about how to think of him. The most important thing in life is to know the living God who is behind all things!
4. The last element is an awareness of the issues at stake and their importance; of how our entire life stands in the balance at this very point, and a decision is expected of us. There is a choice that we can make. And God brings us finally to that very place and helps us to see that in the final analysis it is entirely up to us to choose. God never says, “I'm going to make you leave your misery.” Rather, he says, “If you prefer being broken and don't want to be healed, you can stay right where you are. But if you want life, then this is what is ahead.” God never forces his will upon us. But he sets the choice before us, makes it very clear, and then expects a response on the basis that he has given.

In closing, we should return to our key verse: “You shall be whole because I am whole, and therefore I am separating you from the peoples in order that you should be mine.” That, finally, is what God is aiming at. He wants us to be his. Here the verb tense becomes very interesting. In

our English text, this is in the future tense: “you shall be mine.” But the Hebrew has a strange usage, very different from English. You can put all three tenses in one word, and that is what we have here. God is saying, “You were mine, you are mine, you shall be mine.” “Mine,” he says, that’s all: “Mine!” It includes all the tenses of life – the past, the present, and the future.

If you pursue this idea through the Bible, you can see how true it is:

- Many of you know from your own experience that after you became a Christian, became God’s, you realized that there was a sense in which you had belonged to him all along. Paul, the apostle, says, “He [God] set me apart before I was born” (cf. Gal 1:15). And yet he was a blustering, threatening enemy of Christianity until his experience on the road to Damascus. But, looking back, he knew that he had been God’s all along. “You are mine,” God says. “Even though you are an enemy, even though you are against me, hostile to me, and fighting me, you are MINE!”
- Then, in the present tense, God looks at us in our brokenness, our hurting condition, our fragmented, flawed, imperfect state, and he puts his hand upon us and says, “You are mine, right now, just the way you are. You belong to me”

A friend of mine told a story recently of a true incident which I think is so illustrative of this: He told of a children’s service at a rescue mission in a midwestern city a few years ago. Children were putting on the program, and one little boy was to give a recitation. He was only about five or six years old and he had a deformity; he was a humpback. As he walked across the stage to give his recitation it was evident that he was very shy and afraid, and very much aware of his condition. In fact, it was the first time that he had ever tried anything like this and it was a great struggle for him.

Two older fellows had come into the back of the room intending to ridicule the service. One of them called out to this boy as he walked across the stage, “Hey, bud, where are you going with that pack on your back?” The little

boy was completely demoralized, and he just stood there and sobbed.

A man got up out of the audience and came up to the platform. He knelt down by the little boy and put his arm around him. He said to the audience, “It must take a very callous and cruel person to say something like that to a little boy like this. He is suffering from something that is not his fault at all. In spite of this deformity, he was trying for the first time to venture out and say something in public. This remark has cut him deeply. But I want you to know that I love him just the way he is; this little boy is mine, he belongs to me, and I’m proud of him” And he led the boy off the platform.

That is what God is really saying to us. He sees our hurt and our heartache and our longing and our brokenness, and he says, “You’re MINE!”

- But that isn’t all. Because of his power and wisdom, God says, with that wonderful hopefulness of a loving father, “You shall be mine – healed, made whole, with all your blemishes and deformities corrected, all your faults straightened out, all your iniquities set aside, all your tangled relationships unsnarled. You shall be whole, for I am whole.”

That is what this book is about, that is what the Bible is about, and that is what Jesus Christ is about.

Not long ago, I had the encouraging experience of talking with three people who I would have said were absolutely hopeless two years ago. They were hostile and rebellious and so torn up inside that they could not get along with themselves nor anybody else. No one could even talk to them much less reach them with the truth. They were ruined, literally ruined. But now the healing has begun. It is very evident that they are on their way to wholeness. God is correcting the problems of their lives. And that is what he is doing here with us.

I don’t know anything more suggestive of this activity for us than the Lord’s table. This event tells us of how God, in love, began the process of healing. It portrays for us how he began to reach out to us in the cross, in the suffering of Jesus, and how he broke the power of darkness and began to set us free. Our Lord Jesus gave us this event to

teach us the meaning of these ancient sacrifices: a life poured out for us, a life given up in order that we might have a new basis of living, in order that we may be his.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, each time we come to the Lord's table, we ask you to make it very rich and meaningful to us. May we, in our mind's eye, see the Lord Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who has broken through the sin barrier, broken through the fear barrier,

and now reaches out to us in tender, forgiving, accepting, understanding love, and who offers us everything it takes to straighten out the tangled relationships of our lives. Lord, help us to understand this and to lay hold of it, to give thanks for it. We know that for many, the healing has begun and is still progressing. For some, it is just beginning. There may be some for whom it has not yet started. We pray that in your love, Lord Jesus, you will reach them and heal them. We ask it in your name, Amen.

NUMBERS: The Incomplete Christian Life

by Ray C. Stedman

The Pentateuch – the first five books of our Bible – trace for us the spiritual journey of an individual from sin into belief and to glorification in Christ. The whole Old Testament was written so that we might see in a vivid way what the New Testament declares to be true. The New Testament confirms this. The New Testament says that all these events involving Israel happened as an example to us, and were written down for our instruction (1 Cor 10:11) since they are pictures of what we will go through, as we move along with Jesus Christ:

- Now, the book of Genesis is a picture of humanity in all its strident, clamant need. It portrays what we look like as a result of the fall of man and the consequent need for God in our life. From Exodus to Deuteronomy, we have the way from Egypt to Canaan as a picture of the way the Christian will move from the slavery of sin to the freedom of victory in Christ, victory in the midst of his enemies. This is precisely the spiritual journey God has called us to, so these books become exceedingly helpful for us. If you read the Old Testament as nothing but a history of ancient events concerning people who have long since disappeared, it will be the dullest, most boring reading you can find. However, if you read it as a picture of what is happening in your life, vividly displayed in terms of these people of old, you will find fascinating reading indeed.
- The book of Exodus is a picture of God's delivering power. There we have the three great events in the early life of Israel – the Passover in Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. These corre-

spond with God's work in us. Like the Israelites in the Passover, where the blood was sprinkled for them, we too realized that the angel of death had passed over us in the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross and by that event, we were saved. We too moved out across the Red Sea when we openly declared our redemption in Christ and cut off the ties that bound us to the world. We came into the wilderness and heard the Law of Moses when we began to learn, perhaps for the first time in our lives, the kind of God with whom we had to deal, a God of utter holiness, of complete righteousness, utterly consistent with himself.

- Then in the book of Leviticus we learn how to worship, what it is this kind of God demands, and how a God of such surpassing holiness can dwell with men and women like ourselves. Here we discover the means by which God makes possible the necessary intercourse between God and man.
- Now we come to the book of Numbers:

In Numbers we have dramatically set forth what is perhaps the hardest lesson a Christian has to learn – to trust God instead of his own reason. This is where we struggle, isn't it? We think that what we want to do and the way we want to do it is the right way. The hardest struggle we have, even as these Israelites had, is to learn to believe that God knows what he is talking about and that what he tells us is the truth, and is for our good, and to operate on that basis despite what friends and others around are telling us concerning the right way. Proverbs puts it so graphically, "There is a way

which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death,” (Prov 14:12 RSV). The book of Numbers is a picture of that experience in the believer.

You will recognize, of course, that it is the experience of Romans 7 where the unhappy, defeated Christian, who is his own worst enemy, is being disciplined by God because God as a father loves him. He is experiencing in the midst of this discipline the fatherly love and care of God and protection from his enemy. That is what the book of Numbers portrays. It is a picture of people who have come out of Egypt but who have not yet reached Canaan. They had the faith to follow God out of the bondage and slavery of sin but have not yet come into the fullness of liberty and rest in the Holy Spirit – Canaan being a picture of the Spirit-filled life.

This book falls into three divisions:

The first is included in Chapters 1 through 10, and is a picture of **God’s provision for guidance and warfare**. These are the two critical needs of Israel in their march from Mt. Sinai, where the Law was given, until they came north across the wilderness of Paran to the edge of the promised land, the land of Canaan. On the way they would need guidance, because this was a trackless wilderness; moreover, they would need protection, for the wilderness was occupied by fierce, hostile tribes that opposed them every time they turned around.

All of this, you will recognize, is an exact picture of our need, isn’t it? We need guidance because of the clever subtleties of the world in which we live and the ease with which we can be misled and derailed; and we need protection because of the enemies among whom we dwell, those within us and round about us, who would defeat us if they could.

In this section that begins with the arrangement of the camp, note two things –

- The position of the tabernacle with the tribes on every side, and
- A numbering of the armed men of Israel.

These are pictures for us of the need for defense against the enemies of God. God provides all the strategy and resources necessary to meet every enemy that comes our way. There is not only the or-

der of the camp (the tabernacle surrounded by the tribes), but also there is the cloud over the camp by day and the pillar of fire by night – all of which (tabernacle, cloud, and pillar) picture for us the great truth of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We have God in our midst. That is a great truth. He is able to direct and to lead us through the wilderness of the world by the guidance of the Word. We are led by the cloud and the fire, just as Israel was led, and we are to be obedient to that leading. This is all the potential we need to get us from the place of the Law (the knowledge of the holiness of God) to the rest in the Spirit which the land of Canaan represents. We have everything we need, just as Israel had all that they needed.

But what happened?

Well, the major part of this book, from Chapter 11 through 21, is a description of **the murmuring and rebelling of the people**. It is a most remarkable fact, but one every pastor and parent is fully aware of, that rebellion and willful disobedience to God always begin with murmuring and critical complaining. Whenever you find yourself beginning to complain and murmur and whisper and carrying on a carping campaign against the circumstances in which you find yourself, you know that you are on the threshold of rebellion, because it always begins there. Notice that there are three kinds of murmuring – three levels of complaint – that occur throughout the wilderness journey.

1. There was, first of all, the complaint of the people against the circumstances. They complained about the manna and about the lack of water; they complained about the meat and about the wilderness itself. They were always murmuring. This was their favorite outdoor sport, it seems, and they worked at it day and night. Nothing was right, not even the manna, the miraculous supply of God every day.

I wonder if you know what manna typifies in your life? Well, it typifies the Holy Spirit. For the manna, it says, tasted like oil and honey mixed together into a thin wafer. Oil and honey are both symbols of the Holy Spirit.

On this they were to feed. But it was just a thin wafer. It wasn’t enough to satisfy them – although it was enough to sustain them – because God never intended them to live so long

in the wilderness. He intended them to get on over into the land of Canaan and begin to feed upon the abundant food there. But they got sick of manna. Who wouldn't after forty years, when it was only intended for a few days? Manna for breakfast, manna for lunch, manna for supper. Nothing but manna, manna, manna – until finally they began to complain and rebel. Yet it wasn't God's fault. Manna was never intended to satisfy. It was merely a temporary provision until they could get into the fullness of the land, just as God never intended you to live on the experience of the meager contact with the Holy Spirit you get in a defeated Christian experience. Go on into the land of abundant living. That is where you will find satisfaction.

They also complained about the lack of meat, so God gave them meat for a month until they were sick, and then they complained about the abundance of meat. So on it went. In murmuring they always thought about Egypt and this is a picture for us of a degenerating Christian experience. All they could think of was the meat, the melons, the cucumbers, leeks, onions, and garlic of Egypt. Imagine dreaming of that kind of food! But that is what Egypt meant to them. They had no thought of Canaan because they had no knowledge of it. All they had heard were sermons about Canaan. They had no experience of it. All they could remember was the world out of which they had come. As Major W. Ian Thomas puts it in his book, *The Saving Life of Christ*,

What are these a picture of? A cucumber is 12 inches of indigestion! Leeks and onions and garlic have a very peculiar property about them. They are the kind of food you eat in private but everybody knows about it in public.

Now this murmuring against the circumstances in which they found themselves was met by the judgment of God in three forms – fire, plague, and poisoned serpents.

I wonder if you can see in each of these a picture of the inevitable result of whining, complaining, and murmuring as a Christian. When we begin to complain about where God has put us and the kind of people he has put us

among and the kind of food we have to eat and all the other circumstances of our life, we discover that the fire of gossip, scandal and slander; the plague of anxiety and nervous tension that takes its daily toll of our life; and the poison of envy and jealousy are released in our own life to sap our strength. These things are inevitable.

2. Not only did the Israelites murmur against their circumstances, but there were several times when they murmured against the blessing of God. Imagine that. They came at last to the edge of the land of Canaan, standing on the very border line at Kadesh-barnea, and there God said to them, "Now move forward. Possess the land." They had sent out the spies and had learned that it was a land flowing with milk and honey. The spies had brought back grapes so large that they had to carry them on a stick between the shoulders of two men, the bunch was so heavy. But they also knew that it was a land full of giants, and because of the giants they were afraid to go forward. They thought the giants were greater than God, so they refused to go on into blessing. They resisted God's efforts to bless them. They were glad to get out of Egypt but they were unwilling to go on into Canaan. This is why they wandered for forty years in the wilderness. The inevitable judgment to them was that if they would not go into blessing, they must experience the full results of a failure before moving on in God's program.

Many, many Christians are living right here today, square in the middle of a howling wilderness, living on a minimum supply of the Holy Spirit – enough to keep them going, and that's all. They spend their lives in complaining, unending murmuring against their circumstances, yet still are unwilling to move on into the land that God has fully provided for them. This is the problem of so many. While you can be sustained in the wilderness, you will never be satisfied, never. And that is why the wilderness experience is always marked by a complaining heart and an unending criticism of something or someone. In this book it never ended until a new generation was ready to enter the land. God said, "Not one of you older than twenty years who went back at Kadesh-barnea

will ever enter this land, except two men,” (cf, Num 14:29-30). Those two men – Caleb and Joshua – were men of faith who went on.

Thus it isn't until we make a new beginning in our lives, when we come to the end of ourselves and it seems almost as if we begin again in the Christian life, that we can go on after we have resisted the work of the Spirit in taking us into the land. This is why so many Christians never seem to come to victory until they have a crisis experience, a new beginning, and then they enter into the land.

The Israelites had one other occupation in the wilderness besides murmuring, and that was burying. The mark of the wilderness is that it is a land of death. Did you ever think how many Israelites died in those forty years in the wilderness? This book begins with a census of Israel, and it totals 603,000 men alone, men able to go out to warfare, who are at least twenty years old. Six hundred and three thousand. Most of those men were married. That meant an equal number of women, as well as all the children that were in that camp. Many have estimated the total population at that time to have been well over two million people. Yet in the wilderness, in the space of forty years, one million two hundred thousand of them died, an average of 82 per day, so there was nothing but a great big funeral going on all the time. The wilderness was one huge graveyard. No wonder they had to move so often. You can imagine why, as literally scores of people would die every day through that forty years' time. What a picture of what Romans says: "To set the mind on the flesh is death," (Rom 8:6a RSV).

3. Finally, there is one other form of murmuring here; murmuring against authority. They murmured against circumstances; they murmured against God's effort to bless them, and they murmured against the authority of God expressed through Moses! They said, "All the people are holy. Moses and Aaron, why do you put on airs as though you were better than we are? All of the people of God are holy, in their own eyes," {cf, Num 16:3}. They judged themselves by their own standards and thus rebelled against the properly constituted authority in their midst. They resisted with all their

strength the suggestion that these two should be anything more than they.

Have you noticed that this is another characteristic of the defeated Christian? He always thinks he is holy enough, that he is as holy as he needs to be, and he resents anyone else who seems to be ahead of him or to exercise any authority. He resists any attempt to suggest to him that he ought to be more than he is. That is what these people did.

God met this attitude with the severest judgment of all. There is that dramatic account of the rebellion of Korah and Abiram when they openly challenged the authority of Moses and Aaron. God divided the camp in half and said, "Moses and Aaron you stand over here. Korah and your group, stand over here, and the people stand there," {See Num 16:20 ff}. And then he said, "Stand back. I am going to show you who is in authority here." He led Moses to say, "If these people live out their lives as normal ordinary men, then it is a sign that God is not with me, but if God does something absolutely new and the ground opens up beneath them and swallows them alive, it is an indication that God is with me." And as he said the words, the ground opened up beneath Korah and Abiram and all their families, and they went down alive into the pit. Thus God established his authority through Moses by this remarkable judgment. When we rebel against authority, God judges with the utmost severity.

Through all this, interestingly enough, the murmuring went on, in spite of the severity of this judgment, until two things took place. One was associated with the rebellion of Korah and Abiram and the other was in connection with the serpents that came and bit them at the time they complained about the food:

- Do you remember what Moses did to stop the rebellion at the death of Korah and Abiram? All the leaders of the twelve tribes took rods and put them before the Lord. Aaron's rod was included among them, and when they came back in the morning, they found that Aaron's rod had grown branches, the branches had blossomed and the blossoms had grown fruit and there were almonds hanging on the branches, all taking place overnight. Of the

twelve rods, only Aaron's blossomed. This is a picture of the resurrection life. In this, God is saying that the only ones who have the right to bear authority are those who walk in the fullness and power of resurrection life.

- Then when they murmured about the food, he sent poison serpents among them. In the third chapter of John, our Lord makes reference to this story. Moses cured the effects of the poison by lifting up a brazen serpent on a pole, and all who looked at it were healed. By that God was saying the only cure of sin of any kind, even sin in the Christian, is a look again at the cross and the way it utterly repudiates all human endeavor and human worthiness by putting Christian living solely on the basis of the resurrection life of Jesus Christ. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life," (John 3:14 RSV)

The latter part of the book, Chapters 21 through 36, is a remarkable record of **protection in spite of failure**. Here you find victory over the enemies around, the outward forces of King Arad, Sihon, Og, King of Bashan, and the attempts of Balaam, the false prophet, to try to undermine the people of God which resulted only in greater blessing. All of it is simply saying to us, in the most vivid language God can find, that though we are disobedient, though we are rebellious, though we turn and refuse to go into blessing, though we

wander in a wilderness of defeat and despair and barrenness year after year after year – nevertheless, the Holy Spirit will never leave us.

Even in the midst of our weakness, he grants us protection from our enemies and deliverance from complete defeat. What a remarkable book. But what a picture of what Paul sums up in the poignant phrase, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24 RSV). That is why we need to move on into Deuteronomy, where we get the second law, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for these graphic things not only written down for us, but lived out in the lives of men and women like ourselves. Thank you also, for this marvelous book so accurately preserved, so skillfully recorded by which we may learn the truth, if we only give ourselves to it and discover what life is all about. Teach us, Lord, to step out of the barren wilderness of our own frustrated lives and begin to rest upon the glorious provision of the indwelling life of our Lord Jesus; to get out of the wilderness into the land, to give up the frustration of an imitation Christian and begin to enjoy the fullness of a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. We thank you for this provision in Jesus' name, Amen.

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DEUTERONOMY: The Law that Delivers

by Ray C. Stedman

Deuteronomy is the last of the five books by Moses. It is a pastime of scholars today and a supposed mark of intelligence to raise the question of whether or not Moses actually wrote these books. There are those who maintain that Moses really wasn't the writer, but that the Pentateuch was made up by some unknown editor who went through ancient books and abstracted various parts, putting them together in a collection. They say we now have nothing more than a collection of writings by unknown authors whose names have been totally lost to us, and that Moses' name was simply added as the author. This is what is called "the documentary theory of scriptures." Anyone who studies comparative religions in high school or college will probably be exposed to it. Fortunately, it is a theory that has already been very well answered and exposed as false. Amazingly, though, it is still being taught in many places as though it were true.

I remember that Dr. Ironside told me years ago of listening to an outstanding liberal speaker at the University of California at Berkeley who said something like this to the listening young men:

Young gentlemen, I am regarded, at least in some circles, as an authority on the documentary hypothesis of the Old Testament books of the Pentateuch and many questions are asked me regarding the so-called books of Moses. Much is being said today about the assured results of higher criticism and the critics tell us that it is now certain that Moses did not write the books ascribed to his name. But I want to say that after having examined all the evidence very, very carefully, and having worked

in this field for many years, my conclusion is that if the five books of Moses were not written by him, they must have been written by somebody else named Moses.

The ordinary and usual concept that these are the books of Moses is a very authentic one. The book of Deuteronomy is the last great word from the mighty man of God, just before his death. It begins with a word about Moses and that he delivered these words to Israel beyond the Jordan, in Arabah wilderness, and it closes with the account of the death of Moses. It says that God ordered Moses to go up into Mount Nebo which overlooked the promised land. But because of his disobedience to God in striking the rock with a rod instead of speaking to bring forth water for the people in the wilderness {see Num 20:6-12}, he was not permitted to enter the land himself. But he went up into the mountain and saw the land. And although there was not a single sign of deterioration in his physical body, he died, and God buried him there; no man knows where Moses is buried.

But before he left, he preached this tremendous message that we have recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. This great sermon was delivered at the end of forty years of wandering in the wilderness. This was a new generation of people who were camped just across the Jordan River, not far from the city of Jericho. The message looks ahead to the life that will be theirs when they have entered into the land. They are through with the wilderness and ready to enter the land of Canaan.

Now let me remind you that these five books of Moses are what might be called God's visual aids to demonstrate what is happening to us in our own spiritual life. As God leads the people of Israel out of Egypt through the wilderness into the land of Canaan, they reproduce in all their journey the exact same problems, same obstacles, same enemies, and the same victories that we will be encountering all through the journey of our spiritual life. The bondage depicted by Israel as slaves of Egypt is the same as the bondage to the world we experienced before we were Christians. And the land of Canaan, flowing with milk and honey, pictures a life filled with continual victory, which can be ours in Christ. All this is God's way of picturing for us what is happening in our individual lives. If you read your Old Testament with this key in hand, it becomes a simply luminous book. Every story in it has a direct relationship to you and there are marvelous lessons to be learned.

In my own experience, I could not understand the mighty truths declared in the New Testament until I saw them visually demonstrated in the Old Testament. As these stories come to life for us and we see how they apply to our own experience, then the New Testament truths which are so familiar to our ears become living, vibrant, vital experiences.

Moses' great sermon in Deuteronomy falls into three divisions. (Every good preacher has three points to his message.)

- The first four chapters review God's love and care of Israel in the wilderness. Most of these people waiting to enter the land had gone through only part of the wilderness journey. They were only children when, forty years earlier, Israel had stood at Kadesh-barnea and refused to enter into the land. Many of them are now just young men and women – twenty or thirty years of age. They need to be reminded of what God has done during the wilderness journey.

So Moses' first task is to recite to them the wonderful care and love of God watching over them, as he led them with a pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day, and guided them through the trackless, howling desert. He tells how God brought water from the rock to slake their thirst in a vast and waterless area. And how he delivered them from their enemies again and again; how he fed them with manna that

did not fail. Imagine it! For forty years God fed more than two million people every day with manna that fell from heaven. What marvelous evidence of his loving concern for this people.

- The second division is a great resume of the Law. The Ten Commandments appear in the Bible for the second time here, beginning with Chapter 5, Verse 27. Here are the laws on divorce, on faithlessness and the penalty that was extracted if any were caught in some suspicious situation. Here are the penalties for idolatry, and for sorcery, and the warnings of God against falling into the terrible, terrible deeds practiced by the tribes that then inhabited the land.

It is essential to understand that the land into which these people were coming was inhabited by people who were utterly given over to lewd and obscene practices. The book of Deuteronomy is a mighty revelation that God expected his people to live in the midst of a sex-saturated society, among people who were completely committed to the most vile practices. I think this is encouraging to us who are being asked to live in just such a society today. And yet God expected his people to keep themselves completely from these things and to be a holy people in the midst of sex-mad nations. Then, at the end of this section, there is a recapitulation of the sanitary laws, which are also found largely in the book of Leviticus.

- The third division of the book, Chapters 27 through 34, is a mighty revelation of the future, both in terms of blessings and of curses upon Israel. The twenty-eighth chapter is one of the most amazing prophecies ever recorded. This prophetic passage is fully as complete and remarkable in its detail as any other prophecy in Scripture. It is a prediction of the entire history of the Jewish people, even after they ceased to be a nation and were scattered over the face of the earth. Here you can find the entire record of all that Israel has gone through in these long, long centuries.
- First, there is the prediction of the Babylonian dispersion; when Israel would fail to heed the prophets and turn to other gods,

God would send them out into captivity. This happened, as you know, under Nebuchadnezzar.

- Then there is the prediction of their return to the land and how, after centuries, they would fall again into the terrible sin of rejecting the Messiah. A strange nation would come in from the west, the Romans, who would be hard and cruel people. They would burn the cities, destroy the inhabitants and disperse them again, to the ends of the earth.
- Israel would wander for many, many centuries as a people without a land, but God would at last gather them again and there would be an ultimate restoration. All of this is precisely predicted in the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy. There are predicted blessings for the obedience of the people – wonderful blessings. And there are curses that would come upon them if they disobeyed the word of God.

The key to this book is in its name: *Deuteronomy* means “the second law.” The first giving of the Law was in the twentieth chapter of the book of Exodus, where you have the Ten Commandments. Why was it necessary for the Holy Spirit to give the Law twice? Why do you find the Ten Commandments once in Exodus and again in Deuteronomy? And all the sanitary regulations and the dietary regulations are reproduced in Deuteronomy. Why? From the book of Romans in the New Testament we learn that the Law of God has two functions. In Paul’s great argument in Romans, the Law is also brought in twice. It is introduced first in Chapter 1 and then again in Chapter 7. And in the third chapter there is a specific statement of what the Law was designed to do. Most of us think God gave the Law to the human race to keep us from doing wrong and to make us do right. If you ask the man on the street what was the purpose of the Ten Commandments, he would probably say, “It is to keep us from doing wrong.” But this is not the reason the Law was given. God never dreamed for a moment that the Law would keep anybody from doing wrong. The reason the Law was given is set forth in Romans:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, [Why?] so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. (Rom 3:19 RSV)

That is the reason the Law was given in the first place: It was given to man to reveal the sinfulness of his acts, because there is this amazing faculty about the human heart – we never think that what we are doing is wrong! It is always what the other fellow does that is wrong, isn’t it?

It’s remarkable the different expressions we have for this. We have a whole category of words that use apply to things we do and quite a different set for what everybody else does:

- Others have prejudices – we have convictions.
- Others are stingy – we are very thrifty.
- Others try to keep up with the Joneses – we are simply trying to get ahead.

And so it goes all the way down the line.

Now what does the Law do? Well, the Law comes in and applies the same terms to everyone. The Law says,

- “You shall not murder.
- “You shall not steal.
- “You shall not covet.
- “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and have no other gods.”

And the Law is absolutely impartial in its application. When we are confronted with the Law of God, we can no longer deceive ourselves. We have to admit that what we are doing is wrong. God said that the Law was given “so that every mouth might be stopped,” {Rom 3:19b RSV}. There is nobody who dares to stand up to God and say, “Well, others may be wrong, but right here you’ve got someone that leads a good, clean, moral life.” The Law says: No!

All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:23 KJV)

Therefore, the cross of Christ becomes the answer to what man did. What Jesus did on the cross is the answer to what we have done. “He bore our

sins in his own body on the tree,” {cf, 1 Pet 2:24}. That is set forth so beautifully in the books of Exodus and Leviticus in the sacrifices of the lamb, the goat, the oxen, the calf, and the other animals. They are pictures of the blood Jesus Christ shed for the transgressions and sins we have done. There is no way for a sinful man to deal with a holy God except by some payment, some ransom, or some justification being rendered to him for man’s sins. It is the Law that makes us aware that we need to make this payment.

But the Law comes in again in Romans 7. Once our sins are settled, isn’t that enough? Once we discover through the Law that we have done what is wrong in God’s sight and are guilty before him, isn’t that enough? No! There is another purpose of the Law. Paul says,

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. (Rom 7:7a RSV)

It is not sins here, but sin. Not what I have done, but what I am. If it had not been for the Law, I would not have known that I am under the grip and influence of an alien, satanic philosophy which is in itself sin.

I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. (Rom. 7:7b-8a RSV)

Paul continues:

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? [Was it the Law that did this?] By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (Rom 7:13 RSV)

He says, not only do I realize that I have done things which merit the just wrath of God, but that I am a sinner indeed and have received Jesus Christ as having paid the price on the cross, thus settling the debt for my sins. But it is also through the Law that I understand that I not only do things that are wrong, but what I am is wrong in God’s sight. The answer to this, we discover from the book of Ro-

mans, is in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. He died to pay for our sins. But further Paul writes:

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Rom 5:10 RSV)

I learn that it is the presence of a living Savior within my heart, who dwells within me, and who makes available to me everything that he is, that is the answer to what I am.

- I need what he did because of what I have done.
- But I need what he is because of what I am.

This is what the book of Deuteronomy illustrates for us.

If you read carefully through Deuteronomy you will find two themes running throughout this entire discourse that are not found in Leviticus or Exodus:

The first great theme is of **man’s utter weakness and inability**, even though he is cleansed, to do anything in himself to please God. There is nothing he can do in himself. His sincere, dedicated efforts to please avail nothing. “The mind that is set on the flesh ... cannot please God,” as Paul puts it, {Rom 8:7a, 8:8b RSV}. Right along with this is a wonderful parallel theme – the theme of God’s abiding presence. God himself is the answer to the demands of the Law in us. He himself takes up residence with us in order that he might meet the demands in himself. What he demands of us, he himself supplies.

Let’s look at a few passages so that you may see this yourself:

1. First, in Deuteronomy 6 you have the theme of man’s weakness. Moses says:

“When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?’” (Deut 6:20 RSV)

In other words, why do you do these things? Why do you go through all these ceremonies? Why do you kill these lambs and goats and sheep? Why do you go up to the tabernacle? What is the purpose of all this? When your son asks you that, what do you say?

“then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt;’”
{Deut 6:21a RSV}

That is where we begin. That is what we are. We are no better than slaves.

“We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes; and he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land ...” (Deut 6:21-23a RSV)

He brought us out so that he might bring us into the land. These are all symbols by which God is teaching us what it takes to get us out of Egypt and into the land. That was the explanation they were to make to their sons.

2. Further on Moses explains:

“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession ...” {Deut 7:6a RSV}

A people for his own possession where he himself will dwell.

but it is because the Lord [Jesus] loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” {Deut 7:6b-8 RSV}

It wasn’t anything in you; you have nothing. It was God who did it – not man.

3. And in Chapter 9, there is this elaboration:

“Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land’... {Deut 9:4a RSV}

“Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you, {Duet 9:5a RSV}

“Know therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people.” {Deut 9:6 RSV}

4. Near the end of the book, in Chapter 29, Moses said:

“You know how we dwelt in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed; and you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, which were among them. Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away this day from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations ...” {Deut 29:16-18a RSV}

After forty years of training in the wilderness he says, “Watch out. You never get to the place where you can stand on your own. Never!

“... lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’ This would lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The Lord would not pardon him, but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy would smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book would settle upon him, and the Lord would blot out

his name from under heaven.” {Deut. 29:18b-20 RSV}

You see man never gets to stand in his own strength. God never makes us so strong that we no longer need him. Never! We are continually dependent upon him. This is the great lesson taught in Deuteronomy, just as it is also taught in Romans 5 through 8.

Accompanying this theme is that of **God’s abiding presence** as the strength of the believer:

1. Back in Chapter 7:

“If you say in your heart, ‘These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?’ You shall not be afraid of them, but you shall remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt,” {Deut. 7:17-18 RSV}

When you are up against problems in life – giants, difficulties, and various trials you say to yourself, “I don’t have any strength in myself, I can’t do this;” – what should you remember? – that God does it. God is in you. God is there to meet that problem. God is there for living. He is there for the problem of your life.

“... remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt, the great trials which your eyes saw, the signs, the wonders, the mighty hand, and the outstretched arm, by which the Lord your God brought you out; so will Lord your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid. Moreover the Lord your God will send hornets among them, until those who are left and hide themselves from you are destroyed. You shall not be in dread of them; for the Lord your God is in the midst of you, a great and terrible God.” {Deut. 7:18b-21 RSV}

What a statement!

2. Then in Chapter 8:

“And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers

know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.” (Deut 8:3 RSV)

Does that sound familiar to you? Those are the very words Jesus used in the wilderness when he explained to the devil why he did not, would not, and even could not – in that ultimate sense of obedience – turn the stones to bread. He said “You don’t understand how I live. I don’t live by doing remarkable signs to make everyone look up in amazement. Man doesn’t live like that. Man lives not ‘by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’ But God is in me. That is what makes me strong.” (cf, Matt 4:1-4)

3. Again the theme of God’s presence:

“You are the sons of the Lord your God; [therefore] you shall not cut yourselves or make any baldness on your foreheads for the dead. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, [There he lives. There he dwells.] out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth.” {Deut. 14:1-2 RSV}

4. Even in the midst of the sanitary regulations for Israel, where he is giving orders to the people, governing the uttermost limits of their life he says:

“You shall have a place outside the camp and you shall go out to it; and you shall have a stick with your weapons; and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it, and turn back and cover up your excrement.” (Deut. 23:12-13 RSV)

Why?

“Because the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp, to save you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, that he may not see anything indecent among you, and turn away from you.” (Deut. 23:14 RSV)

The presence of the living God is the secret of a satisfying life.

Chapter 30 contains one of the most remarkable passages in the Bible: Here is a marvelous explanation of **the dynamic that keeps the Law**. What is it that makes it possible for a man to obey the Law? In the first part of this chapter, Moses recounts the Law again. He tells the people of the blessings that will come and warns of cursings if they disobey. Then he says, Deuteronomy 30:11-14:

“For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you,”
{Deut 30:11a RSV}

Every man who falls short says, “It is no use. The Law is too hard for me. I can’t do that.” Moses says it is not too hard for you.

“... neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’” {Deut 30:11b-13 RSV}

That is, who can bring this near to us so that it will come into our very lives? Now listen to what he says:

“But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.” {Deut 30:14 RSV}

What does that mean but the indwelling life of God himself! And these very words are picked up by the Apostle Paul when he writes about the two occasions when the Law was given – the first Law in Exodus and the second Law in Deuteronomy:

Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it. (Rom 10:5 RSV)

But Israel found it utterly impossible to live by the Law on that basis. Now Paul says, again quoting from Moses, this time in Deuteronomy:

But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down) {Rom 10:6 RSV}

But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom 10:8-9 RSV)

There it is. The two great things are the death of the Lord Jesus and the raising again from the dead, making his life available to others. This is what Paul calls “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:2a RSV) fulfilling by another principle the righteousness which the Law demands.

You know that old illustration of the plane – the law of gravity continually holds us down to our seat, but the law of aerodynamics overcomes the law of gravity. It doesn’t cancel it out. It simply overcomes it. You simply step into a plane and sit down. You don’t have to cling to your seat; you don’t have to hang on to the sides of the plane in order to stay aloft once you are in the air. You just rest on the fact that there is a law at work that is keeping you from fulfilling the law of gravity. If you were ever to get to the place where you thought you had it learned and you said to the stewardess, “Will you open the door please? I think I will go on by myself,” you would be very literally “jumping to a conclusion!”

But in this quiet, continual, confident resting on the fact that God is the ample provision of all that he requires from us, there is the ability to fulfill the righteousness which the Law demands. And that is what the book of Deuteronomy teaches. The Israelites are taught the principle, at least in shadow, of how to live in the land.

The only book that could possibly follow this is the book of Joshua in which the people are led into the land.

Prayer:

Our Father, what marvelous truths you have unfolded to us in this great word. How feebly we apprehend it, but teach us, Lord; teach us by your Holy Spirit. Teach us, young and old alike. Teach us to be

dissatisfied with life in the wilderness. Lord, make us to be fed up with this continual barrenness, this empty, frustrating experience of trying to do something on our own, and struggling and failing all the time. Make us desperately ready to listen, and to heed this delivering word, Lord:

how we can be set free from this wretched man and made to walk in fullness of your Spirit so that the righteousness which the Law demands might be fulfilled in us. Not by us, but by the Lord Jesus working through us in his blessed, risen life. We pray in his name, Amen.

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JOSHUA: Guidebook to Victory

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Joshua (whose name means “God is salvation”) is packed with practical lessons – challenging concepts to help grasp the principles of a Spirit-led life. The key to the book is given to us in the New Testament: “these things ... were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come,” (1 Cor 10:11). What the people of Israel went through in their actual historical experiences become patterns, or metaphors, that we can apply to the spiritual battles in the spiritual pilgrimage in which we are engaged. These experiences have an exact and accurate application to us.

Joshua is one of the two books of the Old Testament that every Christian should master. (The other is the book of Daniel.) These messages are primarily designed to help Christians withstand the first full impact of the battle of the world, the flesh, and the devil. If you feel the force of the opposing powers; if the tremendous, subtle deceptiveness of the principalities and powers against which we are engaged have come upon you so that you sense that you are in the conflict (Eph 6:12), these books will be especially important to you.

The fact that Joshua follows the book of Deuteronomy is certainly in the wisdom and care of God. Deuteronomy prepares us for Joshua by introducing us to the great second law of the spiritual life – “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:2) – which will lead us into the experience set forth in Joshua as the book of victory.

The book of Joshua falls into three main divisions:

- Chapters 1 through 4 concern the entrance into the land and all that involves. If you are struggling right now with how to enter into a life of victory with Christ, how to move out of the wilderness of doubt, restless wanderings,

and mere subsistence into the full blessing of the Spirit-led experience, then this is the section you ought to be concerned with – Israel’s entrance into the land – out of the wilderness and into Canaan.

- Chapters 5 through 21 cover Israel’s conquest of the land through many battles and conflicts as they came into the land of promise.
- Chapters 22 through 24, including many passages from Joshua’s own lips, set before us the perils and dangers in the land that we must guard against in order to remain in the place of victory that the land represents.

The land of Canaan is a picture, as we have mentioned, of the Spirit-filled life – the life that God intended for every Christian to live. There are no exceptions to this. The Spirit-filled life is not just for certain advanced saints, but is provided by God for every one of his people. Beginning in Chapter 1 we have a marvelously descriptive picture of it:

“Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people into the land which I am giving to them, ...” {Josh 1:2a RSV}

The land is given to the people of Israel, just as the life in Christ is made available to you absolutely without effort on your part. In the third verse you will notice that although the land has been given, it still needs to be possessed: Title to it is the gift of God; possession of it is the result of an obedient walk.

“Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses.” {Josh 1:3 RSV}

The idea is, you can have all that you will take. You can have every bit of the spiritual life that you want. You will never get any more. God will never give you more than you are ready to take. So if you are not satisfied with the degree of your real experience of victory, it is because you haven't really wanted any more. You can have all that you want. “Every place where the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you.”

Then the land is described as abundant and far-reaching; a land in which you will find all you need, in every area of life; “a land flowing with milk and honey,” (Exod 3:8):

“From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory.” {Josh 1:4 RSV}

But we find that it is also a land of both conflict and victory:

“No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.” {Josh 1:5 RSV}

One of the first things we learn in coming into this place of walking in the Spirit is that although it is a place of conflict, every conflict can be a victory. There need not be any defeats. It is a frontier, if you like, and there is nothing more exciting than life on a frontier. This life is especially frontier living in the victory of Christ.

The secret of living in the land includes both a promise and a presence; an obedient heart and an empowering spirit. God said:

“Be strong and of good courage; for you shall cause this people to inherit the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous...” {Josh 1:6-7a RSV}

It is going to take courage. There can be no drifting aimlessly along with the crowd. You are going to have to walk against the current.

“... being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success.” {Josh 1:7b-8 RSV}

There is the greatness of the book of Joshua! There is the promise! The written word must be our constant, prescribed meditation and study so we may “know the truth and the truth shall set us free,” (cf, John 8:32).

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” {Josh 1:9 RSV}

And there is the accompanying presence of the Holy Spirit: an obedient heart brings an empowering spirit. That is life in the land.

In Chapter 2 we have the remarkable and intriguing story of Rahab and the spies that were sent out by Israel. When these spies came into the house of Rahab, she hid them under some flax drying on the roof. While the men of the city were searching for them, the spies learned a most startling secret from Rahab:

“I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted and there was no courage left in any man, because of you; for the Lord your God is he who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath, ...” {Josh 2:9-11 RSV}

How long before the spies entered into this city had these events taken place? Forty years. In other words, for forty years the inhabitants of Jericho had been a defeated foe. Their hearts were melted.

They were defeated before the armies got anywhere close. Israel could have gone in at any time and taken the land.

How long have you been waiting to enter in and take a defeated foe in your life?

Next we read of the spies:

They departed, and went into the hills, and remained there three days, until the pursuers returned; for the pursuers had made search all along the way and found nothing. Then the two men came down again from the hills, and passed over and came to Joshua the son of Nun; and they told him all that had befallen them. And they said to Joshua, “Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands; and moreover all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of us.” {Josh 2:22-24 RSV}

After three days they came back and told this story. Notice the opening verse of Chapter 3: On the third day, “early in the morning,” they prepared to go into the land. Here is a reminder to us that on the third day, early in the morning, the resurrection took place. And it is in resurrection power that they entered in to take the land of Canaan, picturing Christ in his risen life working in and through us to make us victors over all that defeats, hinders, and fetters us.

Between the Israelites and the land, however, there still flowed the Jordan River. This account of the crossing of the Jordan is very similar to the story of the crossing of the Red Sea. In many ways the two crossings picture the same thing: death. Any man venturing into the Red Sea without the waters having been parted would have gone to his death. So the crossing of these waters is a picture of death.

Now, as you may already know, the crossing of the Red Sea is a picture of Christ’s death for you and me – when he cuts us off from the world in all its attitudes, ways, and opinions. In other words, when you became a Christian, you changed your ideas and sense of values. Your baptism was an expression of the fact that you were passing out of one life into another, and that your whole attitude was changed. That was the Red Sea – his death for you. But the Jordan is a picture of your death with Christ, when you bring your Adamic life to an end; when all that you are in Adam comes to an end –

your reliance on yourself, your desire to have your own program, to live and make your own decisions, and set your own goals – and you discover that you can’t have his life with your program. If you want to hold onto your program, then you can have only your own, fallen Adamic life. But if you want his life, then you will also have his program, which is one of victory. You cross either the Red Sea or the Jordan River when you accept the principle involved in this. But crossing the Jordan is what you do when you let go of your own program, make up your mind, and say, “All right, if this is what you want for me Lord, this is what it will be.” That is what happened with Israel when they went into the land.

You cross the Jordan the same way you crossed the Red Sea:

And the Lord said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.” {Josh 3:7 RSV}

By faith – that is all – by obedience and by faith. God is saying to Joshua, “By the same way I led Moses to bring Israel through the Red Sea, so I will lead you to bring Israel through the Jordan.” The same way! You experience the life of Christ for every living moment in the very same way that you claimed the death of Christ for your sins. The faith that got you out of Egypt is the same faith that gets you into the land. As Paul writes: “As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him,” (Col. 2:6).

Was it any harder for Israel to cross the Jordan River than to cross the Red Sea? No, they just walked down, the waters rolled back, and they went right through. The same thing. No problems.

And it is no different, you see, to walk into the land. It is simply believing that God is in you and that what he said about you is true – that he has cut off the old life (you agreed to that) and he has given you a new basis that will work. You believe it and you walk out on that basis and say, “Thank you, Lord, for being in me to do through me everything that needs to be done.” And you enter the land.

In Chapter 4 you read that two memorials were set up by Israel:

- One was twelve stones on the bank of the river for a continual reminder to them of the principle of faith to which they had now returned after years of wandering in the wilderness. I believe this memorial is representative of the Lord's Supper which is a continual reminder to us of that principle of life by which we are to live.
- The other memorial was a series of twelve stones in the middle of the river which were to be placed where the priests stood while all of Israel passed over to the other side. The stones were put in place before the waters came back. This is a picture for us of how Jesus Christ stays in the place of death long enough for every area of our lives to pass out of the control of self and into the control of Christ.

In Chapter 5 we come to the second section of the conquest of the land. What a mighty story this is! As the Israelites contemplated moving in to take possession of this land, they saw the tremendous city of Jericho with its huge walls. While Jericho was the first visible obstacle in their pathway, it was not the first thing that Israel had to deal with. They had something to do in their own lives first. God never begins his conquest with the outward problem. You will discover that he begins with you; you are the first problem.

There are **three things that the people of Israel had to do** before they could destroy the enemy in the land:

1. First, they had to be circumcised. The whole generation that had been circumcised in Egypt had died in the wilderness. A whole new generation had grown up uncircumcised, so when they came into the land, the first act was circumcision. As we know from the New Testament, circumcision is a picture of a surrendered heart – a heart in which the reliance on the flesh has been put aside, cut off – a circumcised heart (Rom 2:29).
2. The second thing they needed to do was to celebrate the Passover for the first time since they had come out of the wilderness. The Passover is a remembrance of the night when the Lord and the angel of death passed over the

houses of the Israelites back in Egypt because they were protected by the sheltering blood of the lamb. It also pictures a thankful heart that looks back to that day of deliverance when Christ became our Passover sacrifice for us.

After their celebration of the Passover came a new food. The manna that had sustained them in the wilderness ceased on the day after they came into the land, and they began to eat of the satisfying corn and food of the land. As far as I can discover, the nearest thing that we have to manna today is cornflakes. How would you like cornflakes for breakfast, lunch and supper every day for forty years? They were plenty tired of cornflakes when they got into the land of Canaan. And in fact, it was never intended to be their food for forty years. They had fed on that which sustained their strength but never satisfied them. But when they came into the land, they found that which satisfies.

3. Finally, before their conquest began, Joshua had to plan the strategy for taking the city of Jericho. He must have been a perplexed and bewildered man. How could he take this huge, walled city with this "army" of people, untrained in battle. As he looked out in the moonlight over the city, he saw a man standing there with a drawn sword, and said to him, "Are you on our side or on the side of the enemy?" The man said, "No; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come," (Josh 5:14). That is, "I haven't come to take sides but I have come to take over. It isn't your job to plan the strategy of battle. That is my job. I have given the city of Jericho into your hands." Then the man told Joshua the most remarkable battle plan that has ever been arranged. He was to have the people simply march around the city once a day for six days and on the seventh day, seven times, and then to blow a long blast on the trumpets and the walls would fall down. That was all there was to it.

As there were three preparations that needed to be made before engaging in battle, so in this section there are **three major obstacles** to be overcome before the land is won. These picture for us the

three types of problems which confront us as we walk the Christian life:

1. The first one is Jericho – with walls about 300 feet thick and 60 feet high – an immense fortress, and outward challenge, a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. It pictures for us those problems, most frequently occurring at the beginning of our experience of walking in the Spirit, when we are confronted by something that has baffled and mocked us for years. Maybe it is a habit that we have had for a long time and have never been able to overcome. Maybe it is a circumstance in which we live that is a constant threat to our spiritual life and nothing that we do seems to change it. It may be some situation in which we are placed, somebody that we have to work with, or some problem that seems absolutely insurmountable to us.

There is an amazing thing about this type of problem. When we follow the strategy outlined here – simply walk around it, displaying the ark of God (the presence of God) while shouting and playing the trumpets as a display of triumph – the walls fall down. When there is a complete change of attitude towards a problem of this nature, the problem disappears. It isn't the visible obstacle that is the problem, but our attitude toward it; as soon as the attitude changes, the problem dissolves.

But God had Israel march around for seven days. Why that long? Well, it took them that long to change their attitude toward Jericho. All that time they were thinking, "What a huge place. How will we ever take this place? What an absolutely insurmountable fortress." Day after day, while walking around this city, they had time to think about God in their midst, the power that he had displayed, and what he could do. Gradually their attitude changed so that on the seventh day they shouted in triumph and the walls fell down. There was nothing to it when they obeyed.

2. The second obstacle in their path is the little city of Ai; but first, there is the story of the sin of Achan. He coveted something that was forbidden. He took it and hid it and when they went up against Ai, Israel was utterly defeated. Joshua fell upon his face before the Lord and

said, "What is the reason for this?" (cf, Josh 7:7). God said to him, "Joshua, get up off your face. Don't pray to me now. There is sin in the camp. Go search it out." Finally, after searching through all the ranks of Israel, they filtered down to Achan and his family and Achan confessed.

Ai, then, is a beautiful picture for us of those inward problems arising out of our own lusts for that which God says we cannot, and must not have. We play the hypocrite and then discover that we are prey to every evil force that comes our way. We have no power to stand. We experience failure and defeat, as Israel did. But the minute this sin was confessed, they went up to Ai and it was no longer a problem. It was a battle, but no problem. Through it, they gained victory over the problem of the flesh.

3. The two battles of Gibeon and Beth-horon comprise a third picture for us of the special attacks of Satan upon the believer:

- Gibeon is the story of deception. The Gibeonites dressed themselves up in old clothes, took old moldy bread and tattered wine skins, and rode emaciated donkeys out to meet Joshua, (Josh 9:3 ff). When Joshua met them, he said, "Where are you from?" "Oh," they said, "we are from a country far away. We have heard of the mighty prowess of Israel and we have come over to make a treaty with you." Joshua said, "How do I know that you are what you claim to be?" They said, "Well, look. Look here at our provisions. We took this bread fresh from the oven just when we left, and look how moldy and dry it is. And our clothes – how ragged and tattered they are. We have traveled so far that our donkeys are all worn out." Joshua believed them and made a pact with them. When they had signed the treaty, Israel walked over the hill and there was Gibeon! They had been trapped and deceived by an angel of light – by a Satanic deception which appeared to be right, and good, and trustworthy, but was not. They had to stick by their treaty and spare the Gibeonites, and as a result, the Gibeonites

became thorns in their side throughout the rest of Israel's history. That is the story of Gibeon, the angel of light.

- Then comes the account of Beth-horon when all the kings of the Canaanites banded together and came roaring down in a tremendous league of nations against Joshua. It was a mighty battle, and although Israel was greatly outnumbered, God gave the victory in the remarkable manner of arresting the sun in its flight, thus making the day of battle to last until victory came – the long day of Joshua.

Here is a picture of what happens when the devil comes as a roaring lion in some overwhelming catastrophe that seems to shatter us, to shake our faith, and make us cry out, “God, what is happening to me? Why should this happen to me?” And we seem to be swept off our feet by this terrible, staggering thing.

But Joshua stood fast in faith, depending upon God to simply work a miracle. And God worked a miracle. “The righteous will never be moved,” we are told (cf, Prov 10:30). This is why Paul tells us in Ephesians that when the enemy comes like this, we are to just stand still – that is all – stand on the promises of God and the enemy will be defeated, (cf, Eph. 6:13).

The rest of this section (Chapters 11 through 21) is simply a mopping up operation. After the battle of Beth-horon, the land was practically theirs although there were individual victories. The victories of Caleb, Othniel and the Josephites and the setting aside of the cities of refuge all contain wonderful lessons of the audacity of faith – taking what God has promised and using it in individual lives.

In the last section we learn of **the perils that beset us**, how to stay in the land, and certain particular hazards. They are threefold:

1. First of all comes the account of the misunderstood motives that were ascribed to the Reubenites, the Gadites and half-tribe of Manasseh. They built an altar on the wrong side of the Jordan, causing indignation among

the other tribes of Israel. To them, this was idolatry and disobedience to God's command. So they gathered themselves together and came to make war against their own brethren. When they got there, the Reubenites, the Gadites and half-tribe of Manasseh were tremendously upset. They cried out, “Before God, this is not a rebellion. Let us explain,” {Josh 22:21 ff}. Then they explained that they were afraid that some time in the future the Israelites in the land might say to the tribes outside the land, “What have you to do with the Lord our God? God has made the boundary here at the Jordan River. You don't belong to us. You are outside our nation.” So they said, “We have built this altar not for worship or sacrifice, but simply to remind us that we belong with the people on the other side of Jordan” (vs. 28).

It is a wonderful picture for us of the peril of improper criticism, of ascribing wrong motives to people. If there is anything that will drive us out of the land of victory, it is to become engaged in a controversy over misunderstood motives.

2. The second peril is incomplete obedience. Although the land had been given to the people of Israel, they did not possess all of it, but left some of it unconquered. As Joshua warns the people as he nears the end of his life, the uncaptured people whom they permitted to live were to become snares and thorns to them throughout the rest of their history (Josh 23:12-13).
3. Finally, Joshua appeared before the people with a great message challenging them to walk before the Lord their God, saying, “Choose this day whom you will serve,” (Josh 24:15b RSV). He is saying: “You think you can go on in a sort of neutral position between following the devil and following the Lord. You can't do it.” This is exactly what Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters;” (Matt 6:24a RSV). You must serve either God or Satan. You cannot serve both. There is no intermediate ground. Here is Israel's response:

Then the people answered: “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods; for it is the

Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, and who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land; therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” {Josh 24:16-18 RSV}

Brave sounding words.

But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the Lord;” {Josh 24:19a RSV}

You cannot do it. The greatest peril of all in the Christian faith is false confidence. You say, “Well, certainly I can do what God wants. I’ve got what it takes. After all, I know the Scriptures. I have been raised in the right church. I can certainly walk faithfully and honestly before God. Don’t talk to me about apostasy, defeat, back-sliding. I can serve the Lord.” Joshua says, “You cannot serve God.”

This greatest lesson of the spiritual life is that you have no strength in yourself to stand, no matter how long you have walked before God. You can never have a moment of strength to stand by yourself. Your strength comes out of weakness and your sense of dependence. Your sense of your constant need of God’s strength is the only thing

that will keep you. Joshua, the wise old man that he was, said:

“You cannot serve the Lord; for he is a holy God; he is a jealous God;” {Josh 24:19a RSV}

“If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” {Josh 24:20 RSV}

But the people said, “No, Joshua, you don’t know what you are talking about. We are going to serve the Lord anyway.”

That is why the next book, the book of Judges, is the book of defeat.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, what marvels of knowledge and wisdom are wrapped up in this remarkable book that you have given to us and how inconceivably poverty stricken we are because we do not know it. We neglect it. We do not listen to it. How we stumble on from defeat to defeat in bitter disillusionment, often scarcely realizing what the reason is because we are so woefully untaught by the Spirit. Teach us now to open the book and ask the blessed Holy Spirit himself to make it real to us that we may understand it, grasp it, and walk in the strength of it, for we pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

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JUDGES: The Pattern of Defeat

by Ray C. Stedman

There is hardly any book of the Bible that can compare to Judges in color and intrigue. You wince as you read how Ehud the judge went to visit the king in his summer palace and slid his dagger between the fifth and sixth ribs of the king so that the fat closed around it and he couldn't draw it out again. You cringe when Jael drives the tent stake through the skull of Sisera and pins him to the ground – and worry with Gideon when God cuts his army down from thirty-two thousand to three hundred, and sends him into battle. As you go through the book, you watch the terrible prophecy of the orphan Jotham fulfilled in God's strange and mysterious workings against Abimelech, the false judge.

Perhaps your heart sinks with mine when Jephthah's daughter comes out to meet him coming back from the battle and he remembers the vow that he had made that the first person he met as he came home he would sacrifice to God, and he has to fulfill that vow. Perhaps you glory with Samson as he wreaks havoc among the Philistines with that tremendous God-given strength of his, and yet wonder at his naive folly in allowing the Philistine maiden to worm the secret of his strength out of his heart, and finally destroy him. Doubtless you turn with revulsion from the story of the Benjaminite perversion that marks perhaps the darkest and blackest chapter in all the history of Israel.

It is, to say the least, a very interesting book to read. But in broader perspective it is essentially the story of a deteriorating nation, and, as such, it is a picture for us of deteriorating Christian life.

Now the interesting thing about the books of Joshua and Judges is that they both take place in the land of Canaan. In the light of the New Testament revelation that is given to us, all these things – although they are reputable accounts of actual history – nevertheless also serve a dual purpose as pictures of the spiritual encounters that we will be up against. “These things,” as the Apostle Paul says, “were written down for our instruction” (1 Cor 10:11 RSV), God retraces in our lives the very circumstances, the very battles, and the very conflicts that we find Israel going through.

In Joshua, the land of Canaan is the picture of the Spirit-filled life. The land signifies the understanding and application of the principles of victory over sin through the risen life of an indwelling Lord. God's whole purpose for the believer is to get him out of Egypt – the world and its ways, the place of slavery and bondage – through the wilderness with all its defeat, barrenness and fragmentary enjoyment of God's resources, into the land with its promise, supply and victory.

This is brought out so clearly in the book of Judges. While Joshua is a book of victory (under Joshua – which means “Jesus” – there was consistent victory when the Israelites faithfully obeyed him). Judges is a book of defeat and of failure. It is the first in a series of books which sets before us the warning spots, the danger signals, and the perils that lie along the pathway of a believer. The pattern of defeat that is described in the book of Judges is presented to us over and over again.

The principle that always meant defeat in the lives of the nation of Israel is given to us in the very

last verse of the book. If you miss that, you miss the key to the book:

In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 RSV)

Notice that it does not say, "Every man did what was *wrong* in his own eyes." These people were not trying to do *wrong*. They were not essentially rebellious people determined to thwart the will of God in their lives. At this stage of Israel's history these people were very determined to do right, but they were trying to do what was right in their own eyes. The pattern of peril in this book of Judges can be simply put this way: They were given over to the folly of consecrated blundering. They were consecrated, dedicated blunderers – meaning to do right but ending up all wrong.

I can tell you that no pattern repeats itself more frequently in my counseling sessions than this. Many, many times I have heard people say, "Oh, I don't know what went wrong. I meant to do right. I did what I thought was best. But everything seemed to go wrong."

This was the problem with Israel in the book of Judges. As the verse says, there was no objective authority in their life. There was no king in Israel in those days. Actually they did have a king: Jehovah was their king, but they did not take him seriously. And when they did not take him seriously, they had nothing else to do but to take themselves seriously. So they did what they thought was right, guided by their conscience, dedicated to an earnest effort to do what was right, but always ending up wrong.

In the first two chapters of the book we see **the pattern of defeat** that will repeat itself again and again, in cycle after cycle of frustration. Each time God in his grace comes in and delivers the people, only to have them enter another cycle of defeat. It begins in the first chapter:

Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Bethshean and its villages, ... {Judg 1:27a RSV}

The discouraging story of defeat contained in the book of Judges also takes place in the land, which is simply an indication that victory in the Christian life is not an automatic thing. Just be-

cause you know the great truths of deliverance through a risen Christ doesn't mean that you automatically enjoy them. This is one of the greatest problems Christians struggle with. They think that because they have come to a place where they understand, perhaps for the first time, the great delivering truths of Romans, Chapters 6 through 8, that these truths are automatically working in their lives. It is a great shock to them to discover that although they know the truth, it isn't very visible in their experience. There can be a great gap between what we know and what we actually experience.

The tribe of Manasseh failed to obey God when he had commanded them (as they came into the land) to drive out all the tribes of the Canaanites. Look at Verse 29:

And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who dwelt in Gezer; but the Canaanites dwelt in Gezer among them. {Judg 1:29 RSV}

Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol; but the Canaanites dwelt among them. {Judg 1:30a RSV}

Again in Verse 31:

Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon, ... {Judg 1:31a RSV}

Or the inhabitants of other villages. Look at Verse 33 referring to Naphtali (that's not soap; that is the name of a tribe of Israel):

Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Bethshernesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, {Judg 1:33a RSV}

The Amorites pressed the Danites back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain; {Judg 1:34 RSV}

That was just the beginning of the story of the defeat of Israel. They did not take God seriously about the threat their enemies posed to them, but instead, moved in among them. God had said that they were to drive out every inhabitant of these Canaanite villages. They were not to mingle with

them or have anything to do with them. They were not to marry with them or associate with them.

But when Israel came to some of these villages, instead of mounting armed warfare against them, they went in and investigated the towns. What they saw seemed quite innocuous. The villages did not seem particularly dangerous and the people seemed to be very fine people. So they said, "We will let you stay in this village. We'll start another town right next door." They allowed these tribes to retain their villages in among the cities and villages of Israel. They settled for less than total victory.

Have you ever done that? As a Christian, have you ever settled for less than total victory in your life? Did you stop smoking, for instance, or drinking, or wearing overshoes in bed, or all those other terrible habits that you had as a non-Christian? But when it came to other matters such as a hot temper, or worry, or self-confidence, or pride, you said to yourself:

- "Oh, I have improved so much over what I used to be that by comparison these are just trivial things. Surely God is not going to make an issue out of these." And you allow them to stay there, with defenses protecting them:
 - "After all, I am Irish,"
 - Or "I am only human."
 - Or "My whole family does this. This is just the way I am, and you are going to have to accept me this way."

You are settling for less than total victory.

Now look at **the next step in this process**. In Chapter 2 we see God's grace as he warns them about results of this practice:

Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land which I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my command." {Judg 2:1-2a RSV}

God warns them. He continues:

"What is this that you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you." {Judg 2:2b-3 RSV}

And what did Israel do?

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals; and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were round about them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. {Judg 2:11-12 RSV}

The next step was open idolatry. The Baals and the Ashtaroths were the gods of the Canaanite tribes. Baal was a male god. Ashtaroth was a female god. These were fertility gods. You can almost see how easily this idolatry came about. The Israelites didn't mean to do it. They knew that God had commanded that they were not to bow down before any idols. They knew the Ten Commandments. They didn't intend to get trapped like this.

But what happened? They had been farmers in Egypt where irrigation was a means of watering the land, so they weren't used to dry land farming. They didn't know quite how to handle the crops nor what to do. When their crops came up the first spring, then, they were of rather poor quality and straggly. In contrast, the Canaanite tribes had wonderful fields of grain. The Israelites said to them. "Well, what do you do? What is your secret?" The Canaanites said, "It is very simple. We have certain fertility gods and we bow down to them and offer them sacrifices. Then they bless our crops. If you ever expect to get abundant crops in this land, you are going to have to adjust to our ways."

- Have you ever had any pressure like that put on you?
- Does anyone ever say to you, "Look, if you are ever going to get ahead in this company, you are going to have to give up some of your relig-

ious ideas. You'll have to come around to our way of doing things"?

So the Israelites gave in.

Of course, along with this advice the Canaanites taught them how to plant their crops properly, how to fertilize the soil and so forth, so that next spring, sure enough, after they had bowed down to the gods of the Canaanites, they found the crops were wonderful. The Israelites said, "There must be something to this fertility business. We'd better worship these gods after all." They forsook the God of Israel and bowed down to the Baals and Ashtaroths. Now what is not recorded here is that these were sex gods and worshipping them involved not only bowing down before dumb idols that could not speak, act, or think, but also involved the Israelites in licentious practices. Thus they gradually drifted off into idolatry.

The next step in the cycle is God's grace again. The whole pattern is of man's unutterable folly in disobeying the simple Word of God. God in his arresting grace puts block, after block, after block in the path of these people trying to alert them to what is happening. In Chapter 2, we read how God dealt with their disobedience:

They forsook the Lord, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them; and he sold them into the power of their enemies round about, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them; and they were in sore straits. {Judg 2:13-15 RSV}

Have you every had the Lord's hand against you? Have you ever sensed that he was against you in everything that you did? What you thought you were doing in dedication and sincerity was so against what he had said, that since you hadn't taken him seriously, you discovered his hand was against you. This is what Israel discovered; nothing seemed to work out right. They found themselves in bondage. One after another of the tribes around them was allowed to rule over them. These tribes came in and made slaves out of them – sub-

jected them to servitude and bondage for year, after year, after painful year.

But God's grace comes in again for deliverance:

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the power of those who plundered them. And yet they did not listen to their judges; for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed down to them; they soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so. Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; {Judg 2:16-18a RSV}

That is why this book is called "Judges." Over and over this story is repeated. God raised up Othniel; and then Ehud; and then Shamgar – judge after judge until you come to the last judge, Samson. Twelve judges altogether, all representing God's intervening grace in attempting to keep these people from the folly of their own senseless disobedience.

God will intervene continually, again and again, in our own lives to stop us from the folly of not taking him seriously about these enemies that afflict us.

The revelation of man's perpetual folly is seen, as we continue in Chapter 2:

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and behaved worse than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them; they did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. {Judg 2:19 RSV}

The total result is that the book of Judges is nothing but a record of Israel's continuous decline. Look at the first verse of the book, where Israel is calling out:

"Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" The Lord said, "Judah shall go up; ..." {Judg 1:1b-2a RSV}

They were saying, "Lord, we are here to do battle against these enemies and we want you to

say who is to go up first against them.” In the last chapter of the book they are asking exactly the same question under exactly the same circumstances, except this time the enemy is no longer the Canaanites, but their own people, the tribe of Benjamin:

The people of Israel arose and went up to Bethel, and inquired of God, “Which of us shall go up first to battle against the Benjaminites?” And the Lord said, “Judah shall go up first.” {Judg 20:18 RSV}

This marks the decline of the people from battling against their enemies, who were also the enemies of God, to battling against themselves. This happens so often in Christian experience. As you read through this book you’ll find in each cycle the pattern is exactly the same, bringing them lower and lower until they finally come out at that black and revolting episode which is described in the last two chapters, the perversion of the Benjaminites.

If you take this book and lay it along side the first chapter of Romans you will find that exactly the same pattern is followed:

1. First there is idolatry. Paul says, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them,” {Rom 1:19 RSV}. They had no excuse, ...
2. But what did they do? “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.” (Rom 1:22-23 RSV) – idolatry.
3. Then you will find that they turn so far from God that, as it is said, “God gave them up.” Three times it is repeated {Rom 1:24, 1:26, 1:28} that they gave themselves to their own licentious practices until they learned to practice perversions among themselves, marking the lowest stage of human folly.

The great lesson of this book, then, is that we must take God seriously about the enemy. Jesus Christ has come to save us from our sins – not to allow us to settle down to live all our lives with them. He has come to drive them out from us, and

to separate us from them. If we do not take God seriously about these things that we call trivial we will experience an inevitable sequence, taking us step by step away from the intervening grace of God, onward to a course that brings us at last to moral collapse.

I think this is the answer to those sudden moral collapses of men and women who have apparently been outstanding leaders for God, who present, on the outside at least, a fair and happy prospect that looks as though their spiritual life is strong. Then suddenly we read of some terrible moral collapse. What has happened? There has been an inward deterioration, exactly along the pattern of the book of Judges.

I think there is not one of us who isn’t asking himself, as I am asking myself,

- “Is this happening to me? Am I kidding myself?”
- In some area of my life am I saying, “Well Lord, this really isn’t very important. Why do you bother me with this matter of an impatient spirit, of an unforgiving spirit against someone, or a tendency to dwell on lustful things?”
- Or we say, “In this matter of my confidence in my own ability to do something – after all, there are lots of Christians you bless with that kind of a spirit – this isn’t very important, is it Lord?”

If this is my attitude, I am exposing myself to peril and will discover that unless I heed the intervening grace of God, and listen to his warning voice, I shall discover, sooner or later, that, as in Judges, so in my life, there will be moral collapse.

Now I trust that, as we read this book as God intended, we will see ourselves here. But let me remind you, also, that the book of Ruth is the next book.

Ruth, one of the loveliest books in the Bible, took place during the very same time as the book of Judges.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for your faithfulness to us. Lord, how rich is your grace; how in-

finite is your patience; how long you delay and warn, beseech and urge, and try to turn us back. How wonderful is your saving grace that sends again and again a Savior into our life to restore us and to bring us back. Lord, we pray that we will give heed to this voice, this blessed one who has come into our hearts and lives to redeem

us, to save us, and to deliver us. Help us to walk with him and know the glory of a life of victory, so that with the Apostle Paul we can say, "Thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere," (2 Cor 2:14). In Jesus' name. Amen.

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RUTH: The Romance of Redemption

by Ray C. Stedman

When Benjamin Franklin was United States Ambassador to France, he occasionally attended the Infidels Club – a group that spent most of its time searching for and reading literary masterpieces. On one occasion Franklin read the book of Ruth to the club when it was gathered together, but changed the names in it so it would not be recognized as a book of the Bible. When he finished, they were unanimous in their praise. They said it was one of the most beautiful short stories that they had ever heard, and demanded that he tell them where he had run across such a remarkable literary masterpiece. It was his great delight to tell them that it was from the Bible, which they professed to regard with scorn and derision, and in which they felt there was nothing good.

The book of Ruth is certainly a literary masterpiece. It is a beautiful story of a romance. I wonder how it would be featured in some of our romance magazines today. I can almost see the headline; it would be something like: HOW ONE WOMAN FOUND HAPPINESS – IN THE ARMS OF SECOND HUSBAND! It is a book that inflames the imagination, because all through it is entwined the captivating theme of love and romance.

Although it is a beautiful story in itself, it is the story behind the story – its meaning and significance – that is simply fascinating. The book of Ruth is one of those beautiful Old Testament pictures that is designed by God himself to illustrate the dramatic truths of the Christian faith expounded in the New Testament. It is a word picture in the Old Testament illustrative of the truth we find in the New Testament, as First Corinthians tells us:

Now these things happened to them as a warning [literally, as a type] but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Cor 10:11 RSV)

It is the story of the romance of redemption.

The four divisions of this book trace for us the four major steps of the work of redemption. The book begins with **an introduction of the characters:**

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years; and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was bereft of her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:1-5 RSV)

In those five short verses we are introduced to a series of personalities who are the keys to this book.

One of the clues to making the Old Testament a living book is to learn the meaning of the names of

the characters who are featured in prominent places. God has hidden away great truths in these names. The story of Ruth begins with a man whose name was Elimelech. *Elimelech* means “my God is king.” In that one name the whole doctrine of man – “My God is king” – may be comprehended.

This book begins with God, just as the Bible begins with God – “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” (Gen 1:1 RSV). The Bible never argues the existence of God. The God of the Bible is the God who is, the God who exists. From beginning to end you will never find any apologetic dissertations on whether or not God exists. The Bible starts with the fact of God. The existence of God is a matter that rests wholly upon the innate revelation given to the human heart.

Man either admits that God exists or he denies that God exists – one or the other. He is built to recognize the existence of God. There is no hope for him if he doesn’t, because as Hebrews 11 tells us, “For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists,” (Heb 11:6b RSV). God is. And it isn’t difficult to believe that God is. Light from God is streaming to us from all around. It is more difficult to believe that God isn’t. Only those who are educated beyond their intelligence finally talk themselves into believing that there is no God. The whole story of man begins with that great fact that God is.

But there is more: “My God is king.” It is the “God who is” who is my God. That means that the “God who is” is available to me as a man. The God who exists and created the universe has made himself completely available to man. Hebrews 11:6 goes on to say “whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Jesus said, “seek and you will find;” (Matt 7:7b RSV). If a man never finds God, it is because he never bothered to seek. Any man who wants to come to God – discover the realities of God, grasp the fact of God, and experience the person of God – needs simply to begin to seek God, because God makes himself available step by step to the man who begins to look. Then he becomes “my God” and this is the relationship that man in his innocence had with God. In the eighth Psalm we read David’s remarkable statement:

**When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him? (Psa 8:3-4 RSV)**

Then the Psalmist answers his own question:

**... thou ... dost crown him glory and honor.
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;
(cf, Psa 8:5-6a RSV)**

Here is the third facet of that name “my God is king.” Man was given dominion over all the universe that God had made, but only as he himself was subject to the dominion of the God who made him. As he subjected himself to the dominion of “my God” (all that you are is available to me), he began to exercise dominion over all the rest of the world. As he was subject to dominion, he was given dominion. This was exactly the relationship into which Jesus Christ came. After quoting the verse from Psalm 8, the writer of Hebrews said,

... we do not yet see all things in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels ... that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. {cf, Heb. 2:8b-9 RSV}

We see Jesus. When Jesus Christ came, he came not to act as God, but as a man, subject to the dominion of God. All dominion was given to him. As he said:

“All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me.” {cf, Matt 28:18 KJV}

Why? “Because,” he said, “I am totally subject to the dominion of my father.” That is the true relationship of man with God. Thus when Adam walked in that relationship, all the universe was subject to his dominion because his “God was king.” That is man in his innocence.

Now Elimelech married a woman whose name was Naomi, which means “pleasure.” In the joining of these two names you have the entire doctrine of the fall of man. When Satan came to Eve in the Garden of Eden, he said to her, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’”

(Gen. 3:1 RSV). In the clever phrasing of that question he suggested that God was denying that which would bring pleasure to her. Then he dangled the fruit in front of her and said, "It looks good, doesn't it? I'll tell you something. It tastes better than it looks. And if you will take of it, you will find that it will make you wise." The devil in his cleverness did not lay before Eve a temptation which she could obviously see through. He offered her a very delightful proposition. He suggested to her that if she would take of this fruit – which God in his sovereignty had forbidden them to take as a test of their obedience – she would be given the ability to become like God. She would be entering into a new domain where she could step out into her own independent activity and be "god" without God. Satan offered man pleasure.

When "my God is king" married "pleasure" he stepped outside of the limits God had placed upon him. He sought his own pleasure before he sought his own God. We read in the New Testament that such are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," {2 Tim 3:4 RSV}. This is the spirit of the age, and has been through the centuries. In the marriage of Elimelech to Naomi we have a picture of the fall of man.

Now this couple had two children whose names were Mahlon and Chilion. *Mahlon* means "sick," and *Chilion* means "pining away."

Imagine naming your children that! How would you like to go visit this home and ask about the boys, Mahlon and Chilion? There is little Mahlon lying in the corner, sick, pasty-faced with a temperature, hovering between life and death. Little Chilion is nothing but skin and bones – wasting away.

When these boys grew older, they went into the country of Moab. While they were there (we read) the boys married girls who were Moabites. Their names were Ruth and Orpah. Now, *Orpah* means "fawn" – a little young deer; we also use the word in English to mean a superficial kind of love – *fawning* upon someone – a kind of surface love or attention. *Ruth* means "beauty."

The next thing we read is that Elimelech died, Mahlon died, and Chilion died. All three died – and this is exactly in line with the picture in Scripture of the results of the fall. After Adam and Eve were excluded from the Garden of Eden we read that they had a son, Abel, who was murdered by his brother Cain. Then we read of the generations of

Adam. Adam had a son whose name was Seth. Seth died. Seth had a son whose name was Enos. Enos died. Enos had a son. He died – and he died, and he died, and he died. All down through that chapter the bell of death rings out again and again. When "my God is king" marries "pleasure" the result is death. Here in the land of Moab these three men died and left behind three heartbroken, lonely widows.

Now the heart of the story really begins with these three widows in the land of Moab. We read that Naomi decided to return to her home in Bethlehem in Judah. Both of these girls made a promise to accompany her back into the land. As they started out along the road and got further from Moab, Orpah kept dropping behind. At last Naomi saw that Orpah's heart was really not in this journey – that she longed to go back into Moab. So Naomi kissed Orpah good-bye and sent her back. Naomi said to Ruth, "Do you want to go back also?" Then Ruth said those wonderful words that we often hear a bride say to the groom during the marriage service, standing at the altar together:

"Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God;" {Ruth 1:16b RSV}

In these two girls there is a beautiful picture of the two kinds of commitments that are made to Jesus Christ. Many, many times you will find that two people who at the very same moment and under the same circumstances, being confronted by the same truth, will make a commitment to Jesus Christ – but one of them is a soulish commitment. Such people are emotionally stirred for the moment. They are drawn by some superficial view of our Lord's person or his glory, or something that they hope to gain from their commitment. They do not actually meet the Lord in the sanctuary of their spirit. At the moment you can't tell the difference between this and a true commitment – they both look alike. But as the two walk on in the Christian life, one begins to hang back and at last, like Orpah, comes to the place where, as she says. "I can't go on any longer." We read that Orpah turned and went back to her own people and her own gods. It was only a superficial change that

had occurred; they had always been her own people and her own gods.

But in Ruth you see that marvelous commitment that says, “Where you go I will go.” I am wholly yours – body, soul and spirit. “Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God. I will die where you die. I will never go back.” We read in Verse 19:

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, ...” {Ruth 1:19-20a RSV}

Naomi means “pleasure” but *Mara* means “bitterness.” She goes on:

“... for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” {Ruth 1:20b RSV}

Elimelech married “pleasure,” but the result was “bitterness.” When “my God is king” marries “pleasure,” “pleasure” is turned into “bitterness.” Why had the women come to Bethlehem? We read that they “had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food” (Ruth 1:6). The Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and he said, “I am the bread of life,” (John 6:35). So they had come to the place where God visited his people and gave them bread.

From the bitterness in Chapter 1, we come to **the working of grace** in Chapter 2, Verse 1:

Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband’s, a man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. {Ruth 2:1 RSV}

The name *Boaz* means “strength” – a man of strength and of wealth.

And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, “Let me go to the field, and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor [or, grace].” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.” {Ruth 2:2 RSV}

They arrived at Bethlehem, in the bitterness of their widowhood, with no help, or home, or hope. The only thing left to them was to take the place of destitution and bankruptcy. But somehow Ruth knows what to do when they go there, for she says to her mother-in-law, “Let me go to the field, and glean among the ears of grain that I might find grace.” She is looking for grace. On the long, weary road back these two women must have been talking about what they would do when they got to Bethlehem. Ruth must have said, “Naomi, we are both widows and we don’t have any husbands to watch out for us. How are we going to support ourselves when we get there? We have no money. We have no property that we can turn into money. What shall we do when we get there?” Naomi must have remembered the provision that the God of Israel had made for the destitute and the bankrupt in the Law:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.” (Lev 19:9-10 RSV)

God had made provision for the poor. When Ruth and Naomi arrived in Israel, they took the place of destitution. They didn’t say to themselves, “We have been away and people will expect that we made our fortune in Moab. Perhaps we ought to open an account down at the store and live on credit for awhile. If we can act like we are rich, everybody will take it for granted that we are really rich and maybe we can work out some kind of a scheme to get by.” If they had done this, they would have faced catastrophe. But instead, Ruth took the place of destitution and went out looking for grace. And because she looked, she found it. If you seek for grace, you will find it.

So she set forth and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened [Just happened?] to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, ... {Ruth 2:3a RSV}

Have you ever discovered the glories of God's "happenings" in your own life? How many times have you thought something just happened by accident and then you discovered that it was by divine appointment that you were where you were?

- Remember little Zacchaeus up in the sycamore tree? (Luke 19:2). It just "happened" to be the tree that the Lord Jesus chose to stand under. And little round, fat, bald Zacchaeus, clinging to the branch of the sycamore tree, looked down and congratulated himself because he didn't want anyone to see that behind the businesslike facade he had built up was a seeking heart. And it just "happened" that the Lord Jesus looked up, saw him there, called him by name and told him to come down. Did it just happen? Jesus knew his name. Zacchaeus was there by divine appointment.
- When the woman of Samaria came to the well, she just "happened" to come at the noontime hour to find Jesus sitting there (John 4:7). It just happened – by divine appointment.
- When Nicodemus came at night, he just happened to find the Lord Jesus still up (John 3:1). He was probably very surprised to find him, not realizing that the Lord knew that he was coming and was waiting for him by divine appointment.

Then we have this wonderful story of "boy meets girl," and it never gets old, does it? Ruth was gleaning in the field and Boaz saw her. He said to his workmen, "Who is this maiden?" They told him who she was, and Boaz went down to meet Ruth. Now it doesn't tell us how it happened, but if you use your sanctified imagination you can see that it must have been a bit awkward at first. She was working away (picking up the grain here and there) and along comes this handsome fellow – evidently a wealthy man by his clothes. She drops her eyes, afraid to look up at him. He stands on one foot and then the other, clears his throat a couple of times and finally says, "Shalom." She looks up and says, "Shalom." Then he says to her, "Listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my maidens," {Ruth 2:8 RSV}. She is encouraged by this. He

goes on, "Let your eyes be upon the field which they are reaping, and go after them. I have charged the young men not to bother you," {cf, Ruth 2:9 RSV}. She wonders what is happening. So finally she asks:

"Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" {Ruth 2:10b RSV}

Boaz says,

"All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before." {Ruth 2: 11b RSV}

"I may be a stranger to you, but you are not a stranger to me." You wonder how this all happened, but I have found out about you. This is the old, old story of a lost and guilty sinner meeting Jesus Christ. He may be a stranger to us, but we are not strangers to him.

As you trace through this wonderful chapter you find that Boaz tells his men to drop a little grain here and there so as to increase the bounty that she is gleaning out of the field. To her amazement she discovers that these workmen are undoubtedly the sloppiest workmen in the whole kingdom of Israel, because they leave huge quantities of grain on the ground. When she goes home that night with her apron full, she beats out the grain and comes to Naomi with a whole ephah. An ephah is probably a little more than a bushel of barley. Naomi greets her and says, "Where have you been working today?" Ruth says, "I gleaned in a field of a man whose name is Boaz."

Naomi's response was:

"Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead! ... The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin," (Ruth 2:20b RSV)

The Hebrew word for *nearest kin* means, literally, "one who has the right to redeem." If you look back at Deuteronomy 25, you will see what she is referring to:

"If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the

dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel." {Deut 25:5-6 RSV}

In other words the right of redemption is the right to bring life out of death; to restore life to that which was dead. Here is one who had the right to redeem.

Now, in Chapter 3, we read of **the clearing up of the debts**. In reading this through it appears that Ruth acts in a way that to us may seem presumptuous and very unmaidenly. But she is really acting quite strictly in accord with the law of Israel. When Boaz lies by his threshing floor at night, she comes, uncovers his feet and lies down at his feet. He discovers her there and asks who it is. She identifies herself and then he says to her:

"May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; you have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich." (Ruth 3:10 RSV)

In this way she has laid claim to his right to redeem her, an action that is perfectly right within the law of Israel. So Boaz says:

"And now, my daughter, do not fear, I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of worth. And now it is true that I am a near kinsman, ..." {Ruth 3:11-12a RSV}

This is what she made clear by this act on her part. But Boaz knew something else:

"... yet there is a kinsman nearer man I. Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will do the part of the next of kin for you, well; let him but if he is not willing to do the part of the next of kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will do the part of the next of kin for you." {Ruth 3:12b-13 RSV}

There is **an obstacle that needs to be cleared** away before he can act as a redeemer. Turn to the

opening part of Chapter 4 and you will see how he demonstrated his interest and how he removed the obstacle.

And Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there; and behold, the next of kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, "Turn aside, friend; sit down here"; and he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit down here;" so they sat down [as witnesses]. Then he said to the next of kin, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say, 'Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people.'" {Ruth 4:1-4a RSV}

The court is now assembled.

"If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you." {Ruth 4:4b RSV}

Can't you just see Ruth and Naomi hiding behind a bush listening to what is happening and wondering what the man will say? (I don't know what he looked like, but I rather think he had a long red beard and was probably about 75 years old.) And Ruth was holding her breath, because if this man redeemed the land, he also bought the right to her. To her chagrin and dismay the man replies. "I will redeem it." Poor Ruth – her heart doubtless sank within her. Then Boaz stepped in and played the card he had been holding in reserve:

"The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also buying Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the dead, in order to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance." (Ruth 4:5 RSV)

When the kinsman learned that, he said:

"I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance." {Ruth 4:6b RSV}

And Ruth's heart grew light again. Now what does this picture? Remember that we are told the Law has been given to men as an apparent redeemer (cf, Rom 7:10). Moses had said "If you

obey the commandments of the Lord your God ... then you shall live,” (cf, Deut 30:16). So the Law has the nearest right of redeemer, because it is something inherently involved with mankind. But there is one trouble with the Law. It can only redeem outwardly and never inwardly. It can only control our outward affairs and activities; it never touches the motives of the heart. When the Law is charged with the task of changing the inner nature of man – changing his motives so that he wants to do what is right – the Law must say “I cannot do it.” In Romans 8:3-4 we read:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, {Rom 8:3-4a RSV}

... so that the righteousness that the Law demands might be ours in Jesus Christ.

When the obstacle was removed. Boaz moved to redeem Ruth:

Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon.” {Ruth 4:9 RSV}

All of it.

“Also Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brethren and from the gate of his native place; you are witnesses this day.” {Ruth 4:10 RSV}

The Lord Jesus left his glory in heaven and came to earth as our redeemer to die upon the cross. He bought all the fallen estate of Adam for every inhabitant of the earth, without exception. Every man, woman, and child in this world has been redeemed already by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has bought back all the fallen estate of the sons of Adam – whoever they might be – Mahlon and Chilion and Elimelech.

But where was Orpah in this picture? Ruth was ready to enter into all the value of Boaz’s ac-

tivity for her, and Orpah could have had it too. But because Orpah turned and went back to her own people, and to her own gods, she is never heard from again – she has no part in the inheritance. Though Boaz bought the entire inheritance of her husband as well as Ruth’s, Orpah is lost in this picture because she turned and went back to her own people and to her own gods.

But of Ruth we read:

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and he went in to her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next of kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age;” {Ruth 4:13-15a RSV}

The boy who is to be born of this union, of the “strength” of the redeemer and the “beauty” of humility is to be a restorer of life.

This is the ministry of Jesus Christ, our restorer of life: he takes the dead, and the things of death in our life, and replaces them with vitality and life.

Then we read:

Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom [like any good grandmother] and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, the father of David. {Ruth 4:16-17 RSV}

... and of the Lord Jesus! It is written that Christ was David’s son. Ruth is one of the forebears of the Lord Jesus Christ, and her name becomes great in Bethlehem, as the people predicted that it would.

This child’s name, Obed, means “worship” – making our story complete.

When Elimelech, “my God is king” married Naomi, “pleasure” he fell into the bitterness of death. Out of that comes Ruth, in the “beauty” of humility, taking her place as a destitute stranger, dependent upon the grace of Boaz, “the strong one,” the one of wealth and strength. He redeems her and binds her to himself in marriage. When “beauty” is married to “strength,” the house is filled with “worship.” Isn’t that a wonderful picture?

Now turn to the second book of Ruth. Oh, I forgot – it's not in the Bible, is it? But it is written in many a life. Ruth was a woman redeemed by grace.

But imagine this scene: One morning Ruth says to her husband Boaz, "Dear, I am going into the field this morning." She picks up her bundle and starts out for the fields. Boaz says to her, "Ruth, where are you going?" And she replies, "I am just going out to get a little breakfast from the fields. I'm going to pick up a little grain here and there that we might have something to eat for a snack." How do you think he would feel? Here his wife whom he had redeemed out of bondage and slavery as a foreigner and taken into his house was saying to him, "Now I am going out to glean in the fields as I did before you redeemed me!"

This is exactly what we do to Christ, so many times. We are married to him who has given us everything. Christ is the one risen from the dead, the restorer of life, the one of wealth and strength, who has given us all our estate.

Don't you think Boaz would say to her, "Ruth, what is the matter with you? Don't you realize that you are my wife? I have given you everything I have. You don't need to glean in the field. You own the whole estate right along with me. All that I have is yours. Why do you go out to glean?"

Don't you suppose that the Lord Jesus looks at us sometimes in amazement and says,

- "What are you doing?"
- "Why do you keep coming to me and asking for the thing that you already have?"
- "Why do you ask for health and strength and grace and joy and peace? I have given you all this. All that I am is all that you need!"
- "Why keep begging for that which you already have?"

If we would begin to walk out upon this mighty transforming truth that God has given us here in the book of Ruth – that we are now married to him who is risen from the dead, married to the man of strength and of wealth, who has given to us all that he is and all that he has – we would see the incredible folly of our gleaning for insignificant scraps. If we saw what we were doing by that, our lives would be transformed. And the ones we live with at home would be the first ones to see it – then the ones at work – then the ones we encounter in the course of our daily affairs. Soon everyone would know that something had happened to us, and that we had begun to live in the glory and fullness of our redeemed life.

That is what I want for me. Won't you join me in the "beauty" portrayed in Ruth?

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1 SAMUEL: The Death of the Flesh

by Ray C. Stedman

The Old Testament is wonderfully illuminating in presenting case studies in normal and abnormal living. Anyone who has taken a course in psychology knows that in the text the case studies illustrate the principles being taught, in terms of real people and incidents. The whole of the Old Testament is just like that. It is filled with the most fascinating case studies illustrating the principles God wishes us to know. Sometimes, however, they are hidden in enigmas. If you like such things as cryptograms and crossword puzzles and riddles, you will enjoy ferreting out these truths of the Old Testament. You have to read your Bible (at least figuratively) with the Old Testament in one hand and the New Testament in the other, comparing them constantly in your mind. The Old Testament accounts illustrate the truths that are set forth in the New Testament. In them you will meet yourself and your own case study.

First Samuel is the story of two men, Saul and David. These two men illustrate for us the two principles in the heart of every Christian believer seeking to walk before God. They are the principle of flesh and the principle of faith. Saul is the man of the flesh, and David is the man of faith – the carnal believer and the spiritual believer. The fact that both of these men were kings beautifully illustrates the supremacy of the will in human life. As the book of Esther shows, each one of us is a king over a kingdom. Our will is supreme in our life. Even the Spirit of God does not violate it. We are ruling over the kingdom of our lives and our af-

fairs, over those things that concern us personally and also the things that have an impact and influence upon others. What you, the king, say and do, influences the whole kingdom over which you reign.

Here, in these two kings, the two principles which are in conflict in your life and in mine are illustrated. We see in Saul the ruin caused by the will that is set on the flesh. In David you see beautifully illustrated the blessing which is brought by the mind that is set on the Spirit. “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace,” (Rom 8:6 RSV). This conflict is illustrated in the book of First Samuel in the lives of these two men.

The book actually begins with the story of a third man, Samuel, who is the human expression of the voice of God to both Saul and David. (You and I have in our lives the expression to us of God’s will by the Word of God in those men and leaders in the church who teach and explain the word to us. God speaks to us objectively as well as subjectively. This is what is pictured by Samuel.) These three men mark off the divisions of the book:

- The first seven chapters give us the life of Samuel.
- Chapters 8 through 15 present King Saul, the man of the flesh.

- Then, in Chapters 16 through 31, David, the man of faith, is eminent as an illustration of the mind set on the Spirit.

Samuel was the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. The events of this book take place right after Israel had passed through some three hundred or more years of the rule of the judges. (During that time the little episode of Ruth occurred.) Samuel is the chosen instrument of God to close out the realm of the judges and to introduce the beginning of the prophetic ministry and the monarchy.

In the beginning, there is the wonderful story of a barren woman, Hannah, the wife of a man named Elkanah. This man had two wives. The other wife was a prolific woman, who taunted and mocked Hannah in her barrenness. The barrenness of Hannah is very symbolic, coming as it does at the beginning of this book, because it illustrates the spiritual state of Israel at this time. This people to whom God had manifested himself had fallen into a state of utter infertility and barrenness. The priesthood which God had set up with the tabernacle and the rituals – the means by which the people would have access to him – was beginning to disappear. The cause for this failure is found in the song that Hannah sang after her prayer to God was answered and God gave her the boy, Samuel. Every woman ought to memorize this glorious song. In it, Hannah indicates the problem with which the book is essentially concerned:

**“Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.”
{1 Sam 2:3-4 RSV}**

The rest of the song magnificently sets forth the ability of God to exalt the lowly and to cast down the proud.

In this book is set forth the eternal conflict between the proud heart which finds confidence in itself and its ability to do things, and the humble spirit which looks to God in utter dependence, receiving all the fullness of divine blessing. That was the problem with Israel. The priesthood was failing, not because there was anything wrong with the

priesthood (which was a picture of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ), but because the people refused to bow before the Lord. They refused to come for cleansing and to turn from idolatrous worship. As a result, their access to God was cut off. The priesthood, then, was about to pass out of the picture as an effective means of mediation between the people and God.

At this point we have the familiar account of Samuel’s birth and childhood. When Samuel is just a little lad he is brought to the temple and dedicated to God. He becomes the voice of God to Eli the priest and is given a message of judgment. Later he becomes the voice of God to the nation – especially to the two kings, Saul and David. The first seven chapters tell us the story of Israel’s fall into decay. The ark of God, the very place where God himself wrote his name and where his presence dwelt, was taken captive by the Philistines into their own country. Eli the priest, because he did not make his sons obey him (which is a powerful word of warning about juvenile delinquents today) – even though his own heart was right – finds that his priesthood is taken away from him. And when Eli’s grandson is born, his mother names him Ichabod, which means “the glory has departed.” Here Israel reaches one of the lowest states in its national history.

We read then of the entrance of King Saul. In Chapter 8, Verses 4 and 5, the people demand to be given a king like all the other nations:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “Behold, you are old and your own do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like as the nations.” {1 Sam 8:4-5 RSV}

The principle of the flesh is at work in the nation of Israel to destroy its communion, its fellowship, and its enjoyment of God’s blessing. The same principle is interwoven in every Christian life, and it may be expressed in many ways, which are clearly indicated throughout this book. The first is that they be given an authority like all the other nations. In other words, the desire of the flesh is to be religious in a manner accepted by the world, to conduct its business like the rest of the world does. If our mind is set on the flesh, we want to interject the principle of business acumen into the conduct of the church. We wish to adopt the salesmanship

tactics of the world. We no longer rely upon the strategy of the Holy Spirit but we appoint a committee to plan out the program. Then we ask God to come and bless it and make it work. It is our program instead of his. This principle is continually at work, reflected in Israel's rejection of the authority and the sovereignty of God and their desire to be ruled like all the nations.

Well, this request was granted by God. Samuel was displeased when they asked for a king, because he knew that this was not God's program. Samuel prayed to the Lord and the Lord said:

“Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, hearken to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” {1 Sam 8:7-9 RSV}

This is always the way of God. I think one of the greatest lessons we can learn about God is that if we want something badly enough, he will give it to us. But we must also be ready to face the consequences. This is true about everything in life, isn't it?

Suppose I have before me two glasses filled with liquid that both look like water. One of them is water and the other is poison. I have a choice to make between drinking the poison or the water. If I choose to drink the poison, I no longer have any influence over what happens. The results are inevitable. Once I have made the choice, then I must accept the sequence of events that follows.

All through the Scriptures we find that this is the way God deals with men. If we want something badly enough, we can have it. But when we get it, we won't want it. If we start hungering and thirsting and clamoring after what we want as these people did, instead of relying upon God to give us what we need, we will discover that what we desired is no longer what we want. Our only recourse is to come back to God in repentance and ask him to give us what we need.

I will never forget hearing Dr. Ironside tell of an incident in the life of Dr. William Evans of the

Hollywood Presbyterian Church. His little girl, who was about eight years of age, came home and said to him, “Daddy, I want to get some ballbearing skates. All the other children have ballbearing skates and that is what I want.” He said, “But dear, you have a pair of skates.” She replied, “Yes, I know Daddy, but they are not ballbearing skates. They are rollerbearing skates. They won't go as fast as the others will.” He was a minister and did not have too great an income so he said, “Well, my dear, I'm afraid you will have to make do with the rollerbearing skates. We simply can't afford to buy any others right now.” But she wouldn't let him be. That night when he came home from his work, there was a little note at his place on the table. It said, “Dear Daddy, I still want the ballbearing skates.” When he went to bed that night there was another note pinned to his pillow. It said, “Daddy, would you buy me some ballbearing skates?” Well, he did what we would have done; he scraped up the money somehow and got the ballbearing skates. When he gave them to her, she was delighted. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him and kissed him and thanked him. Then she put on the ballbearing skates and started out the gate and down the sidewalk and around the corner. That was the last time they ever saw her well and alive. As she went around the corner, the skates were too much for her and she slipped and fell down, hitting her head against the sidewalk. They brought her home in a coma. She died at the hospital before the night was out. “Since then,” Dr. Evans said, “when I want something of God and it seems as though he is not willing that I should have it but I keep crying out for it, the Spirit of God reminds me, ‘Are you asking for ballbearing skates?’”

This is what happened in Israel. It is a principle that is at work in all of our lives.

The tremendous story of **Saul** follows here. It is a fascinating story of a young man who, like so many young people today, was living his life without any regard or concern for what God wanted him to do. He was busy with his father in the donkey business. And donkeys take a lot of tending. Samuel was running and judging the country and they were glad to leave that all up to him. Saul and his father were too busy with the donkeys. It is wonderful to trace God's dealings with this man

and to see how he reached him. Here is a young man who shuts God out of his thinking, has no time for him nor any real interest in him.

We all know people like Saul. How do you think God reached him? Well, he did the very obvious thing. He went into the donkey business himself. He lost Saul's donkeys for him. When the donkeys strayed away, Saul was vexed. It didn't occur to him that God was involved; he thought only that someone had left the pasture gate open, so he set out to look for the donkeys.

After a long and fruitless search, he came to the town where Samuel lived. In Chapter 9 he was about to give up and go back home, when his servant said to him, "Let us go and ask the man of God who lives here where the donkeys are" {cf, 1 Sam 9:6}. Saul was not very anxious to do this. In fact, he desired to stay about as far away from the prophet as possible, because prophets were a very disturbing kind of people, and he wanted to get back home. But the servant prevailed on him to go up to see Samuel, and to Saul's amazement, Samuel was expecting him. God had told Samuel the day before that there would be a young man named Saul appearing upon his doorstep. Samuel had a great dinner prepared for Saul and thirty invited guests; and Saul, to his consternation, was the guest of honor. He hardly knew what was happening. Those troublesome donkeys had got him into all this and he wanted to get out of it as fast as possible. But Samuel took him aside as they finished the dinner and announced to him a stunning thing: "God has anointed you," Samuel said, "to be the king over Israel," (cf, 1 Sam 10:1).

Saul had been out looking for donkeys but ended up the king of Israel. And he wasn't at all interested in the job. But Samuel told him that he would have three signs indicating that God was with him, and then sent him home. Sure enough, each one of these signs was fulfilled: one, two, three.

The first one was that he would meet a band of prophets and the Spirit of God would come upon him and he would begin to prophesy. When Saul began to prophesy along with all the other seminary students – all those who were in this school of the prophets – the word went out through all of Israel. The people said, "Is Saul, the son of Kish, also one of the prophets?" (cf, 1 Sam 10:11). As Saul went on toward his home, he met his uncle, who said, "What has been happening?" Saul said, "I went

out looking for the donkeys and I ran into Samuel, and he told me that the donkeys are safe at home," (cf, 1 Sam 10:14-16). Not one word about the anointing and the new commission that God had given him. Saul was out to make the most of his life and he was not interested in what God wanted him to do, unless he could use God for his own purposes. So he said nothing.

But Samuel wasn't through. He told Israel that God had hearkened to their plea, and would give them a king according to their desire. Samuel calls all the people together to cast lots for the choice of the king. The lot is cast first upon the tribes and the tribe of Benjamin is taken. Then upon the family group and the family of Kish is taken. And then upon the individual and Saul is taken. The word went out, "Where is Saul?" No one could find him anywhere. Finally the Lord said, "He is hiding among the baggage." Sure enough, that is where they found him.

Now why was he hiding? Was it because he was so modest that he didn't want to have anybody make a fuss over him? Was it because he was shy and diffident? No, the record indicates that Saul was hiding because he was finding it rather inconvenient to do what God wanted. He wanted to live his own life his own way and he was trying to get away from the call of God.

But God had called him and he was crowned king. As he stood among the people, they raised a great shout and said, "What a king!" He looked like the very picture of a king: head and shoulders above everyone else, handsome as could be, a very wise young man in many ways and fair-minded in seeking justice. But now there is trouble with the Ammonite people up in the north. Saul sends out word to all the people of Israel to come together, and to his great delight, thirty-six thousand people respond to his call. They march up and utterly destroy the Ammonites in a great victory. And Saul begins to feel that maybe this matter of serving God is going to be all right. Maybe he can use it for his own advancement after all. But the next battle he faces is with the Philistines. Now the Philistines aren't a mere tribe of people who are tough only in their own limited area like the Ammonites. Saul is up against a nation which was the equivalent of the Soviet Union or the United States – one of the major powers of the world. The Philistines, when they heard of the little difficulty that Saul's son, Jonathan, had caused when he defeated their army at

Geba, gathered thirty thousand chariots of iron, six thousand horsemen, and a multitude of people so vast that even the Philistines could not number them.

When Saul looked out his window and saw this great horde of people advancing upon him, he realized that this job of being king was not totally delightful. So he sent out the word again through all Israel expecting that the people would rally to his support as before. He waited, and he waited, and he waited. Finally a thousand people showed up, and then another thousand, and then another thousand. This happened to be the three thousand standing troops that he had already selected and he kept waiting for the others to come. No more came. He compared this pitiful three thousand soldiers with the multitude of the Philistines' tremendous force and sent for Samuel. Samuel told him to wait at Gilgal for him to offer a burnt offering to the Lord. The man of flesh depends upon his own resources until he gets into trouble, and then he calls upon the Lord. But God was ahead of Saul as usual, and Samuel delayed coming. While Saul waited, he kept watching his soldiers begin to slip away one by one and go back home. So the three thousand soldiers dwindled to two thousand, and then to one thousand, until finally only about 600 men were left. By this time, Saul was getting desperate, and when Samuel had not come after five or six days Saul took it upon himself to offer the burnt offering. The moment he had finished, Samuel came walking up. The old prophet was stern-faced as he said, "What have you been doing?" Saul said, "Well, I waited for you, but when I saw that the people were going back to their homes, I thought I ought to take action, so I finally forced myself to do the offering. I knew we did not dare go out to battle without going through this kind of a ritual and since you weren't here, I did it myself," (cf, 1 Sam 13:12). On hearing this, Samuel said to Saul:

"But now your kingdom shall not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord has appointed him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you."
{1 Sam 13:14 RSV}

It was thus prophesied that Saul's kingdom would be taken from him.

As we read on, we find that God gave a great victory through Jonathan's faith and delivered the people from this vast horde of Philistines. When at last the battle was won, Saul built an altar. It is the first altar that we are specifically told King Saul ever built. Here is a man who thinks the outward marks of faith are all that are necessary.

If you go through the external ritual – if you belong to a church, if you sing the hymns, if you say the right things, if you confess the right creed – that is all God expects. That is the principle of the man of the flesh. But God says that when you act on that basis, your reign over your own life is taken away. You no longer have authority in your own kingdom. You become the victim and the slave of an inexorable force which will grind you under its heel and bring you into subjection to it. This is what every man or woman who lives by the flesh sooner or later discovers. When we yield ourselves to that which we obey, as Paul puts it in Romans, we become slaves of that thing (cf, Rom 6:16).

This is what happens to Saul. After he builds an altar, God brings him to his knees, and gives him one last chance. At the beginning of Chapter 15:

And Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore hearken to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.'" {1 Sam 15:1-3 RSV}

This was Saul's last chance, because if Saul had obeyed this command, he would have demonstrated that he was ready to allow the cross to do its work against the flesh – to crucify it and to put it to death. Amalek is a picture throughout all of the Scripture of the principle of the flesh which opposes the things of God. Amalek was that people about whom Moses had said to Israel, "Remember Amalek unto all generations. He will never make peace with Amalek," (cf, Exod 17:16). And Saul was given this commission to carry out. But did he?

And Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havalah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed. {1 Sam 15:7-9 RSV}

Worthless in whose eyes? I wonder if it wasn't the donkeys that Saul wanted to save. After all, he appreciated farm animals. He probably reasoned, "Why should we destroy these perfectly good animals?" He presumed to find something good in what God had declared utterly bad.

Paul wrote that we must "put off the old nature" {Col 3:9 RSV} with its ways of jealousy, perverseness, bitterness, envy, anger, intemperance, selfishness and all these things. But the mind of the flesh says, "Oh, some of this is worth keeping. I can hardly be a real personality if I don't have a hot temper and tell people off once in awhile." So we presume to find good in what God has declared bad.

The result was that Samuel came to Saul and asked him, "How have you been doing?" Saul said, "Wonderful. I have done everything the Lord said. I killed all the Amalekites and destroyed everything just as the Lord said." Samuel cocked his ear and said, "What do I hear? What is that sound of bleating and lowing outside the window? Why are those animals out there?" {cf, 1 Sam 14:14-15}. Saul said, "Well it is true that I spared a few; I thought God would be pleased if I dedicated them to him." That is an excuse we use, isn't it? What we desire to keep, we pretend to dedicate to God. This is what Saul tried too.

And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? {1 Sam 15:17a RSV}

"Why did you not obey the voice of the Lord?" {1 Sam 15:19b RSV}

And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord." {1 Sam 15:20a RSV}

**And Samuel said,
"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,**

**as in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to hearken than the fat of rams
For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,
he has also rejected you from being king."
{1 Sam 15:22-23 RSV}**

No man can walk in the authority and the freedom that God has intended for his children when he rejects the authority of the Spirit of God in his life. That is primarily the story of Saul.

The story of **David**, starting in Chapter 16, is the story of the man after God's own heart. There are tremendous lessons in the accounts of David, his rejection, and his exile. He was chosen from the eight sons of Jesse. The seven eldest sons passed before Samuel and each one looked like a king in the making until God said to Samuel, "This is not the one that I have chosen." And last came the youngest and the skinniest one of all – David. God put his seal upon him. His choice was not according to outward appearance – God looked instead at his heart.

David was not set on the throne immediately as Saul was, but was tested and proved by struggle and adversity. This is the principle that God often follows with the man who learns to walk by faith. He is put through a time of obscurity, of testing, and of problems. Everything seems to go against him until at last he recognizes the great principle by which God's activity is always carried on – man can do nothing in himself but only in complete and utter dependence upon the God who indwells him. This is what David learned even as a shepherd boy, so that he could say,

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. {Psa 23:1-3a RSV}**

We come to the testing of David as he comes face to face with the giant, Goliath. Israel was held in fear and cowardice by this giant who paraded up and down between the armies, taunting and mocking the impotence of the Israelites. No one dared to

do a thing about him. He strutted in arrogant pride up and down, beating his chest and demanding they send someone out to fight. And no one dared to go. When little David came from his flocks to bring food to his brothers, he found the whole camp of Israel plunged into gloom and despair. He came in and asked, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" {1 Sam 17:26 RSV}. That is always the outlook of faith. It is never shaken by the circumstances.

Word is brought to Saul of this young man in their midst. Saul asks David what he wants to do. David says, "I'll go out and fight him." Saul, thinking to be helpful, puts his armor upon David. Now Saul was about one and a half feet taller than David and the armor on the young lad began to clank and get in his way. David tried to move around and couldn't even take a step. Finally he said, "Bring me a can opener and get me out of this." David then went down to the brook and got five smooth stones.

Why five? A little later in the book of Second Samuel you will read that Goliath had four brothers. That is why he took five. He was prepared for the whole family!

David went out, threw the sling around his head, and Goliath fell to the ground with a stone right between his eyes, {See 1 Sam 17:41-47}. Someone has said his last words were, "Nothing like this has ever entered my mind before." Anyhow he went down. David took Goliath's own sword and cut off his head.

What a glorious picture this is of him who went up against the great enemy of mankind face to face and slew him with his own sword. We read in Hebrews 2:14 that by death the Lord Jesus slew him that had the power of death, even the Devil. David becomes here a picture not only of Christ, but also of the believer who lives the life of Christ.

This event is followed by Saul's great jealousy of David. From Chapter 18 on we have the story of the growing persecution of David by Saul – a living illustration of the principle that Paul declares in Galatians. He says,

... as at that time, he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now. {Gal 4:29 RSV}

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are

against the flesh ... to prevent you from doing what you would. {Gal 5:17 RSV}

So Saul persecuted David and tried to kill him. It was during this time that David wrote so many of the Psalms – those wonderful songs that speak of God's faithfulness in the midst of distressing conditions. David was pursued and finally exiled from the presence of Saul.

In Chapters 21 and 22 we find the fullness of God's abundant provision made for him even in his exile. He is given the very holy bread of the tabernacle. This bread, representing the presence of God, is a picture of that secret ministering to everyone who is undergoing difficult problems, yet looking to God for deliverance. To such God gives the hidden bread, the bread from the very table of the Lord himself. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," (John 6:35). "As I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me," (John 6:57). In his exile, David the king had a prophet, Gad, and a priest, Abiathar – whose resources were available to him even though he was hunted like a bird upon the mountains – just as when you are in trouble, hardly able to work out your own problems yourself, you can find in the Lord Jesus Christ (who is our prophet, our priest, and our king) all that it takes to bring you through the time of trouble to God's open door for you. This is what happened to David. He refused to act for himself. Twice he spared Saul as God delivered him into his hand. In a remarkable spirit of faith he waited for God to work out the problems.

At the end of the book, we see the end of the man of flesh. Saul, out of desperation, descends to witchcraft to try to determine the mind of the Lord after the Spirit of God has departed from him. Although witchcraft was utterly forbidden to the people of God, Saul calls up the witch of Endor and tries to get her to call Samuel up. God overrules this and sends, not an impersonating spirit, as the witch expected, but the true Samuel who announces Saul's impending death on the field of battle the next day.

True to the prophecy, Saul and his son Jonathan, David's bosom friend, are slain, and David, ever the man of faith, in the opening chapter of Second Samuel extols them both as men used of God, despite their many weaknesses.

1 SAMUEL: The Death of the Flesh

The death of Saul well illustrates Paul's words in First Corinthians 3 concerning the carnal believer and his work,

If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but

only as one escaping through the flames. {cf, 1 Cor 3:15}

So Saul joins Samuel in the life beyond, but as one whose earthly life is essentially wasted and whose opportunity for service in glory is thereby diminished.

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2 SAMUEL: The Story of David

by Ray C. Stedman

Second Samuel is really a continuation of First Samuel (in the Hebrew Bible they are not divided and this is the first book of Kings) and it all centers on one man – David. The book falls into four simple divisions:

- Chapters 1 through 5 trace the road to dominion. David began his reign as king only over the tribe of Judah and it was not until seven years later that he was crowned king over all twelve tribes of Judah and Israel.
- The section in Chapters 6 through 10 highlights worship and victory – these two things also go together in the Christian life.
- Then in Chapters 11 through 20 is the record of David's failure and God's forgiveness, and their results in his life.
- The closing section {Chapters 21-24} comprises an appendix which sets forth some important lessons learned by King David in the course of his reign.

There are two ways of looking at the life of David:

1. You may look at him as a picture of Jesus Christ – and it is perfectly proper to do so; the Lord Jesus himself used this analogy. David was not only the forerunner and ancestor according to the flesh of the Lord Jesus, but in his reign he was also a picture of Jesus Christ in

the millennium. David went through a time when he was rejected, persecuted, hounded and harassed. But in the time of his exile he gathered men around him who became his leaders, his commanders and his generals when he did become king over the land. Thus David was a picture of Christ in his present rejection, forsaken by the world, gathering in secret those who will be his commanders, generals, and captains when he comes to reign in power and glory over the earth. Christ will come to establish his kingdom, to rule and to reign in righteousness as the Scripture says, and David is a picture of that too. As God develops this and brings it to pass we can also see in the present world scene that God is bringing Christ to his throne at last, where he shall reign in righteousness.

2. David is not only a picture of Christ, but he is also a picture of each individual believer. It is only as we read from that point of view that the book comes alive and glows with truth for us. If you look at these Old Testament books as if they were mirrors, you will always find yourself there.

Psychologists tell us that in our dreams we are always present no matter what the dream is about; we are the central object. You may take the form of a donkey or a cow or some other object, but whatever you dream about, you are always in the center of your dreams. The amazing thing about Scripture is that you are always in the center of that too. "These things

were written,” Paul says, “for our instruction” (1 Cor 10:11 RSV), that we might understand ourselves as we see events worked out in the lives of these characters in the pages of Scripture.

The story of David is a picture for us of what happens in a Christian’s life as he gives it to God – a place of dominion and reign. Every Christian is offered a kingdom, just as David was offered a kingdom. That kingdom is the kingdom of your own life and it is exactly like the kingdom of Israel. There are enemies threatening it from outside. There are enemies threatening from within to undermine it. The kings of Israel were never able to get rid of the Philistines, the Ammonites, the Jebusites, the Perizzites and all the other “-ites” of that day. They form a picture for us of those internal enemies that threaten to undermine and overthrow the dominion that God intends us to have as we learn to reign in life by Jesus Christ. What are those enemies for you? Well, you don’t call them Jebusites and Perizzites. You call them jealousy, envy, lust, bitterness, resentment, worry, anxiety, and all the other “-ites,” “-isms,” chasms, and spasms that afflict us in our daily walk.

As we see David being brought by God to the place of reigning over his kingdom, we will see how the Holy Spirit is working in our lives to bring us to the place of reigning in life by Christ Jesus. What an accurate picture this is! David is called in the Old Testament “the man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam 13:14), just as King Saul, the first king of Israel might be labeled “the king like the nations around.” Saul, portrayed in First Samuel, represents the man of the flesh, the man who tries in his own right to please God by his good intentioned, highly sincere efforts to be religious. Yet everything falls apart. It never works. The Christian life is not just a shabby imitation of the life of Jesus Christ. It must be the real thing. It must be Christ himself living his life in you. As Saul is the picture of the flesh and its attempt to imitate, David is the picture of the man after God’s own heart – a believer in whom the spirit of God dwells and who is open to the instruction of the Spirit, who is taught to walk in the Holy Spirit.

The first section {Chapters 1-5} opens with **the death of Saul**, the man of the flesh. When Saul died, David was free to be king over the land. In our lives this is the picture of the time when we come at last to the full truth of the cross and what the cross means to us. It is the cross of Jesus Christ that puts the old man to death and brings to an end the reign of the flesh pictured here by King Saul. When at last it breaks upon our astonished intellect that God really means it when he says that he has utterly separated us from the life of Adam and linked us to the life of Jesus Christ – the old man has been crucified with Christ, has been nailed to a cross, has no longer any right to live – then we are standing right in the same place as David was in the book of Second Samuel and we are free to reign. King Saul is dead.

At first David was king only over his own tribe, Judah. For seven years he dwelt in the city of Hebron. But while he was king only over Judah, there was a fierce struggle going on between the rights of David and the house of Saul. In other words, the flesh dies hard. It doesn’t give up its reign easily. There is a fierce battle. At last we are told that David comes to the place where he is acknowledged king over all twelve tribes. He is free now to assume his God-given royal prerogatives over the whole of the land.

Chapter 6 begins **the second movement** in this book. Here are the results in David’s life when he comes to his full authority within the kingdom. His first concern is to bring back the ark of God. In First Samuel we read that the ark had been captured by the Philistine tribes. They had taken it and tried to set it up in their temple. But when the ark of God stood opposite the staring-eyed, ugly, grotesque fish god of the Philistines, the fish god could not stand it. He fell flat on his face and ended up with a broken neck. The Philistines realized that they couldn’t get away with trying to keep the ark of God in their own temple and they sent it to another city. It remained there until David became king. When he became king over all twelve tribes, his first concern was to bring the ark of God back from the Philistines into the central life of the nation of Israel.

What does this signify? When you first came to the realization that Jesus Christ had the right to be Lord over every area of your life, was it not

your desire to put him squarely in the center of your life? That is what is pictured here in David's desire to bring back the ark.

David built a brand new ox cart and set the ark in the middle of it and started back with all the people singing and rejoicing around the ark. It was a time of enthusiastic, utterly sincere, complete dedication and devotion to God. But then a terrible thing happened. As the ark was going down the road, the cart hit a rut in the road. It trembled and shook so much that it looked as if the ark was going to fall off. A man named Uzzah, standing by the cart, reached out his hand to steady the ark. The moment his hand touched it, the lightning of God struck him and he fell dead. David was non-plused; he didn't know what to do. Of course it cast a pall of tragedy over the whole scene, and all the rejoicing and the merrymaking was abruptly stopped. David was so sick at heart that he turned the ox cart aside, put the ark of God in the first house that was handy, and went back to Jerusalem – bitter and resentful against the Lord for doing a thing like this.

This was the first lesson David had to learn. It is recorded for us that David was very much afraid of the Lord when this happened and he became very bitter. But the truth was that it was David's fault that Uzzah had died. In the book of Leviticus there were very specific and detailed instructions on how to move the ark of God. Only the Levites were to do this. It was David's fault that the Levites had not been asked to move the ark. He was presumptuous enough to assume that God was so much on his side that he could get away with anything. He just put the ark on an ox cart and started to move it himself. Therefore, it was really David's fault that this all happened. David had to learn the very bitter lesson that sincerity in serving God is never enough. Things must be done God's way in accomplishing God's will.

Have you discovered that yet? Have you ever had some favorite project you felt, in the earnestness of your heart, would be a wonderful thing to glorify God? Perhaps you could even justify what you wanted by something in the Scriptures. You felt it was the will of God, so you determined to bring it to pass. But God blew upon that activity and the whole thing crumbled to pieces. Everything went wrong. You had to face the fact that all your cherished plans for doing something for God were utterly disintegrated.

I talked with a young man recently who was going through a time of resentment and bitterness for this very reason. He felt sure that he knew what God wanted him to do in a certain matter and he had determined that it was the will of God. He felt that he could foresee exactly how God was going to work, and had even announced to some of his friends that God would do a certain thing. But it all fell apart. He told me, "I confess to you that I feel God is unfair. He doesn't back up what he says." As we talked together, it became very apparent that he was going through just this kind of a trial.

David had to learn that too, and the death of Uzzah stands as a constant testimony that God never will compromise on this score. It is not his job to do our program. It is our job to be in such a relationship to him that he leads us in his program.

The next thing we read in this section is about the desire that entered into the heart of David to build a temple for God. The ark had been in the tabernacle – just a shoddy, rough old tent. So David reasoned with himself, "Here I live in a beautiful house of cedar and God's ark has to dwell in an old tent. Why don't I build a house for God?" (cf, 2 Sam 7:2). When Nathan the prophet heard of it he encouraged David in this, but God sent a message to Nathan and said, "No, this is not right." The reason was that David was a man of war. Only Jesus Christ or, in Old Testament terms, someone who pictures Christ as prince of peace, will ever build the temple of God among humanity. David had been the one chosen to represent him as the conquering king over all. And so God said, "No, it will not be David who builds the temple," {cf, 2 Sam 7:4-16}. God rejected David's plan to build the temple even though it was well intentioned, sincere, and earnest. David was not able to learn the lesson of Uzzah.

In this chapter is a beautiful example for us in the obedience in David's heart as he praises God and accepts this disappointment and the reversal of his own plans. He agrees that God is right and that the temple should be built by Solomon, his son.

The rest of this section is simply a report of David's victories over the enemies – the Philistines and the Ammonites. In other words, when God is in the center of David's life and his heart is ready to walk out upon God's program – not David's program, but God's program – there is no hindrance to victory. All the internal enemies and the

external enemies are in complete subjection to the man who walks in this relationship with God.

The next major section {Chapters 11-20} begins **the story of failure in David's life** – the black and bitter picture of David's double sin. Notice how Chapter 11 begins:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, {2 Sam 11:1a RSV}

After the interruption of the winter season when proper and true battles were being fought for the Lord's cause, it was time for the king to go forth to battle.

David sent Joab, and his servant with him, and all Israel; and they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. {2 Sam 11:1b RSV}

That is where the failure begins. He forsook the post of duty. It doesn't mean that it is wrong, necessarily, but to be absent from the place where you belong is to be exposed to temptation.

The next part of the story about David can be told in three simple sentences: He saw. He sent and inquired. And he took:

1. Walking on the roof of his house he saw a beautiful woman taking a bath.
2. He sent and inquired about her.
3. And then he took.

In those three sentences you have a graphic tracing of the processes of temptation.

Any temptation in your life and mine will also follow this pattern. It starts first with simple desire. There is nothing wrong with the desire. It is awakened in us simply because of human nature. It may be along any avenue, but the desire is there, and it must be dealt with when it arises. Either it is put away at that point or it is formed into an intent.

David saw the beautiful woman, desired her, and then started to work out the way by which he could take her. He sent and inquired about her. This was followed immediately by the act, and

David, the man after God's own heart, is thus involved in the deep and black sin of adultery.

When it was accomplished, he refused to face the music, like so many of us try to do. Instead of openly confessing and acknowledging the wrong, and trying to make it right, he committed another sin to cover up. This is always the process of sin. If you commit one sin, you commit another to cover that one up, and ten more to cover up the second one. And so it goes. David sent for Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, and tried to trick him. But Uriah, in his simple faithfulness to God, confounded David, and ended finally in bloodshed. Joab, David's rugged and ruthless general, became a conspirator with David in this plot, and Uriah was slain in battle. Uriah was slain by the hands of the Ammonites, but David was the murderer.

So here suddenly, almost without warning, there breaks into David's life this double sin of adultery and murder. This is the man whom God had chosen to be the ancestor of the Lord Jesus. This sin is appalling to many of us and we wonder how a man like David could do this terrible deed. There have been many who have pointed the finger at David and said, "How could God ever pass over a thing like this?" But if you want to see what God means when he calls David "a man after his own heart," look at what happens in David's life when God sends Nathan the prophet to him. Nathan points his finger at David and tricks him with a little parable. When he comes to the punch line, Nathan says, "Thou art the man," {2 Sam 12:7b KJV}. Immediately David acknowledges and faces his sin. He no longer tries to justify it. He acknowledges his total wrong in this matter and it was at this point that David wrote Psalm 51. All of us have turned to this psalm at one time or another when we have been laden with guilt.

Not too long ago a man came to me after having been involved in the same kind of a problem that David had, and together we went over this psalm. I saw the Holy Spirit wash away all the guilt, the stain, and the ugliness of that thing in the man's life by using the words David wrote after his sin with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah had been discovered.

Now we see the results in David's life, beginning in Chapter 12. We are told that when Nathan came with this announcement, "Thou art the man," he said to David:

“Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.” Thus says the Lord, “Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun.” {2 Sam 12:10-11 RSV}

That was literally fulfilled by Absalom, David’s son. Nathan goes on:

“For you did it secretly [God says]; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.” David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” And Nathan said to David, “The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die.” Then Nathan went to his house. {2 Sam 12:12-15a RSV}

This is a great lesson in forgiveness. There are a lot of people that ask God to forgive their sins and they think that therefore they should never have to suffer any results from their evil ways. But notice what God does with David. God forgives David after his confession. David’s life is spared, even though under the Law the penalty for this sin is death. God forgives David and thereby restores that inner personal relationship between them so that David has a sense of peace and freedom from guilt.

God deals with us not only in grace but also in government. In government he is concerned with the effect of our deeds upon others around us, and those effects go on regardless of whether or not we are forgiven. So David must face the results of his deeds and, as we learn in the New Testament, God chastens those whom he loves, (cf, Rev 3:19). The first result was that the baby born of this illegitimate union died, even though David pled with the Lord in a pathetic, poignant passage where he is torn with grief. Then the predicted results in David’s home, in his family, and in his kingdom take place.

The New Testament tells us, “Do not be deceived [don’t kid yourself]; God is not mocked,” Paul says, “for he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption,” (Gal 6:7a, 6:8

RSV). Your personal relationship to God can be restored immediately. That is forgiveness. But the evil results of every misstep in the flesh affect those outside yourself, beginning with those closest to you.

David was told that never again would his house know peace as a result of his sin. In the rest of this section, from Chapter 13 on, you can see how this was fulfilled.

The next chapter tells the dark story of Amnon, David’s son, as he sinned against his own sister, Tamar. This resulted in a black hatred born in Absalom, David’s other son, against Amnon. So there in David’s own family, among his own sons, was spread a bitter spirit of rebellion and evil and lust, created by David’s own failure. In the story of Amnon and his quarrel with Absalom – and finally in his murder at the hands of Absalom – you find that King David is utterly helpless. David cannot rebuke even his own son because Amnon is simply following in David’s footsteps. Amnon is only committing those sins of passion for which David himself had set the example by taking Bathsheba.

Next, we read of the uprising of Absalom. This handsome, brilliant, gifted young son of David fomented a rebellion throughout the whole kingdom and secretly worked against his own father in attempting to take the throne for himself. He finally was so successful that David, with all his court, had to flee the city again as an exile. Imagine that! The man whom God has set to be a king over Israel, the man who is to reign over all the twelve tribes, the man to whom God had given a throne, now has to flee like a common criminal because of failure in his own moral life. Throughout all of this, David’s heart is penitent and resting upon God. He is acknowledging the fact that these things are resulting from his own folly, and is trusting God to work it out. It is a beautiful picture of what the attitude of the heart should be when we fall into sin and failure, and evil results begin to come. There is never a word of complaint from David. There is never any attempt to blame God! There is no bitterness, but simply the recognition that God can still work this out, and he does. God restores David to the throne and Absalom is overtaken, conquered by his own vanity. His long hair (which he gloried in) is caught in the branches of a tree and Joab, David’s ruthless general, finds him there and kills him. In Absalom’s death the rebellion is crushed. But that is not the whole story.

In Chapters 18 through 20 is recorded the final result of David's sin in the rebellion of Sheba against King David. All of this stems from that one double sin on David's part. There is no peace the rest of his reign. He has God's forgiveness, God's grace to him, God's restoration, and God's blessing in his personal life, but he still reaps the results of his own folly.

There is a popular song that says "The Lord above has commanded that man should love his neighbor" but the song goes on to say "With a little bit of luck, with a little bit of luck, when your neighbor comes around, you won't be home." The Lord above has said that man should be faithful to his wife and never go out philandering, but "with a little bit of luck, with a little bit of luck, she will never find out." And so it goes, with an exquisite capturing of the world's philosophy about God's program: "You can get by. God's not going to bring these things to pass. If you eat of this tree, you will not die," Satan said to Eve. "And with a little bit of luck" things will work out. But, as God shows in the story of David, this philosophy is a lie.

Finally {in Chapters 21-24}, we have the epilogue, or appendix, to this book, which gathers up some of **the lessons that David learned** through the forty years of his reign as king.

The first is the story of the Gibeonites, which teaches that the past must be reckoned with. If there are things in our past that can still be corrected, we have a responsibility before God to go back and set these things straight. Many a man or woman, boy or girl, has learned that money he stole before he became a Christian weighs heavily upon his conscience. He must get the money together, perhaps that he can ill afford, and pay back a debt or theft that he was guilty of before he became a Christian – because God desires truth in the inward parts. He is not content with mere outward formalities. He wants the whole of the life to be right. In the story of the Gibeonites, David went back and corrected something that happened under King Saul. As Saul's heir to the throne, he had to set it straight.

In Chapter 22, you have the beautiful eighteenth Psalm. The key to this psalm begins in Verse 26. David sings:

**"With the loyal thou dost show thyself loyal;
with the blameless man thou dost show thyself blameless;
with the pure thou dost show thyself pure,
and with the crooked thou dost show thyself perverse.
Thou dost deliver a humble people,
but thy eyes are upon the haughty to bring them down.
Yes, thou art my lamp, O Lord,
and my God lightens my darkness."
{2 Sam 22:26-29 RSV}**

And then this figure which I always love. David sings:

**"Yea, by thee I can crush a troop,
and by my God I can leap over a wall.
This God – his way is perfect;
the promise of the Lord proves true;
he is a shield for all those who take refuge
in him."
{2 Sam 22:30-31 RSV}**

What does he mean? Well, simply that what you are to God, that is what God will be to you. If you are open and honest and perfectly forthright with him, God will be open and honest and perfectly forthright with you. If you are crooked, perverse, deceitful, and lying to God, he will cause all your circumstances to deceive you and lie to you. If you are pure in heart and see everything in the proper light, you will discover that God is this way to you, and will bring more of this beauty and purity into your own heart and soul. This is what Paul cries out for in Philippians when he says, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own," (Phil 3:12 RSV). "What I am to him, he will be to me," he is saying. This is exactly what David discovered.

The last chapter is the account of David's third sin recorded in this book – his sin of numbering Israel. A plague came upon the people of Israel when David, in his pride, began to reckon on his own resources, and upon apparent military might, instead of relying upon the grace and power of God.

What does this teach us? Well, one great truth: our old natures are always there, ready to spring into activity the minute we cease relying upon the Spirit of God. Sin never dies of old age. No mat-

ter how long you walk with God, it is still possible to fall. The only thing that maintains the spiritual life is the quiet, day-by-day, moment-by-moment walk in faith.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this glimpse into our own lives and hearts. May the truth

grip us. May we realize that these are not mere words to tickle our fancy or instruct our intellect for the moment, but these are revelations of what life is all about – the secrets of living. May we take them seriously and heed them and love you and serve you and yield ourselves to you, day by day. In Christ's name, Amen.

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1 KINGS: How to Lose a Kingdom

by Ray C. Stedman

First Kings is the gripping story of how to lose a kingdom.

As we read these Old Testament books, the key to making them live and be vital in our lives is to see that they are visual aids by which God is showing us what is going on in our own lives. We can see ourselves in every one of these Old Testament stories and when we do, the words take on eyes and look at us. We discover that the words are aimed exactly and directly at us.

The view that the Bible gives of man is that every one of us is intended to be a king over a kingdom. The whole purpose of the Lord Jesus coming into our lives, which is the theme of the book of Romans, is that we might learn how to reign over the kingdom of our lives in God-given authority and victory. It is this that makes human life full and complete and fascinating when we learn to walk in God's power.

One of the overworked phrases constantly bandied about in Christian circles is "the victorious Christian life." Unfortunately that has been abused, distorted, twisted, and perverted so many times that it has lost much of its meaning for us. But if you take it in the freshness of its original intention, that is exactly what God has in mind for you – to learn how to walk in victory as a king over the kingdom of your life and thus find its intended fulfillment. That is exactly what these books of the Old Testament illustrate for us, especially the books dealing with the monarchy in Israel.

God called aside the nation Israel; he marked it out as his own people. He made, in a sense, a stage of the little land of Israel. He bid the whole world

to look upon that nation. What went on in that land is a portrayal of what is going on throughout the whole course of human history, and individually going on in each of our lives. If we see these books like this, they take on a tremendously intense meaning and purpose in our lives.

The book of First Kings holds the secret of success in reigning over the kingdom of your life. It is the secret of learning to be submissive to the authority and dominion of God in your own life. In other words, man can never exercise dominion over his life unless he first subjects himself to the dominion of God. If you yield to God's dominion, you are given reign over the areas in your own life. On the other hand, if you refuse the dominion of God in your own life, you cannot under any circumstances or by any means fulfill your desire to be in authority over your life. It is impossible! This is what these books teach us. That is why all through this book you will find that the spotlight is on the throne. It is the king that is the important one – for as the king goes, so goes the nation. In your life your will is king. What your will allows to enter in to control your life, determines how the kingdom of your life goes.

King Solomon, the successor to David, is upon the throne. David is still king when the book opens, but immediately he is confronted by the rebellion of another one of his sons, Adonijah. Adonijah attempts to gain control of the throne even before his father David dies. David, learning of this, acts to put Solomon on the throne. Solomon is anointed king while his father still lives and

in effect assumes the throne while David is still alive. This indicates **the first mark** of what a real reigning authority in our lives should be: Authority must come by the gift and hand of God. We cannot reign except as we are established by God. When we give ourselves to the authority of God, it becomes his responsibility to bring every circumstance, and every enemy, and every rebellion that would otherwise threaten our reign, under control. This is what he did in the case of Adonijah.

As we read on in the second and third chapters you see Solomon coming to the throne. He rules in power and might and glory. Solomon's reign marks the greatest extension of the kingdom of Israel and was particularly characterized by a display of outward majesty and power. But in Chapter 3, you also have the seeds of defeat. These are very, very important to notice. In Verses 1 and 2 we read:

Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter, and brought her into the city of David, until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been build for the name of the Lord. {1 Ki 3:1-2 RSV}

Then the all-important third verse:

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father; only, he sacrificed and burnt incense at the high places. {1 Ki 3:3 RSV}

Now here is a man who loves God. He loves him with all his heart. Solomon begins his reign with a wonderful expression of yieldedness and a desire for God's rule and authority in his life. He follows in the footsteps of his father, David. Nevertheless, he does two little things – which seem to be very small, trivial matters – that ultimately overthrow his kingdom:

1. He makes an alliance with the daughter of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, (which always pictures the world) and brings her into the central life of the nation of Israel; here an alliance is made with the world.

2. Then he also worships at the high places.

In the pagan religions of that day all the worship and rites were conducted up on the mountain tops. The pagan tribes had erected altars, many of which were the center of very idolatrous and licentious worship. Frequently, the altar was the place where the fertility of sex gods was worshipped in a sexual display. But the altars were also taken over by the people of Israel and used for the sacrifices to Jehovah. The ark of God was now in the city of Jerusalem in the tabernacle, where David placed it. But Solomon did not present his offerings at the altar in the tabernacle; instead he was offering in these high places. He was offering sacrifices to God, but on pagan altars. Outwardly there was much that was beautiful and admirable in this young man's rule, and, in general, his heart was set in the right direction. Nevertheless, there was an area that was not fully committed to God. There was a weakness in his fellowship. There was a lack of understanding that the secret of God's love lay in that inner yieldedness to his will, represented by a worship before the ark of the covenant. In many, many a life, there is often much outward yieldedness and commitment to the will of God, but in the private inner life there is a lack of warmth and a hunger after God.

It was here that the strength of David so vividly lay. Even though David fell into the black sins of murder and adultery, nevertheless, in the inner sanctum of his heart there was a deep and abiding commitment to the will of God and a hungering after the person of God. You see it breaking through in all the psalms of David. But this is lacking in Solomon, and this is the first indication that something is wrong in his life.

This story takes us into a description of the beauty and the display of the greatness of Solomon's kingdom.

The second mark of a God-given power and reign is given to us in Chapter 3 in the account of Solomon's dream, in which God appeared and told him to ask for whatever he wanted. Solomon, in a marvelous passage, asks not for riches or for honor, but for wisdom:

“Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this thy great people?” {1 Ki 3:9 RSV}

In beginning his reign like this, Solomon indicated that he had grasped to a great extent what was a primary need in exercising authority within the kingdom that God had given him – wisdom.

When you come to the New Testament, you find that this is true. In the book of Hebrews the writer takes to task the people that he is writing to because he says, “When you ought to be teachers, when you have been Christians long enough that by now you ought to be able to teach others, you have need of somebody to take you back to kindergarten and instruct you all over again in the ABC’s of the Christian life,” (cf, Heb 5:12). He says the sign of those who are mature in Christ, and have learned to really walk in Him, is that they are able to discern between good and evil.

That is the problem today, isn’t it? Good looks bad, and bad looks good. Anybody can tell good from evil when good looks good and evil looks evil. The great problem is to identify evil when it comes smiling at you, dripping with solicitude, and seems to offer you everything you have been looking for. Christian maturity comes when we learn to exercise the spirit of wisdom to distinguish between good and evil. That which seems to minister to the spirit may actually be a clever trap of Satan to plant a seed of distrust in the heart and will eventually produce terrible fruit a few years later in life.

This wisdom is what Solomon asked for. God granted him his request. But there was one slight weakness in his request. He asked for wisdom that he might govern the people. We can only wish, as we read, that this fine young man had asked for wisdom to govern his own life first. That is where he began to fail. It is evident from this that God knows exactly what is in a person. He granted Solomon this wisdom but he also gave with it the circumstances that put wisdom to the test.

God does this with all of us. God knows exactly what is in us. He gives us essentially what is our basic, urgent, clamant cry to him. If we want something from God badly enough, he will give it to us. But he also puts us in circumstances that will bring out what is in us.

Along with the wisdom, he gave to Solomon riches and honor. It was the riches and honor that overthrew Solomon. As Solomon gloried and exulted in the magnificence of his kingdom, pride began to enter his heart. His downfall came as a result of this.

The first mark of rulership then, in order to establish your rule in the kingdom of your own life, is dependence upon God. The second is wisdom – insight and understanding of yourself – if you are to walk in the Spirit.

We have this demonstrated to us in Solomon’s wise judgment between the two mothers who brought a baby to him. They had both had a baby, but one baby had died. Both women claimed the living baby. Solomon was asked to decide whose baby it was. In a display of his wisdom to analyze other people’s problems he said, “Bring a sword.” Then laying the baby down before these two women, he said, “Now divide the baby in half. Give one half to one woman and the other half to the other.” The real mother immediately said, “Oh, no; don’t do that! Let the other woman have the baby.” But the other woman said, “No, that is fine. That is perfectly fair. Divide the child and we will each take half.” Solomon knew at once who the real mother was. Thus his wisdom was demonstrated.

Chapter 4, Verse 29, begins a commentary on how much wisdom Solomon was given:

God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and largeness of mind like the sand of the seashore, so though Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east [including all the so-called wisdom of the orient – the Chinese and Indian] and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Herman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol [these were the newspaper commentators of that day!]; and his fame was in all the nations round about. He also uttered three thousand proverbs [we have them recorded in the book of Proverbs]; and his songs were a thousand and five [of those we have only one: “The Song of Solomon” or “The Song of Songs”]. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; he spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles,

and of fish. And men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. {1 Ki 4:29-34 RSV}

What a picture this is of what Paul says in First Corinthians, “we have the mind of Christ” {1 Cor 2:16b RSV}, and “the spiritual man judges all things” {1 Cor 2:15a RSV}. He does not need anyone to teach him, since he already discerns all things. He is able to analyze and understand all things.

In Chapter 4 you have **the third mark** of what it means to reign – orderliness. A kingdom is orderly. God is not the author of confusion for he does things decently and in order. Also in Chapter 4, Verse 20, is **the fourth mark** of authority:

Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy. Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life. {1 Ki 4:20 RSV}

That is total control over all that God intended him to have.

Have you learned to reign like that in your life? This is what God wants you to have.

In Chapters 5 through 8 we find the account of **the glorious temple** that Solomon built. How marvelous was this beautiful building. The interior was even more glorious than the outside. The inside was entirely covered with gold. To have entered that sanctuary must have been a most amazing experience. Everything one touched was covered with gold. But the central glory of it was the Shekinah glory of God which came down and dwelt in the holy place when Solomon dedicated the temple. In a marvelous prayer, Solomon gives thanks to the grace of God and recognizes again the one great principle by which a kingdom must be maintained – the king’s obedience to the throne of God.

Then we have the story, wonderful in its detail, of the visits of the Queen of Sheba and the King of Tyre to Solomon, and the recognition by the nations of the glory of Solomon’s kingdom.

Then suddenly, at the beginning of Chapter 11, the whole story takes a quick turn in the other direction. We read of **the results of the seeds of evil** that were sown earlier in Solomon’s life:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women: the daughter of Pharaoh, and Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, {1 Ki 11:1 RSV}

These are pagan tribes.

... from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods;” Solomon clung to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and [in the greatest understatement in the Bible] his wives turned away his heart. {1 Ki 11:3 RSV}

This is the same man who in the book of Proverbs wrote, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing,” (Prov 18:22a RSV). This is the greatest example I know of, of a good thing carried to an extreme. One thousand wives! Somebody has said that he was amply punished by having one thousand mothers-in-law! But this also marks the weakness and the failure of Solomon as his heart was turned away from God.

Now notice where it first began: This man enjoyed all the magnificence of his rule, with the greatest glory of the kingdom committed to him. The outward magnificence here was evidence of God’s blessing upon his life. But his downfall began when his heart became captured by something that God had prohibited. This is exactly in line with the warning that Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, “Watch out where your heart goes, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” {Matt 6:21, Luke 12:34 RSV}. The first step in moral decline always begins with your emotions.

What do you allow your emotions to center upon? What captures the central place of emotion in your life? That is where the decline begins.

Then we read it is followed by idolatry:

For Solomon went after Ashtoreth [the sex goddess] the goddess of the Sidonians, and

after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab,” {1 Ki 11:5-7a RSV}

Chemosh was the hideous image in which a fire was built and at the height of the religious festival children were thrown into the fire. It was Solomon who built this place where the rites centered on the worship of this grinning god.

... and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites [another fertility god], on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods. And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away ... {1 Ki 11:7b-9a RSV}

Three times in rapid succession in the rest of this chapter “the Lord raised up an adversary against Solomon.” First Hadad, the Edomite the man of the flesh. Then in Verse 23:

God also raised up an adversary to him, Rezon, the son of Eliada, who had fled from his master Hadadezer king of Zobah. {1 Ki 11:23 RSV}

Then in Verse 26:

Jeroboam the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite of Zeredah, [who later split the kingdom]. {1 Ki 11:26 RSV}

So these adversaries came in to overthrow Solomon and to accomplish his defeat. The chapter closes with Solomon “sleeping with his fathers” and being buried in the city of David – a sudden collapse to the glory and majesty of his kingdom.

I heard recently of a man who had exercised great pulpit power and a tremendous ministry in many ways for God and whose whole ministry suddenly collapsed. He was brought before his session on moral charges. It was discovered that there had been an unjudged affection in his heart that had been going on behind the scenes, year after year. Despite the outward display of power and authority that he exercised in his ministry, there was eating

away at his heart and emotions that seed which was to utterly overthrow his kingdom. This story is repeated again and again in lives everywhere.

Chapter 12 begins the second movement in this book – **the degradation and breakup of the kingdom**. Jeroboam split the kingdom, taking the ten tribes of Israel in the north to begin the Northern Kingdom. He reintroduced in Israel the awful worship of golden calves. Long before, while Moses was up on the mountain communing with God, the people came to Aaron and said, “We want to have a God that we can worship like the nations.” Do you remember what Aaron told Moses after he got down off the mountain? He said, “I told them to bring all their gold all their earrings and all their jewelry and I took all this gold and threw it into the fire. Lo and behold, a calf came walking out. We fell down and worshipped it, calling it Jehovah,” {cf, Exod 32:23-24}. It was not that they intended to be idolatrous. They simply wanted some visible evidence on which to center their worship. Now we come to the sin of Jeroboam. He is forever afterwards known in Israel as “Jeroboam the son of Nebat who caused Israel to sin.” Here it is not one calf, but two calves. It is the same sin multiplied, doubled in its intensity and power that is introduced into the life of the nation by Jeroboam.

Chapter 14 presents to us the story of the invasion and defeat of Israel by Egypt, the very Egypt out of which God had led this people. Egypt is again a picture of the world and its ways – its wickedness its folly, its futility, and its foolishness. We read in Chapter 14, Verses 25 and 26:

In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem; he took away the treasures of the house of the Lord ... {1 Ki 14:25-26a RSV}

He assaulted the place of worship first of all.

... and the treasures of the king’s house; he took away everything. He also took away all the shields of gold which Solomon had made. {1 Ki 14: 26b RSV}

Do you get the picture? Solomon who knew God and sought to walk with him did not fully judge the emotions and attachments of his heart. He was finally undermined and went back into the ways of the world with all its foolish manifestation,

and so lost that inner glory and sense of worship where God was exalted in the inner temple of his own life.

After this the account tells of the various kings that come to the throne of Israel. Nadab is followed by Baasha and Zimri. Finally comes Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel.

The final part of the book, beginning in Chapter 17, introduces **the prophetic ministry** beginning with Elijah. There are other prophets who came before Elijah but they did not do miracles. Elijah begins the ministry of miracles in the Bible. The prophets who ministered to Judah, the Southern Kingdom, did no miracles because there God's testimony was still the central life of the nation. But in Israel, the Northern Kingdom, God's presence was rejected and in his place the golden calves were worshipped. The ministry of miracles here is a testimony to the people that God is still in their midst. God sought to shake them up to be aware of the fact that they have drifted away from him. Elijah's ministry is a tremendous revelation of God's dealings with the wayward human heart. First of all, in his ministry, he shut the heavens so that it did not rain upon the land for three years. Then he called down fire from heaven upon the sheriffs and others who were sent to arrest him and bring him before the king. As these miracles caught the attention of the people, there came a degree of repentance. They understood that God was using a harsh hand, as God sometimes has to do with us, in chastisement and judgment to wake us up and make us aware of how we are drifting away from central worship of him in the innermost part of our being.

When this happened there came at last the judgment of Baal, when the two philosophies in Israel came to a headlong clash up on Mt. Carmel. God vindicated his honor by sending fire from heaven to destroy all of Elijah's offering, including all the water that was poured upon the offering and the stone altar, and God reigned in mighty power. When that judgment was exercised, the heavens were opened again and rain poured down upon the land.

That is all a picture of us, of what happens in our lives when we resist the right of God to rule in our hearts. God brings us under chastening, and, at last, our stubbornness is broken. The willful rebellion is ended and we are humbled at last before

God. Then the rain of grace begins again and pours down upon our hearts to bring fruit and blessing once more.

Following this is the unusual account of Elijah's fear of Jezebel. I am always amused by this. Here is this fearless prophet, this rugged man of God who has faced four hundred priests alone on top of the mountain, now running in terror from one angry woman. He cries as he hides under the juniper bush, "Lord, I have had enough. It was bad enough facing four hundred priests of Baal but when this one woman gets after me, that is too much." She was threatening his life. This is amusing because he says, "Lord, I have had enough – take my life," but of course he doesn't really mean that. All he would have to do is walk out and find Jezebel and she would accommodate him in his wish. Instead he hides under the juniper bush. God deals with him in wondrous grace:

- The first thing that he does is to put him to bed and give him a good night's rest.
- Then God gives him a good square meal.
- Finally God teaches him the greatest secret that Elijah ever learned – that God does not always move through earthquake, fire, and thunder – but many times through the still, small voice of a changed conscience.

The book closes with **the story of King Ahab**, and his failure, his folly, and his self-centered desire for the vineyard of Naboth, bringing down the judgment of God. In Chapter 22 we learn how God works through what seem to be accidental circumstances. The two kings of Israel and Judah go out to battle. Ahab, king of Israel, in his Satanic cleverness tries to put the king of Judah out in the forefront of battle. Ahab dresses the king of Judah in his own armor in order that he might be mistaken for the king of Israel and shot at. But as King Ahab is complimenting himself on how he has tricked the king of Judah into being exposed to danger, we read that an arrow shot into the air (just by chance) by a warrior on the opposite side, finds its way to him and pierces through a crack in the armor into his heart. God's judgment is accomplished! God is the God of circumstances. God is the God of accidents. God is behind all the move-

ments of our lives. This is the revelation of this account.

As I close this book of First Kings, the verse that comes most prominently to my mind and thrusts itself upon my heart, is this:

**Keep your heart with all vigilance;
for from it flow the springs of life.**
(Prov 4:23 RSV)

Outward circumstances will never dethrone you from reigning in your life. Nothing you run up against in terms of outward pressures and outward circumstances will ever succeed in dethroning you. Your dethronement, your moving back into the slavery and bondage of the flesh and the devil, will come only as you permit some rival worship to enter into your heart and dethrone God. When your

emotions become attached to some place that is a rival to the worship of God, then the kingdom's days are numbered.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that we may learn the great lesson of this book for our own hearts – “that out of the heart flow the springs of life.” As we watch that central place of desire, we learn to know what we want most of all in life. Lord, whom have we in heaven besides thee and who on earth do we desire more than thee? We pray that we may answer this question in the loneliness of our hearts before thee. In Christ's name, Amen.

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2 KINGS: A Wasted Life

by Ray C. Stedman

In the Hebrew Bible the books of First and Second Kings are combined into one book of Kings. They are quite aptly named Kings, as they trace the lives of various rulers of God's kingdom, beginning with Saul and David, down through the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. Then these two books trace out for us the various dynasties in Israel, the northern kingdom, and the single dynasty of the house of David in the southern kingdom of Judah. In each case, the spotlight is always on the king; it is what the king does in relationship to God that determines how the nation goes. The character of the kingdom is largely determined by the character of the king. When the king walked with God in obedience and humility, and worshipped and obeyed God in the temple in Jerusalem (or later in Samaria in the northern kingdom), God's blessing in prosperity and victory rested upon the kingdom. There was no such blessing for the northern kingdom because they had no godly kings. But in the southern kingdom, in the house of David, there was victory and prosperity when godly kings appeared from time to time. The rains came at the right times and the crops grew. The economy of the land flourished. There was victory over their enemies, even when the enemies came against them in allied forces. There was always victory when the king walked with God.

But when the king disobeyed and worshipped other gods, immediately famines broke out, droughts came, and invasions occurred. The land fell into difficult and extremely serious conditions. When the kings were in obedience, they were always types of Christ – such as David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Joash, and Jehoshaphat. They pictured something of the sovereign, kingly reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. But when they were in disobedience,

they were types, or pictures of the antichrist, the man of sin who is yet to appear upon the earth. This was the antichrist of whom Jesus himself said to Israel, "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive," (John 5:43 RSV). It is this man of sin, the quintessence of human evil, that is pictured by the kings of Israel and Judah when they walk in disobedience.

The thing that makes these books perennially fascinating to us is that this kingdom in Israel is a picture to each of us of the kingdom in our own lives. The nation of Israel was picked out particularly from the nations to be a representative of the individual human life. God chose Israel. Israel did not come into the position of prominence and favor in God's sight by their own efforts. God chose them. He formed them and molded them and produced a nation that would be a sample to all the world of what God is willing to do in any individual's life. As we read these books, we will find ourselves right in the midst of the problems and blessings and possibilities that are reflected in these books of the kings.

From the beginning there were always two divisions in the monarchy. Even under David this was true. When David first came to the throne, he was king only of Judah for seven years. It was not until after that seven-year reign that he became king over both divisions of the nation. This division between the ten tribes in the north and the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the south, where Jerusalem was located, existed right from the very start. Now it was intended to be this way, but they were all to be under one king. They represent the divisions in the human life. Everyone knows that there are two evident divisions of human life:

1. First of all, there is the body of which we are so aware. We take it around with us. We spend our time taking care of it, primping it, dressing it up, painting it, unpainting it, and doing all the things necessary to keep it looking good. Unfortunately most of life seems to be spent in taking care of the body. But, of course, there is more than a body to each man.
2. There is also the soul, the invisible part that contains the personality, and is so obviously gone when we look at the emptiness of a corpse and the terrible tragedy of death.

Here in the two kingdoms this division of life is acted out. The ten tribes of the north are representative of the body, while Judah and Benjamin, the two tribes of the south, represent the soul. It was in the southern kingdom that the capital city of Jerusalem was located, and the temple was in Jerusalem, and God dwelt in the temple.

We know from the Scriptures that in the human life there is not only a body and soul, but within the soul – so closely linked to it that only the Word of God can divide between the soul and the spirit – is this dwelling place of God. It is there that the Holy Spirit takes up his residence when he comes into the human heart. When this happens, man is as God intended man to be. Without the Holy Spirit dwelling in the human spirit, man is only an incomplete example of what he is supposed to be. But when God the Holy Spirit comes in, he takes up his residence in the human spirit, the temple of the body. In the New Testament, this figure is drawn for us as we are told that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). If we permit the Spirit of God to dwell within our human spirit he governs our soul, thereby adjusting and controlling the body and the outward life.

This temple of the Spirit was in Jerusalem and all the worship of the kingdom was to be there. It was never to be in any other place. There in the temple in Jerusalem God had put his name. Likewise, in each human being the human spirit is to be the temple, the place of worship. Remember what the Lord Jesus said to the woman at the well about the nature of God? “God is Spirit,” he said, “and those who worship him must worship [where?] in spirit and truth” {John 4:24 RSV}, “for such the Father seeks to worship him,” {John 4:23b RSV}. He can find lots of worshipers who are worshipping

him in soul – mere soulish, emotional worship. But he is not interested in that. He is looking for that worship which is centered in the deepest part of human nature, in the spirit, and this is figured by the temple.

In your kingdom your will is king and nothing can take place in your kingdom except as it passes by the authority of your will. Therefore, what your will does, determines what your life will be like. If you willingly, obediently yield yourself to the influences brought into your life by the Holy Spirit dwelling in your human spirit, you are like the kingdom when David walked with God. The land flourished in abundance and prosperity and the influence of that little kingdom reached out to the uttermost parts of the earth. But if, like many of the following kings, you walk in disobedience – if your will is defiant, and is set against the things of God; if you refuse his sovereignty and dominion in your life – then the same kind of evil invasions that fell upon this kingdom will come into your life. You will no longer have any strength to repel the inward corruptions that ruin and take their toll upon your life and the lives of those you influence. Thus the kingdom falls into ruin.

As we trace this ruin we notice that Solomon, the son of David, introduced the principle that began the deterioration of the kingdom. He fell in love with the daughter of Pharaoh. There was nothing wrong in his falling in love. God approves of that. But there was something definitely wrong with his falling in love with the daughter of Pharaoh. Pharaoh was the king of all Egypt, the very place from which God in grace and power had redeemed his people. (Egypt in Scripture is always a type or a picture of the world’s allurements to the human heart.) When Solomon brought the daughter of Pharaoh into his court, the door was open for alliances with other lovely girls in the tribes around Israel. Soon he had a thousand wives and along with them came their idols. The kingdom began to deteriorate under Solomon because he allowed the world to entice and allure him, to draw away his heart’s interest from the temple where his worship should have been centered. You can draw the parallel picture in your own life.

Then Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, actually split the kingdom so that the northern ten tribes were removed from the southern two tribes and a separate kingdom was set up in the north. If the northern kingdom is representative, as I have suggested,

of a man's body, then when our spirit loses fellowship with the Holy Spirit within, it isn't very long before the body begins to disintegrate. Fleshly indulgence sets in and bodily wrongdoing soon follows, as the first chapter of Romans tells us.

Then came Jeroboam, the son of Rehoboam. It was Jeroboam who introduced the great sin for which the northern kingdom was noted. Jeroboam set up two calves in Bethel and Dan to be the worship centers. Remember, when the Israelites were down at the foot of Mt. Sinai and Moses had gone up to the mountain to receive the Law, Aaron the priest led the people in the building of a calf of gold which they began to worship. And they called it Jehovah (Exod 32:5). It wasn't that they were denying Jehovah, their God. They were misrepresenting him by this calf which was like the gods of the other nations. They were calling it by the name of the true God. This was an abomination in the sight of God and was eliminated from the nation until the days of Jeroboam when he introduced the two calves of gold and said, "These be your gods, Israel. Worship here," (1 Ki 12:28).

This represents that form of godliness which denies the power of God. It is an outward conformity to Christian faith which lacks the inner response of the Spirit. It is quite possible to make a very good appearance of being a Christian – so much so, in fact, that you fool everybody but God. You can come to church, you can stand when everybody stands, sit down when everybody sits down, hold the hymn book at the right angle, bow your head at the proper prescribed angle and at the proper prescribed time, but inwardly there is no worship at all. This is exactly what is pictured here in the worship which Jeroboam the son of Nebat introduced into the northern kingdom.

From that moment on, these two kings, David and Jeroboam, become the representatives of the two spiritual principles that are traced throughout the kingdoms. They become the measuring sticks for the kings that followed. Time and time again in these books we read that a king either walked in the ways of David his father and served the Lord his God – tearing down all the false and abominable worship that Israel had fallen into – or they say he walked in the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat and caused Israel to go whoring after the gods that Jeroboam had set up. Now in Israel, the northern kingdom, there were no godly kings. There was just a continual succession of kings murdering their

predecessors to gain the throne. But from time to time, God in his grace intervened by sending prophets in an effort to arrest the fall of the northern kingdom. In Judah, the southern kingdom, there were a few godly kings and these men stand out like lights in the darkness – the primary ones were Jehoshaphat, Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

All through this time of decline God made various efforts to stop the corruption and decay of the kingdom. These centered largely on the ministry of Elijah and Elisha. The books of Kings are primarily noteworthy for the ministry of these two mighty prophets of God. (God never spoke to the nation through a king. He used the king in government, to control and to administer justice. The life and the character of the kingdom was due to the reflected character of the king.) When God wanted to speak to the nation, he sent a prophet. Hosea, Amos, Joel, Isaiah and Jeremiah were also prophets that ministered to the kingdoms, but the only ones that appear in First and Second Kings are Elijah and Elisha.

Elijah was a rugged personality. He went around wearing a leather girdle and dressed in haircloth. What a scraggly, mangy person he must have looked – a rugged, tough character. Time after time, he met the king face to face to deliver a message of judgment and his life was at stake many times. But he was faithful and God protected him. We have the wonderful story of how he met with 400 priests of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel and single-handedly defied the power of this abominable worship in Israel (1 Ki 18:20). He challenged them to a contest as to who could bring down fire from heaven. In a most remarkable scene he taunted them as they went about cutting their flesh and crying out to their god to send down fire, saying to them, "What is the matter? Where is your god? Is he out to lunch? Has he gone on a journey? Is he asleep? Why doesn't he answer?" When they had exhausted themselves, he called down fire from Jehovah that licked up not only the sacrifice, but the water that had been poured upon it and the very stones of the altar. Everything was gone. He won a mighty triumph for God. This was the character of Elijah. He was primarily the prophet of the Law. It was his ministry to bring the thunderings of the Law to the nation Israel, to try to wake it up to its shameful condition. Therefore, his was a ministry of love and of fire and of judgment.

When Elijah was caught up into heaven in a chariot of fire, his mantle fell upon Elisha. In contrast to Elijah, Elisha's ministry was the ministry of grace and sweetness and glory throughout Israel. Now why was this?

Well, if you study this carefully you will see that these two men together prefigure the ministry of Jesus Christ. When the Lord Jesus came to Israel, it was in a period of decay and corruption, as it was when Elijah came to the nation. Herod was on the throne as a vassal of Rome. The high priest's office had gone into the hands of the Sadducees (who were the rationalists of that day) and they had turned the temple into a place of corruption and commerce. The nation had fallen into dark and bitter times:

- The Lord Jesus' ministry to official Israel was in the power of Elijah. He began his ministry with the cleansing of the temple as he made a whip of many cords and, with his arm bared and his eyes flashing fire (gentle Jesus – meek and mild), drove the money changers out of the temple, turning over the tables and flinging the stuff out into the courtyard. That also marked the close of his ministry in thundering judgment to official Israel.
- But our Lord's ministry to the individual was the ministry of Elisha – the ministry of grace, of winsome sweetness, of compassionate tenderness and helpfulness.

There is another interesting comparison here, in that Elisha also seems to picture the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church after the day of Pentecost; Elisha's ministry also began with a man ascending into heaven. Elisha's very first miracle depicted the ministry of the Holy Spirit – the putting of salt into the water and the sweetening of the water. The miracle concerning salt, the miracle of the oil that kept flowing continually – which is another symbol of the Holy Spirit – and the miracle of the water suddenly appearing in the parched and barren famine-stricken fields all picture the Holy Spirit. Then, also, there was the miracle of resurrection when the little boy who died was raised from the dead as Elisha lay his staff upon him and breathed on his face. This was not mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It was a genuine resurrection. Elisha also performed the miracles of healing leprosy, of feed-

ing a thousand or more people, and of recovering the lost iron ax head by making it float on top of the water. Miracles continued even after he was dead and buried. A group of men trying to dispose of a body were suddenly surprised by a mob of bandits. They threw the body into the tomb of Elijah and when the body of the dead man touched the bones of Elijah the man sprang back to life again. Why? All of this indicates the ministry of the Holy Spirit in a decadent life trying to win back a heart that has gradually drifted into the blindness and darkness of corruption. Even when everything looks dead and absolutely gone, the Holy Spirit is still able to transform death into life by a touch.

The book of Second Kings traces the decline of these kingdoms, and Israel goes first. It is taken captive by Assyria, and, under Shalmaneser, the northern kingdom is carried away into total and final captivity as we read in Chapter 17, Verses 13 through 18:

Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets." But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. They despised his statutes, and his covenants that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them. And they forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Asherah [that is, a sex god], and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only. {2 Ki 17:13-18 RSV}

What a picture this is of the evil results of sin in the human life particularly as it affects the out-

ward bodily life. Have you ever noticed this? We speak of the marks of sin upon some individual and it is amazing how early those marks begin to appear when there is a dissolute, debauched way of life. I am not talking about the normal marks of old age. These come to all of us – even the righteous. You know the five B’s of middle age – baldness, bifocals, bridges, bay window, and bunions. These are just the normal marks of decay. I am talking about the marks of coarseness and vulgarity that mark the body of man when it is expended in high living, a dissolute life, overindulgence in food and drink, and all the other things that leave a mark upon the body. The body is first to go just as Israel was the first to go here.

Judah was next. Judah was arrested from decay for awhile by the glorious life of Hezekiah who arose in the midst of darkness. His father had been an ungodly king and his son following him on the throne was an ungodly king. But Hezekiah was marked by the grace of God. The kingdom had fallen into such decay when he came to the throne that his first act was to cleanse the temple. It took the Levites – the priestly tribe – sixteen days to carry all the rubbish and junk out of the temple before they could even begin to purify it for the services again. That is how corrupt the nation had become. Hezekiah also reintroduced the Passover. He also destroyed the great brazen serpent that the people had been worshipping. This was the very serpent that God had used for their blessing when Moses lifted it up in the wilderness (Num 21:8-9). But Hezekiah in fine sarcasm called it a piece of brass and destroyed it because it had become an object of idolatry. Many things that were once used in blessing become idols if we hang on to them because of the sentimental value.

Hezekiah’s life was miraculously extended when the shadow on the sundial turned back ten degrees and he was allowed fifteen more years of life. In those fifteen years, however, he had a son named Manasseh who became the worst king Judah ever had. Manasseh had the longest reign of any of the kings – fifty-five years of ungodliness. Thus some have said that Hezekiah is the man who lived too long. If he had accepted the word of the Lord to him about his death, Israel would have been spared the terrible deeds under Manasseh.

So the kingdom declined, and finally, Judah was carried away by Nebuchadnezzar into Babylon the symbol of corruption and defilement. For a few

years the temple remained in Jerusalem, but in the end it too was stripped and burned. The walls of the city were broken down, and all the people were carried away into captivity. The book closes with Zedekiah, the last king of Israel. After he was captured by the King of Babylon, his sons were slain before his eyes, and his eyes were put out. Then he was bound and taken to Babylon.

Zedekiah was the last king that Israel ever had. Later, in the tumult and the tremendous confusion in Jerusalem during the Passover week when our Lord was crucified, Pilate offered their king to the nation, “Here is your King!” {John 19:14b RSV}. But the crowd meant it when they cried out, “We have no king but Caesar,” (John 19:15b RSV). Yet it was Caesar’s governor who taught Israel its lesson by having this inscription written above the cross “Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews” (John 19:19b RSV). That poor people will never know another moment of genuine prosperity and blessing either spiritually or physically until they shall see “him whom they have pierced” {Zech 12:10b RSV}, and recognize the king that was sent to them in lowliness as Zechariah prophesied.

Now do you see what this book is about? It is a picture of a wasted life.

Here is a picture of an individual who is a Christian, whose foundation is laid by Jesus Christ, but who has built upon it with only wood, hay and stubble. In the secret place of his heart, in the will, he has refused to walk in obedience to the things revealed unto him through the Holy Spirit who dwells in the temple of his human spirit. As a result his life becomes more and more characterized by decay and corruption and defilement. It begins with the body and then becomes evident in the personality. Cruelty, hardness, and defiance set in, and, finally, the temple itself is burned. Paul tells us in First Corinthians that for each one there is the judgment of fire which will reveal our work; “the wood, hay, [and] stubble” {1 Cor 3:12 RSV} will be burned although the believer himself will be saved, “but only as through fire,” (1 Cor 3:15 RSV).

The whole lesson of Second Kings, of course, is that it need not be so. God is continually interrupting our lives with the evidence of his grace. God tries to arrest us in our stubborn deliberate ways. Yet we can go ahead. God will not stop us – just as he didn’t stop them. We can go on beating our way to the top of the heap, and, perhaps,

win the acclaim and approval of the world around us. But one day we shall have to stand naked before the one who loves us who gave himself for us and to whom we have denied the right to be God in the temple of our spirit. We have robbed him of his inheritance in the saints. In that day, John says, we shall be ashamed before him at his coming {cf, 1 Jn 2:28}. May God grant that the lesson of these books may come home to our hearts.

Prayer:

Our Father, we know that this is not recorded merely for our enjoyment, or for our astonishment, but, rather, for our instruction. All these things were written that we may see ourselves, and, seeing ourselves, make that adjustment by the Holy Spirit within, who causes our kingdom to flourish in abundance, in victory, in prosperity, in joy, in peace and blessing. In Christ's name, Amen.

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1 CHRONICLES: David and the Ark of God

by Ray C. Stedman

The books of Chronicles cover the same historical ground that the books of Samuel and Kings do, but from quite a different point of view. These books can be compared to the Gospel of John in the New Testament. If you are familiar with the four Gospels, you know that the first three – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – are what we call the Synoptical Gospels. These three parallel each other and cover the same general incidents, often from the same general viewpoint. But the Gospel of John is something quite different. When John sat down to write his Gospel, the last New Testament book written (probably about 90 or 95 A.D.), he employed a deliberately selective process. He says, “Jesus did many other signs ... which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God ...” (John 20:30-31 RSV). He made no attempt to cover the whole of the Lord’s ministry. Instead, John carefully selected certain things out of Christ’s ministry to illustrate the great point that he wished to make – here is the one who fulfilled all the divine predictions of the coming of Messiah, the Christ, and furthermore, he is the Son of the living God. This was his purpose. The books of First and Second Chronicles are similar in their selective process.

The central points around which everything in these books gather are the king and the temple. The king was David. In one sense, he is the only king that appears in these two books. He is **God’s king**. The first book centers on him completely. The second book of Chronicles follows the house of David down through the time of the captivity, almost totally ignoring the northern kingdom, because this is the book of God’s king and the temple.

It is clearly evident that First Chronicles was written after the seventy years of Israel’s captivity in Babylon. It was probably written by Ezra, the priest, who also wrote the book that bears his name. Ezra was one of the great figures to come back with the captives to re-establish the temple and the worship of Jehovah in Jerusalem. It is with emphasis upon the re-establishment of the worship of Jehovah that this book is written, as well as for the purpose of covering the historical events.

The selective character of First Chronicles is evident right in the opening chapters. The first nine chapters are given over to a long list of genealogies. These are not merely the stringing together of a lot of names, however; these genealogies are of great importance. For one thing, they are some of the most helpful material available for anybody attempting to study the problem of biblical chronol-

ogy. If you are working in this area, you will certainly spend a great deal of time in these opening chapters of Chronicles. But they are far more than that.

I know sometimes we are tempted to hurry by these long lists of Bible names. We feel so much like a dear old Scotch preacher who was reading from the opening chapter of Matthew. He started out reading, "Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judah and his brethren," (Matt 1:2 KJV). Then he said, "They kept on begatting one another all the way down this side of the page and clear on to the other side." And he picked up the reading and went on from there.

Some of us also would like to dismiss these genealogies, but they are too important for that. If we read them in a hurry, we will miss the point of this whole passage. If you look carefully at them you will see that God is choosing and selecting, excluding and including, working toward an ultimate goal.

This genealogy is recorded so that we might see both the goal toward which the Lord works in human history and the principle by which he includes or excludes events. It goes clear back to the dawn of human history and lists the sons and descendants of Adam – Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel. We know the sons of Adam to be Cain, Abel and Seth, but here, immediately, Cain and Abel are excluded. There is no mention of them. The whole focus is upon the descendants of Seth, for from him eventually came the family of Abraham and the Israelites. Here is the principle of exclusion in action.

Then the line of Seth is traced down to Enoch and to Noah. The three sons of Noah are given – Shem, Ham, and Japheth. But Ham and Japheth are dismissed with just a brief word and the attention is focused on the line of Shem.

From Shem we trace on down to Abraham and his family. There is this constant narrowing process which then excludes Ishmael, the son of Abraham, and Esau, the son of Isaac, and focuses on Jacob's twelve sons, who became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

As the genealogy goes on, it selects the tribes of Judah and Levi – the tribes of the king and the priestly line:

- It traces the tribe of Judah down to David, to Solomon and then to the kings of the house of David, into captivity.

- The tribe of Levi is traced down to Aaron, the first of the priests, and then to the priests who were prominent in the kingdom at the time of David.

In all of these genealogies there is one very choice incident that stands out. It is found in Chapter 4, Verses 9-10, where we read of Jabez:

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers; and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain." [Jabez means "pain."] Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that thou wouldst bless me and enlarge my border, and that thy hand might be with me, and that thou wouldst keep me from harm so that it might not hurt me!" And God granted what he asked. {1 Chr 4:9-10 RSV}

That little incident is put right down in the midst of a whole long string of names as a kind of spotlight on this individual.

Now there is always one principle that God follows in this process of selectivity:

- He includes a man whenever he finds an obedient heart. All the native disability of that man is canceled out and he is immediately made an effectual instrument for the working of God in human history.
- When God excludes a name, when he turns from a line or a family, it is always on the basis of the appearance of a disobedient heart. On that basis God excludes a man, regardless of rank or ancestry or privilege of any kind.

Wherever there is an obedient heart God begins a new line with him. Wherever disobedience occurs, that name is dropped. You can trace this principle throughout this entire genealogy.

This sets the pattern for the rest of the book. In Chapter 10 there is a brief account that completely covers the life of King Saul, the first of Israel's kings. Saul is dismissed in only fourteen verses. The reason is given in Verses 13 and 14:

So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance, and did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord slew him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse. {1 Chr 10:13-14 RSV}

The rest of the book is all about David. David was a king after God's own heart – a king with an obedient heart. The book traces the whole course of David's life from the moment he was anointed king. In other words, this is the book that emphasizes God's king. David's first act after coming to the place of kingship in Israel is to take over the pagan stronghold of the Jebusites, the city of Jerusalem – God's city. This is the place where God had chosen to put his name among the tribes of Israel. Immediately following is a flashback to the time of David's exile and to the mighty men gathered around him there. These were men of faith and passion who were attracted to David by the character that he displayed. (One of my favorite Bible stories occurs here in Chapter 11, Verse 22. This is the story of Benaiah, Jehoiada's son, who, among other things, slew a lion in a pit on a snowy day.) These mighty men who gathered about David and shared his exile eventually became the leaders in his kingdom. All of this is a picture for us of the reign of the Lord Jesus in his coming to earth again. We are promised that we who share his sufferings now will also share his glory when he comes to rule over the earth to establish his kingdom of righteousness. Then the righteousness of God shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. In the beautifully descriptive language of the prophets, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" {Isa 2:4b RSV}; "neither shall they learn war any more," {Isa 2:4d RSV}; and "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain," {Isa 11:9a RSV}. This is pictured for us by the magnificence, glory, and majesty of the reign of David as he gathers his mighty men and brings them to the throne to share his kingly power and glory.

The second emphasis of this book is on **the ark of God**. In Chapter 13 we are told how David went down to the Philistine city where the ark was being held captive, took it upon a cart and tried to

bring it back to Jerusalem. The unwitting departure of David from the principle of obedience is recorded for us here. He knew the Law commanded that the ark be carried only by the Levites, but in the exuberance of his joy and his zeal for God's cause, he thought God wouldn't mind if the ark was carried in another way. And what was the result? When Uzzah, walking along beside the ark, saw it shaking as it passed over a rough spot in the road, he reached out to steady it. When his hand touched the ark, he immediately dropped dead. David was tremendously shaken by this. But as he thought it over and prayed about it, he realized that it was all his own fault. He had neglected the word of the Lord.

There is no incident from the Old Testament that teaches more clearly the importance of a careful, precise obedience to what the Word of God says. I think it also teaches us that God is able to take care of his own cause. There are many today who, like Uzzah, are trying to steady the ark of God. They think it is going to be defeated by some challenge that is issued against it, and they become self-appointed defenders of the faith, little realizing that God is quite able to defend his own cause.

But David learned his lesson. He returned to obedience and asked the Levites to bring up the ark according to the Law; then the ark came into Jerusalem. Now here is a most remarkable and significant point: the tabernacle, which had been the home of the ark through all the journeyings in the wilderness, and the central place of worship for Israel during the time of the judges and the reign of Saul, was not located in Jerusalem. The tabernacle was located in the city of Gibeon. One would think that the ark should be returned to that tabernacle, since it had been taken from there. The ark belonged in the Holy of Holies in that tabernacle. But when David brings the ark back, he doesn't return it to the tabernacle. He brings it to the city of Jerusalem, the city of the king, and, by his own authority, he sets up a center of worship on the very site where later the temple was to be built. Thus he replaces the authority of the priests by the authority of the king.

These Old Testament books are beautifully designed by the Holy Spirit to be an application to our own spiritual life.

- They cover the warfare that we engage in, the battles,
- The kingdom over which we rule, the difficulties which we encounter, and
- The spiritual principles by which victory is won.

These events are very significant to us.

The tabernacle was, of course, movable. It followed the people wherever they went throughout the wilderness journeys. It is a picture of God's grace that is ready to follow the believer despite the fact that he may be wandering about sometimes in a wilderness, sometimes in the land, sometimes in the desert – sometimes up and sometimes down. God's grace is still ready to follow, ready to support, and ready to minister in the priestly ministry of confession and forgiveness of sin.

Inevitably, in every Christian's experience, there is this up-and-down, trial-and-error time when we are so grateful for the priestly ministry of confession, of cleansing and forgiveness. But, at last, as we are led by the Spirit of God, we come to the place where we recognize the problem. The reason for this wave of up-and-down experience is that we have refused to allow the Lord Jesus to exercise his kingly lordship in our life. When at last we are led by the Spirit to the place where our stubborn will is broken, and we give up, once and for all, our insistence on running our own affairs, we recognize that this is the principle of God by which we must live. Now we may not always follow it faithfully even from there, but at least we realize that God is ruler over our life and Jesus Christ is Lord. In other words, "You are not your own, you are bought with a price" {1 Cor 6:19b-20a RSV}. Your life is no longer yours to plan, to program, or to work out in advance. You belong to the Lord and he becomes king in your life.

At that very moment, what is pictured here is fulfilled. When the king comes, the ark is fixed in the temple and is immovable from then on. All the blessing of God then flows to the heart that is in full submission to the lordship of Christ. The result is that the temple is a new beginning. It is no longer a continuation of the tabernacle – though much of the temple is like the tabernacle in its plan and design. As David made the new temple furni-

ture, it was different in many ways from the furniture in the tabernacle. This was a new beginning, a total change of government, resulting in a total change of behavior. Beginning in Chapter 18, where the ark is brought back and placed at the site of the temple, David's conquest over all his enemies throughout the whole of the kingdom of Judah is immediately recorded. Chapters 18, 19, and 20 are devoted to the victories of King David, beautifully describing what happens in the heart if Christ is crowned king.

The only dark picture in the book is in Chapter 21. One interlude is brought before us of David's sin; that of numbering the people of Israel. It is remarkable that the double sin of David – when he took the wife of Uriah the Hittite in an adulterous relationship and arranged the murder of her husband by sending him out in the forefront of battle – is passed over in total silence. That was David's personal sin as a man. That sin was his own weakness, his foolish willfulness as an individual. It had nothing to do with his reign as a king. But this sin of numbering Israel is an abrupt departure from the principle of dependence upon the strength and glory of God. Why did he number the people? He wanted to glory and gloat in the number of people that were available to him as king. He wanted to see his strength.

This is always the problem in any Christian circle when men begin to depend upon numbers. One of the great principles that runs through the Bible from beginning to end is that God never wins his battles by majority vote. When we think that the cause of Christ is losing because the number of Christians is decreasing in proportion to the population of the world, we have succumbed to the false philosophy that God wins his battles by numbers. He doesn't need numbers. He needs quality. Many, many times that is taught to us in the Word of God. Thirty-two thousand men respond to Gideon's call to the army. When Gideon looks out at them, he says, "That is a good number. I think we ought to be able to do something with that." But God says, "I am sorry Gideon, there are far too many. I can't work with that many." So Gideon sends those home who have just recently been married and the ones who are afraid. Neither of them are any good for battle. Twenty-two thousand went home. They had a large number of weddings! It must have been the middle of June or July in Israel. Gideon said, "Well Lord, you have whittled

me down to ten thousand men. I guess that will be enough.” God said, “No Gideon. It is still too many.” They were put to the test until the army was whittled down to three hundred men. And, with three hundred men, God delivered the nation (Judges 7:2 ff).

How many times we are taught this. Once the whole army of Israel stood in gloom and despair before the tauntings and the struttings of the giant Goliath as he paraded up and down before the camp, mocking the soldiers of Israel. But one little shepherd boy came with his sling, and with a single rock from the brook, God delivered the people. With the jaw of an ass in the hands of Samson, God slew the Philistines. All through Chronicles this same principle is repeated again and again. God’s method is quality – never quantity.

As a result of David’s departure from this principle and because the whole nation looked to him as king for an example by which they learned the principles of God, judgment was exceedingly severe upon David. A prophet was sent to David (1 Chr 21:10-17) and he said, “I will give you three choices. God has said that you can have three years of famine or three months for your enemies to overcome you and run rife through the land or three days of the plague and pestilence.” David did the wise thing. He said, “Who am I to determine anything like this. I will simply cast myself into the hands of the Lord. God is a God of great mercy. Let him do what he thinks is best.” The angel of the Lord came into the midst of the people and for three days he slew with pestilence throughout the nation. David saw the angel with his sword stretched out over the city of Jerusalem ready to slay there also, but David pleaded with God: “It is my fault. Why do you take vengeance upon these others? I am the one to blame.” Then God instructed him to buy the cattle and the threshing floor of Ornan and on these he erected an altar and worshipped God. The temple was later built on that site and the altar was placed where the angel of God stayed his hand from judgment. So the grace of God, you see, came even at a time of disobedience, and turned the judgment that fell upon David into grace and blessing.

The rest of the book tells of David’s passion for **the building of the temple**. Because he understood that a nation without a temple could never be a nation, he longed to see this temple built. A

people without God in their midst will never amount to anything. But David was a man of war, and God wanted a man of peace to rule over the nations of the earth (1 Chr 22:6-19). So God said to David, “No, it is your son who will build the temple. He will be a man of peace and he shall build it.” David had learned the principle of obedience so well that he said, “Yes, Lord, if that is what you want. Much as it is a disappointment to me, I will accept that.”

In grace, however, God allowed David to do everything for the temple but actually build it. He drew the plans. He designed the furniture. He collected the materials. He made the arrangements. He set up the order and ritual. He brought down the cedar poles from Mt. Hermon and Mt. Lebanon in the north. He dug up the rock and quarried the stones. He gathered in the gold, the silver, and the iron. He gathered it all together and then the book closes as the anointed Solomon and David reign side by side – a complete picture of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Christ is both the mighty warrior, David, and the man of peace, Solomon.

What is **the message of this book**? It is the supreme importance of the temple in our lives; the authority of God. Over the three great doors of the cathedral in Milan, Italy, are three inscriptions:

- Over the right hand door is carved a wreath of flowers and over it is written, “All that pleases is but for a moment.”
- On the left hand door is a cross and over it is written, “All the trouble is but for a moment.”
- Over the main entrance are simply the words, “Nothing is important save that which is eternal.”

This is the very lesson of the book of Chronicles. It is the lesson of the whole of the Bible, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of [by the authority of and by the ability of] the Lord Jesus [king in his temple],” (Col 3:17a RSV).

Prayer:

Our Father, may the lesson of this Old Testament book be written deeply in our

hearts. May we recognize that the marvel of this book is that it conveys in human language and through human institutions the revelation of thy workings in history, in individual lives and in our lives. May we, like David, be kings after thy own heart,

ready to walk in obedience to the very words of Scripture itself that we may demonstrate, as he demonstrated it, the glory of the kingdom over which Jesus Christ is king. In his name we pray, Amen.

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2 CHRONICLES: God's King in God's House

by Ray C. Stedman

Tremendous riches are hidden away in the neglected book of Second Chronicles. As First Chronicles was all about King David, Second Chronicles is all about the house of David. The nation of Israel – the ten tribes in the north – is viewed only as it relates to the kingdom of Judah in the south. This book follows only the course of the kings of Judah, the descendants of David. Both First and Second Chronicles center on the temple, distinguishing these two books from the parallel historical passages recorded in Kings and Samuel. This book gives us a picture of God's king walking in the light of God's house. That is the secret of blessing in the kingdom.

David and Solomon were both types of the Lord Jesus, and together these two men, father and son, picture Christ as king over his people. But these books are also a picture of us as individuals. As we find in Hebrews, Jesus is the pioneer of our salvation (Heb 12:2). He is the one who has gone the whole course ahead of us. The principles by which he walked are therefore the principles by which we are to walk. He lived his life as an example. Of course, it isn't his example that saves us; it is his death that saves us. But it is the example of his life that teaches us the principles by which God expects us to walk after we are redeemed. These books picture for us our own will as king of our kingdom. The secret of blessing and victory in the Christian life is to subject the will to the temple of God, which is the human spirit indwelt by the Holy Spirit. These Old Testament books, in exquisitely accurate pictures, show us

truths in the spiritual kingdom of our own lives. This is one of the great proofs, if not the greatest proof, of the divine inspiration of the Bible. How could men write books that are as wonderfully accurate as these in portraying the issues in the spiritual life? It is simply impossible in the flesh. It is the mark of divine activity.

The first nine chapters of Second Chronicles all center on **the temple**. The book opens with a visit of Solomon to the tabernacle in the city of Gibeon. The tabernacle, which had been the center of God's guidance to the people all through the wilderness journey, the days of the judges, the reigns of King Saul and King David, was located in the city of Gibeon. Solomon goes there to make an offering. But the account is immediately transferred from the tabernacle to the temple site which David had bought in Jerusalem.

This symbolizes the fact that when the Lord Jesus reigns as king in our life and we yield to his lordship, then we no longer have a relationship with the tabernacle which followed us in our up-and-down experience. We are now walking in a more permanent relationship in which God's king is ruling and walking in the light of God's house. It was in Jerusalem that God had placed his name.

The account goes on in the second chapter to show how the temple was built by Solomon, though planned and supplied for by David. It was Solomon, as a type of Christ as the Prince of Peace, who was given the honor of actually building the temple. He thus represents the picture completed in

the New Testament where the Lord Jesus himself is the builder of the temple of the human spirit. Remember, in Hebrews, we are told that Moses had honor in God's house as a servant but Christ had more honor – just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself (cf, Heb 3:3-6). Christ is the builder. He is the one who made the temple of our body which contains the sanctuary of the spirit.

This is pictured for us in the physical temple described here. What a beautiful place it must have been. It was small as temples go, but incomparably beautiful. The whole interior was completely lined with gold. Everything was made of gold. In one place in Second Chronicles it says that silver was counted as nothing in the days of Solomon {cf, 2 Chr 9:20}. The furniture, except for the ark of the covenant, was rebuilt completely. In other words, this temple is a new beginning.

Many of us have experienced this when we intelligently, conscientiously, and with permanent intention, yielded ourselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ. It was as though we had been born again. It was a new beginning, wasn't it? This is why certain groups feel there is a second work of grace. It is such a glorious experience of release, of relief, and of victory that they say it is really something new and different. It actually isn't. Rather, it is the fulfillment of all that was already there in potential. When I received the Lord Jesus, the Spirit of God came to dwell in my life. But he may be there for many months, or even years, before I enter into the fullness of what that means by a willing submission in obedience to the lordship of Christ.

This is what is depicted here in the new beginning in the temple. All is remade except the ark of the covenant – the guarantee of God needs no renewing.

The prayer of Solomon in Chapter 6 shows that the temple was also made for the restoration of sin. Whether the people were under circumstances of spiritual failure or the punishment of captivity, they were to remember that if they would pray in earnestness – genuinely confessing their sin – God would hear them, heal their hearts, and restore them to their rightful place. When Solomon had finished his prayer, while all the people waited outside in the temple courts, fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice on the altar. Immediately the temple was filled with a cloud of glory so that the priest could not enter. This was the sign that

God had accepted the offering and of the presence of God in this house.

It is immediately followed by an account of the tremendous conquests and glory of the kingdom. We have the account in Chapter 9 of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon. Hollywood notwithstanding, the account of the Queen of Sheba is a wonderfully illustrative picture of how God intended the whole of the earth to know the story of his grace. Jews, in the days of Israel, weren't sent out into the whole world as we are commanded to do now in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20). God's grace was displayed by the building of a land and a people and a place that was so wondrously blessed of God, so obviously different from everyone around, that word of it spread to the uttermost parts of the earth. People came to Jerusalem from all over the earth to hear and to learn the secret of God's activity.

This is a picture for us of God's own supreme method of evangelism. Every believer, wherever he is in the world, is to be living this kind of life with the Spirit of God inhabiting the temple and in control of the will. When believers are walking in obedience to the indwelling Spirit, their lives will so manifest the victory, the rejoicing, the blessing, the prosperity, and the joy of the Lord that people round about will ask, "What is there about these people? I want to know what this is all about." When the Queen of Sheba came to Solomon, she saw:

... the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, and their clothing, his cupbearers, and their clothing, and his burnt offerings which he offered at the house of the Lord, {2 Chr 9:3b-4a RSV}

When she saw all of this, "there was no more spirit in her," {2 Chr 9:4b RSV}. She said, "The half was never told me. I never dreamed it could be like this," {cf, 2 Chr 9:5-6}.

Have you ever had Solomon's experience? Have you ever had somebody say to you after coming to know you intimately, "You know, there is something about your life that drew me when I first saw you. Now I have learned the secret of it. In the inner place of your heart you are resting on the great sacrifice of the Lord Jesus." This is what Peter says:

but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; {1 Pet 3:15 RSV}

This is God's method of evangelism.

Chapters 10 through 36 go on to give us the record of **the kings of Judah** up to the time of the captivity of this kingdom. Nine of them were good kings and eleven were bad. Manasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years on the throne of Judah, started out as the worst king in Judah's history and ended up as one of the best, as God reached him, redeemed him, and restored him.

As you read through these accounts, the bad kings reveal the pattern of temptation and evil in a disobedient heart. There is a declining standard here:

- It begins with the infiltration of evil into the kingdom on a rather trivial level. Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, in Chapter 10 was unwilling to follow the good counsel of the wise men of his kingdom. He asked the older men, "What shall I do? How shall I treat the people?" They said, "Your father was rather severe with them. If you are more gentle and more lenient, they will love you and serve you." But the young men advised him, "No, don't do that. If your father was strict, you be stricter." Rehoboam refused to follow the old men's good counsel. That is all he did. Yet that was the beginning of the evil that was in its final stages to destroy this kingdom.
- A little later, in Chapter 12, Verse 1, you will find a further lowering of the standards:

When the rule of Rehoboam was established and was strong, he forsook the law of the Lord, {2 Chr 12:1 RSV}

He turned a deaf ear to what God said. As a result, the kingdom was invaded by the Egyptians. The moment there is a turning away from obedience to the rule of God in the temple of God, there is an immediate weakening of the defenses of life, and the enemies come. It was only by God's grace that the Egyptians were turned back. When Rehoboam

humbled himself and returned to God, the Egyptians were repelled.

- The next bad king, Jehoram, appears in Chapter 21, Verse 4:

When Jehoram had ascended the throne of his father and was established, he slew all his brothers with the sword, and also some of the princes of Judah. {2 Chr 21:4 RSV}

Jealousy was next. First, there was the refusal to give heed to good advice. Then a deaf ear was turned to the Law. Now, the spirit of jealousy begins to assault the kingdom.

- This is immediately followed, as we read in Verse 11, by another downward step:

Moreover he made high places in the hill country of Judah, and led the inhabitants of Jerusalem into unfaithfulness, and made Judah go astray. {2 Chr 12:11 RSV}

In one sense, the high places did not yet represent idolatry. They were high hills where the people of Israel worshipped Jehovah. The problem was that *that* was not the place where God had told them to worship Jehovah. He had put his name in the temple and it was there that they were to worship and offer sacrifice. They were worshipping out on the hills because that was where their neighbors and friends were worshipping. They were simply down-grading and reducing the true worship of Jehovah to a lower level.

This, too, was quickly followed by invasion and by disease. As you read, you find that King Jehoram was immediately afflicted by an invasion from the Philistines – representing the desires of the flesh.

- The next bad king is King Ahaz. In Chapter 28, Verses 1-2, we read:

Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord, like his father David, but walked in the

ways of the kings of Israel. He even made molten images for the Baals; {2 Chr 28:1-2 RSV}

Here is the actual introduction of vile, despicable practices of idolatry which were primarily sexual in nature. Israel was increasingly afflicted by these practices. The kings were responsible for introducing them, as we read of King Ahaz (Verses 3-4):

And he burned incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree. {2 Chr 28:3-4 RSV}

The pattern is the same. Again, this is followed by invasion (Verse 5):

Therefore the Lord his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him and took captive a great number of his people ... {2 Chr 28:5a RSV}

We sometimes wonder why we fall prey to so many of the afflictions and oppressions – neuroses and psychoses – of our day. It is because the defenses of the temple are destroyed. Some inner idolatry is weakening us and we find ourselves defenseless against these invaders of the spirit that bring us into depression, frustration, defeat, and darkness. All the way through this book there is a constant battle against the flood of wicked practices during the reign of these kings.

By contrast, the good kings reflect the grace of God in cleansing and restoring and they also reveal the instruments that he uses. There are five great reformations recorded in Israel as God seeks to arrest this deteriorating process in the nation and bring it back to the place of glory and blessing as in the days of David and Solomon:

1. The first of these periods of reformation was under King Asa found in Chapters 14 through 16. In Chapter 14, Verses 2-3, we read:

And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He took away the foreign altars and the high places, and broke down the pillars and hewed down the Asherim, [The sign of Asherim, a symbol of sex, actually signified the worship of the male sex organ.] and commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, and to keep the law and the commandment. {2 Chr 14:2-4 RSV}

This seeking is followed by deliverance, (Verse 9):

Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men [What an attack!] and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah. {2 Chr 14:9 RSV}

We may be put under pressure at times, but if the heart is obedient to the revelation of the Holy Spirit within the human spirit, the defenses are secure against whatever may come. As Isaiah says, “Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee,” (Isa 26:3 RSV). The principle of power is clearly declared when Asa, returning from the battle with the Ethiopians, meets the prophet Oded (15:2):

And he [Oded] went out to meet Asa, and said to him, “Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The Lord is with you, while you are with him ...” {2 Chr 15:2a RSV}

Did you hear that?

“The Lord is with you, while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you.” {2 Chr 15:2b RSV}

The forsaking is never that he gives you over completely to be lost. He forsakes in the sense of not providing any power, or victory, or ability to walk. This is the same as the New Testament teaches, isn't it? It declares that God is fully available to you if you are prepared to be fully available to him. Paul says in Philippians, “I press on to make it [the power

of his resurrection] my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own,” (Phil 3:12b RSV) Or, “I long to be as fully available to him as he is prepared to be available to me.” That is always the secret of real power. This was declared to King Asa for his benefit and for ours.

Each of these kings who leads a restoration shows us a different principle of restoration. In Asa we find the determination to obey the Law. In Chapter 15, Verses 12-15:

And they entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their soul; and that whoever would not seek the Lord, the God of Israel, should be put to death, whether young or old, man or woman. They took oath to the Lord with a loud voice, and with shouting, and with trumpets, and with horns. And all Judah rejoiced over the oath; for they had sworn with all their heart, and had sought him with their whole desire, and he was found by them, and the Lord gave them rest round about. {2 Chr 15:12-15 RSV}

Here is a heart that has awakened at last to the fact that it had been drifting off into weakness, into failure, into assault by the enemies, into bondage and slavery again. The way of return is a renewal of the vow, a renewal of the determination, a hunger and thirst for the Lord, to walk in his sight. And immediately there is a return to rest.

2. Then in the reign of King Jehoshaphat, the next king on the throne of Judah, there is another time of restoration after a time of failure. Jehoshaphat cleans out the idols of the land. In Chapter 17, Verse 7-9, the second principle of restoration, the ministry of teaching, is set forth:

In the third year of his reign he sent his princes, ... {2 Chr 17:7a RSV}

And they taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the Lord with them; they went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people. {2 Chr 17:9 RSV}

That was the principle of this return – the ministry of teaching, followed immediately by deliverance. Look at Verse 10:

And the fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were round about Judah, and they made no war against Jehoshaphat. {2 Chr 17:10 RSV}

Later, however, Jehoshaphat in weakness makes an alliance with Israel and there is an invasion from Ammon, Moab, and Edom – all types of the flesh. But God delivers him in a wonderful way.

It would be well worth your time to read this carefully. God says you don't have to fight these enemies of the flesh. Don't try to subdue with your will power all these evil desires – of bitterness, jealousy, revenge, and lust – all the feelings within yourself. Don't try to fight them. God says, “Believe. That is the way of victory. You are not capable, in yourself, of defeating these things.” Instead, “Stand still and you will see the deliverance of God.”

So God fought for them and these enemies were defeated. In Chapter 20, Verse 24:

When Judah came to the watch-tower of the wilderness, they looked toward the multitude; and behold, they were dead bodies lying on the ground; none had escaped. {2 Chr 20:24 RSV}

Believe what God has done to the flesh in the cross of Christ. We do not have to fight the flesh. Nail it to his cross, rendering it absolutely worthless. When we believe and act on that principle, these things disappear. Even if they come back again five minutes later, they can always be overcome by this principle.

3. In King Joash, Chapters 23 and 24, you have the third principle of restoration. The third restoration of Israel was by the collection of taxes on all things. Chapter 24:4-5, tells us:

After this Joash decided to restore the house of the Lord. And he gathered the priests and the Levites, and said to them, “Go out to the cities of Judah, and gather from all Israel money to repair the house of your God from year to

year; and see that you hasten the matter.” {2 Chr 24:4-5a RSV}

Here is something that had been neglected. No one had been paying the costs for repairing the temple, so it had fallen into such disrepair that the doors were actually shut. No sacrifice was being offered in the temple at all. Joash, realizing this, gathered in money to restore the temple.

Now, if the temple is the spirit, the restoring and repairing of it is a picture of the strengthening of the spirit. How? By what we call restitution – the paying of that which is owed. It may be an apology to someone, or the restoring of something wrongfully taken, or the putting back of something that has been wrongfully used. No matter what it may be, this is the principle of return and restitution.

4. Then in Hezekiah’s reign is the fourth principle of restoration, in Chapters 29 through 32 – the cleansing of the temple. When Hezekiah came to the throne, the nation had fallen on such terribly evil days that the temple had actually been filled with rubbish and filth. There was garbage throughout all the courts. Hezekiah set the people to cleaning the temple. They started carrying out the rubbish and it took them sixteen days, so much had accumulated. At last, when the temple was clean, they restored the worship and celebrated the Passover for the first time since the days of Solomon.

What does this picture? It is the cleansing of the temple of our spirit, the putting away of the filth that has accumulated, the turning away from ideas and concepts to which we have given ourselves, and the turning back to the worship and the cleansing of the Lord.

5. Then in Josiah, the last good king of Judah, you find the last principle of restoration. When Josiah came to the throne, the temple had fallen into complete disuse again. He set the people to cleaning it up and in Chapter 34, Verse 14, we read:

While they were bringing out the money that had been brought into the house of the Lord, Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law of the Lord

given through Moses. {2 Chr 34:14 RSV}

This sounds incredible, but the people had actually forgotten that there was a copy of the Law of Moses in the temple. It had been so neglected in the land that it had been totally forgotten. When the priests went through the temple to clean it, they accidentally found the Law of the Lord, brought it to the king, and read it to him (34:19):

When the king heard the words of the law he rent his clothes. {2 Chr 34:19 RSV}

He commanded the men around him to inquire of the Lord what he should do. In Verses 29-31a, we are told:

The king sent and gathered together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. And the king went up to the house of the Lord, with all the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the Levites, all the people both great and small; and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which had been found in the house of the Lord. And the king stood in his place and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments ... {2 Chr 34:29-31a RSV}

So the last principle of restoration is that of a return to the hearing of the word.

But the people had gone a long way down. The patience of God was ended. The last chapter gives us the account of the terrible, dark days when Nebuchadnezzar took the city captive and set a puppet king upon the throne, who rebelled against him. Then Nebuchadnezzar set his brother on the throne, until at last he came to destroy both the rebellious city and the temple with fire.

Now go back for a moment to the early chapters and look again at that wonderful scene when Solomon, in all his royal robes of glory, is kneeling before the people and praying to the God of heaven. The whole kingdom is at peace. Solomon is reigning over the uttermost limits of the kingdom prom-

ised to Abraham, from the River Euphrates clear down to the River Egypt. All the peoples around him are at peace and the fame of this kingdom has gone out to the ends of the earth. People were actually making pilgrimages to the city of Jerusalem to see the glory of God. The fire of God comes down from heaven and the glory of God fills the whole of the temple like a cloud – what a marvelous sight. Then think of this final scene, with the

temple lying in ruins, the city destroyed, the people slaves and bondservants in a foreign country, and the whole of the land given over to its enemies.

This is the picture that God draws for us of what can happen when the heart walks in disobedience. Yet God's patience is visible in the whole story of this book – how he intervenes, again and again, to call his people back.

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EZRA: The Way Back

by Ray C. Stedman

The books of Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah cover the historical period of Israel's captivity in Babylon and the period immediately following their return to Jerusalem. Israel's return to Jerusalem from Babylon involved about fifty thousand Jews – much, much fewer than the more recent return, which is such a wonder of our own day. The biblical record accords great importance to this return.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. I am convinced that the events of these two books run parallel to one another, a point of view which is a departure from the traditional view. Most commentators on the Scripture say that Nehemiah follows Ezra chronologically, but I believe that a careful study of these two books will indicate that the events covered by them were concurrent. Ezra is concerned with the building of the temple. Nehemiah is concerned with the building of the city and walls of Jerusalem. Now, the temple was the last thing to be destroyed when the nation fell into captivity. It was the last holdout, if we may put it that way, of the Spirit of God. It is the last place (the temple representing the spirit) to be destroyed in an individual's failure to relate to his God. The temple is also the first place where God begins to set about the work of restoration; and therefore the book of Ezra, which deals with restoring the temple, is placed first in the Scriptures. Notice the opening words of this book:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing. {Ezra 1:1 RSV}

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: {2 Chr 36:22 RSV}

The same words exactly! The book of Ezra begins right where Chronicles leaves off. This is one reason why it is felt that Ezra wrote both books. Ezra hence becomes a picture for us of the work of God in the restoration of a heart that has fallen into sin. Restoration can be on an individual basis. It can be on a local church basis, or on the part of any of the great God-honored denominations of our day. It can be the work of God in a nation, bringing it back from secularism and materialism to true spiritual knowledge and strength. In any case, it always follows the pattern depicted here in the book of Ezra. This is the picture of how God works when he sets about to restore the heart that has fallen into sin.

The book divides very naturally in line with the ministries of two men: Zerubbabel, in Chapters 1 through 6; and Ezra, in Chapters 7 through 10. Both of these men led the captives of Babylon back to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel, interestingly enough, was a descendant of David. He is of the kingly line. Ezra, descended from Aaron the priest, is likewise a priest. Clearly outlined here is the need for the work both of the king and of the priest in accomplishing restoration. The work of the king is to build or, in this case, to rebuild. The work of the priest is to cleanse. Both are essential in the work of restoring someone who has fallen into a sinful state.

Now look at Second Chronicles 36:22:

Restoration in the individual life involves rebuilding the control of the Spirit of God through obedience to the kingship and lordship of Jesus Christ. Thus, it involves his ministry as king in our lives. It means the recognition, again, of God's right to own us, to direct us, to replace our plans with his, to change us, and to make both the major and minor decisions of our life. But restoration also means cleansing. The spirit and the soul are cleansed by our great high priest who, when a human heart earnestly confesses its sin, washes away the guilt, tidies up the past, and restores us to a place of fellowship and blessedness in his sight.

Now, return from sin is always the work of God's grace. In the first verse:

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia. {Ezra 1:1b RSV}

And Verse 5 says:

Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. {Ezra 1:5 RSV}

God always takes the initiative. No one, after falling into a sinful experience, would ever come back to Christ unless God brought him back. This is indicated so clearly in the case of these Israelites. When they had gone into Babylon, they became a different kind of people. Dr. J. Vernon McGee has pointed out that while they were in Israel they were sheep-keepers, or shepherds. When they went to Babylon they could no longer keep sheep, so they became shop-keepers, or merchants. And they became very successful too. So much so that this stereotyped image of the Jew is popular worldwide today – the merchants of the earth. In Babylon they started a number of chain stores – Macy's, Emporium, and some other leading department stores. They became so prosperous, so lost to materialism, that they did not want to go back to Jerusalem even though they were still slaves and exiled from their own land. Many of them refused to return when God opened the door. But the Spirit of God stirred up the hearts of some and made them unsatisfied with material prosperity. Mere things will never satisfy the deep-seated cry of the human spirit. When we feel that crying need, God the

Spirit is stirring us up to return and rebuild the things that make for spiritual strength.

Under **Zerubbabel** the first return takes place. This great kingly descendant led about fifty thousand people from Babylon back to Jerusalem. The account of that return is given to us in Chapters 1 and 2. When they came to Jerusalem, it was the seventh month of the year – just in time for the Feast of the Tabernacles of the Jews. This Feast of Tabernacles (also called the Feast of Ingathering) was the time when Israel dwelt in booths to remind them of their pilgrim nature. Incidentally, this feast looks forward to the eventual regathering of Israel from the vast worldwide dispersion for the millennium and is the feast that is mingled with tears of sorrow as the people saw the foundations of the temple being relaid.

1. Their first act was to build an altar on the original temple site in the midst of the ruins. Out under the open sky they erected an altar to God and began to worship and offer sacrifice as the Law of Moses had bid them. This is significant because the first act of a heart that really desires to return from wandering in darkness in the ways of the world to real fellowship with God, is to erect an altar. An altar is always the symbol of ownership. It is both the acknowledgment that God has sole right to us and the symbol of our personal relationship to him. Therefore, an altar almost invariably involves sacrifice, worship, and praise – the sacrifice of recognizing the truth, "You are not your own; you were bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:19b-20a RSV); the worship of again enjoying a restored relationship, when again the heart is ministered to by the only one who can meet its needs; and the praise of a rejoicing heart.

A man reminded me recently about an occasion when he took time off work to come talk to me about his prayer life. He had brought along sheets of paper on which he had written all the things that he had been trying to pray about. He had three or four sheets. At that time he had said, "I have a great deal of trouble with this. I find that it's hard to remember all these things and to go through these lists. It's so mechanical, so empty." I had suggested, "Why don't you just forget all this and spend

your time, for a few prayer sessions anyway, just praising the Lord.” He said, “I was mad. I took time off work to talk to you, and all you told me was, ‘Why don’t you spend your time praising the Lord?’ I wanted some advice for organizing my prayer life and handling it a little better. But after I got over being mad, I tried it – and I found that it worked. There was a sense of restoration, a sense of restored personal fellowship.” That is what God is after. That is why the altar is the important thing in this work of restoration.

2. The second thing they did was to lay the foundation of the temple. The work was met with mixed feeling, in Chapter 3, Verses 11-13:

And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy; so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard afar. {Ezra 3:11b-13 RSV}

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever come back to God after a time of coldness and withdrawal – a captive of sin’s power – with a great sense of joy as the foundations of fellowship were relaid by the Spirit? Yet also with regret for the lost and wasted years? This is exactly what is portrayed here. Tears of joy mingled with tears of sorrow as the people saw the temple being relaid.

3. The third factor in this return under Zerubbabel is the opposition that immediately develops, as we read in Chapters 4 through 6. A force is at work in every human heart, as in world affairs, that immediately rises up to oppose everything that God attempts to do. A force is found in every human individual that resists with enmity and hatred the work of the Spirit of God. This force immediately manifests itself here, and

there is a great lesson in how it does so. This opposition first appears as friendly solicitude. Chapter 4, Verses 1 and 2:

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers’ houses and said to them, “Let us build with you; for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.” {Ezra 4:1-2 RSV}

Incidentally, this is the beginning of the Samaritans, who frequently appear in the New Testament. These Samaritans, worshipping the same God said, “Let us help you. We would like to join with you in this enterprise. You are rebuilding the temple. Fine. We would be glad to help.” They come with an earnest, open-hearted, friendly wish to participate in the work. A very subtle request, isn’t it? It is not very difficult to say “No!” to an enemy who breathes fiery threats of slaughter. But when he comes dripping with solicitude and offers to help in your projects, it is very difficult to say, “No.” The only way you can do it is with a heart that is willing to be obedient to the Word of God, as these people were. We read in Verse 3:

But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers’ houses in Israel said to them, “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.” {Ezra 4:3 RSV}

That may have seemed a bit churlish, but it was not mere capriciousness that made them reply that way. God had commanded that Israel was not to fellowship with other nations, or to engage with them in enterprises that concerned the faith. What does this mean? – that it was wrong for one nation to intermingle with another? No, this has been twisted and distorted, and applied today to situations in which

it has no application. It means simply that God rejects utterly the philosophy of the world in carrying out his work in the world. There is a worldly religion. There is a philosophy that tries to interject worldly concepts, worldly philosophies, and worldly methods into the lives of God's people. God has simply made it clear that these are to be rejected. The philosophy with which the world would defend its actions and its attitudes is quite contrary to the work of the Spirit of God. The world reflects the spirit of the devil, who is the god of this age, in the philosophy, "Advance yourself. Do this for your own glory. Use religious ways to advance your purposes and win admiration, power, fame, or whatever your heart desires. Use religious ways to achieve self-satisfaction." God rejects this principle here.

The veil of friendship that was offered quickly turns to hatred. In Verses 4 and 5:

Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. {Ezra 4:4-5 RSV}

And in the next two chapters is the story of how successful they were in stopping the work of rebuilding the temple. By deliberately attempting to frustrate these people, by mocking them and taunting them, they discouraged Israel from doing work that God had commanded. These so-called friends even used legal means to undermine Israel's authority and right to build. This is what goes on any time anybody wants to stand for God. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit," (Gal 5:17a RSV). This is the picture that we have here, and the principle was quite successful. The work was stopped for sixteen years and the temple lay half-completed, overrun with weeds and grass. Again, worship ceased.

Then God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. These two men were God's instruments to move the people's hearts. The minute the people began to turn back to God, he also turned the hearts

of the kings, Darius and Artaxerxes, and they issued the decree that started the temple work again. Finally the work was finished. In Chapter 6 we read that the first thing they did was celebrate the Passover, marking the beginning of their life under God. Similarly, you can never make sense out of your conversion unless you are in fellowship with the living God. You have nothing to celebrate. You have nothing to thank God for unless you are enjoying the glory and the light of heaven upon your heart. It is only when you are in fellowship, with the temple built, that the Passover can bring joy to you.

The latter part of the book concerns **the ministry of Ezra**, who also led a return to the land. Ezra was a most remarkable man, a priest of the line of Aaron. In Chapter 7, Verse 6, we are told:

... this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses which the Lord the God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was upon him. {Ezra 7:6 RSV}

Wouldn't you like to have that written of you, "the king granted him all that he asked"? What kind of man is this, whom a heathen gentile king regards so highly that he will give Ezra anything that he asks? The secret of this man's character is given in Verse 10:

... Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, {Ezra 7:10a RSV}

That is something else isn't it? We may be Bible students, but are we Bible doers?

... to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel. {Ezra 7:10b RSV}

As a result, Ezra could ask anything of the king and the king would grant his request.

Now this man is a man of the word. Therefore, God sent him to Jerusalem to strengthen and beautify the temple. That is the work of the Word of God in our lives. It strengthens and beautifies within us the place of our fellowship with God. Ezra came to Jerusalem and found an incredible condition. In Chapter 9 Ezra writes:

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons; so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.” {Ezra 9:1-2 RSV}

What does this mean? They were simply starting the whole wretched mess all over again. This is what had broken the strength of the nation before. This is what had undermined the power of God among them and finally dispersed the people, broken up the tribes, and separated them into two nations. At last, as they had carried on this idolatrous practice, God had delivered them into the hands of their captors. Now, after seventy years, they hadn't learned a thing. The flesh never changes. No matter how long you walk in the Spirit, you will never get to the place where you cannot revert to the worst you ever were, if you depart from dependence upon the Spirit of God. They are right back to the same old ways. Ezra, in Verse 3, says:

When I heard this, I rent my garments and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled. {Ezra 9:3 RSV}

... until the evening sacrifice. {Ezra 9:4b RSV}

It was unbelievable.

As the book nears its close, Ezra prays to God and confesses this great sin. In his graciousness, God moves in the hearts of the people. The leaders come in broken-hearted contrition to Ezra and acknowledge the wrong. A proclamation is issued. The people assemble together. It happens to be a day when it is raining, but, despite the rain, the people stand, thousands of them, in front of the temple and confess their guilt – the fact that they had disobeyed God – and agree to put away the

wives and children they had acquired outside the will of God.

Now this is a hurtful thing, isn't it? It isn't easy. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “If any one comes to me ... does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children ... he cannot be my disciple,” (Luke 14:26 RSV). Our relationship with God comes first.

- It doesn't mean that a man is to put away his wife today. This is a symbolic teaching.
- It means that we are to put away whatever stems from the flesh, which is always pictured by these Canaanite tribes in the land.
 - But we love the flesh, don't we?
 - We like to feel angry and resentful toward others.
 - We love to nurse a grudge, cherish feelings of bitterness, or keep an unforgiving spirit burning away in our hearts against someone.
 - We love it! We don't want to give it up!

These things can cause physical ailments in us. Perhaps more than 50% of the nervous and physical problems that we suffer are due to wrong attitudes. But when someone points it out to us, we would rather go on having the problem than change the spirit or the attitude. It is hard, isn't it?

It was hard for the Israelites to put away their wives and children, but they realized that the only chance of being restored to the place of fellowship with the living God and finding the power of God manifest once again among them, was to be obedient to his word. Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; ... If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off ...” (Matt 5:29-30). Be ruthless in these things. Put them away.

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This is what Jesus meant when he said, “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children ... he causes you to sin, cut it off,” {cf, Luke 14:26, Matt 5:30}. Be ruthless in these things! Put them away!

Prayer:

Thank you again, Father, for this insight into your word. Give us obedient hearts, that we may walk in ways pleasing to you and that the inner temple of our soul – our spirit – may be rich and radiant with your fragrance and presence. In Christ’s name. Amen.

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NEHEMIAH: Rebuilding the Walls

by Ray C. Stedman

For a long, long time the only thing I knew about Nehemiah was that he was supposed to be the shortest man in the Bible – through a wretched pun on his name, “knee-high-miah.” I am glad to have discovered a great deal more about this man in the intervening years and I trust you have too. He is one of the great characters of the Old Testament, but perhaps not as well known as some others.

Ezra and Nehemiah are one book in the Hebrew Bible, for they are part of the same story. In fact, the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all come out of the same general period of Israel’s history. They appear in our Bible in reverse order of the chronological order in which they took place. In other words, Esther actually happened when God first began to move in the midst of Israel’s captivity to return this nation to the land. That was soon after the halfway mark of the seventy years that Jeremiah had predicted the captivity would last. God raised Esther, a young Jewish maiden, to the throne of Persia as queen. It was her husband, King Ahasuerus of Persia, who is the Artaxerxes of the opening chapters of Nehemiah. This heathen king gave the command for Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to build up the walls of the city. Perhaps that accounts for a very interesting parenthesis that appears in this book in Chapter 2, Verse 6, when Nehemiah went to the king: “And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), ...” That queen, I believe, was Queen Esther, the Jewish maiden who had been raised to this prominent position by the grace of God.

Neither Artaxerxes nor Ahasuerus are the names of this king. That is what is so confusing. These are really titles. *Artaxerxes* means “the great king,” and *Ahasuerus* means “the venerable father.” These were not the king’s given names. It

may or may not be helpful to know that this Artaxerxes and Ahasuerus are also Darius the Mede of the book of Daniel. And then, to add to the confusion, Artaxerxes in the book of Nehemiah is not the same Artaxerxes as in the book of Ezra. Now do I have you thoroughly confused?

At any rate, in the history of these people, Esther – as an instrument of God’s grace – was sent to the throne of Persia and so moved the heart of her husband, the king, that he allowed Nehemiah, his cupbearer, to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah began the work of rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. Some twenty-five years later, Zerubbabel returned with about fifty thousand of the captives from Babylon, as is recorded in the book of Ezra.

God has reversed this order in Scripture. Instead of Esther, Nehemiah, and Ezra, these books are turned around and we have Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Scripture is never concerned simply with chronology. It is concerned with the teaching of each book. In these three books we have the story of the way out of captivity, back to God. The book of Ezra begins with the building of the temple. The restoration of the house of God is always the first thing in the way back to God. Then comes the building of the walls, as we will see in the book of Nehemiah, filling the need for security and strength. Finally, the book of Esther comes as the revelation of the purpose of all this in the life of any individual. That gives you a quick survey of these three books.

The book of Nehemiah falls into two divisions. The first six chapters cover **the reconstruction of the wall**, while Chapters 7 through 13 deal with **the reinstruction of the people**. With those two you have the whole book.

Now what does a wall symbolize? One of the most famous landmarks in the world today is the Berlin wall, dividing the city in two. Ordinarily, though, a wall symbolizes strength and protection. In ancient cities the only real means of defense were the walls. Sometimes these walls were tremendously thick and high. The walls of the city of Babylon, as recounted in the story of Daniel, were some 380 feet thick and over 100 feet high – massive, tremendous walls. Therefore, the city of Babylon considered itself very safe.

What does it mean, then, to rebuild the walls of your life? Nehemiah is the account of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem is a symbol of the city of God, God's dwelling place and the center of life for the world. In an individual life, then, the rebuilding of the walls would be a picture of re-establishing the strength of that life. We have all met people whose defenses have crumbled away. They have become human derelicts, drifting up and down the streets of our large cities, absolutely hopeless and helpless. But God in grace frequently reaches down and gets some of those people and brings them out to rebuild the walls. This is the picture of the way the walls of any life, of any local church, of any community, of any nation, can be rebuilt into strength and power and purpose again:

1. The first step in this process is given in Chapter 1, Verse 4. It begins with a *concern* about the ruins. Nehemiah says:

When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days; and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. {Neh 1:4 RSV}

You will never build the walls of your life until you have first become greatly concerned about the ruins. Have you ever taken a good look at the ruins in your own life? Have you ever stopped long enough to assess what you could be under God, and compared that with what you are? Have you looked at the possibilities that God gave you in your life, and seen how far you have deviated from that potential?

Like Nehemiah, you have received word, in some form or other, of the desolation and ruin there. When Nehemiah hears this report about Jerusalem, he weeps and prays for days,

showing his intense concern. You will never rebuild the walls of your life until you first weep over the ruins.

2. This is followed by *confession*. In Chapter 1 is Nehemiah's wonderful prayer as he confesses that the nation has forsaken God, and acknowledges the justice of God's dealing with them.
3. That is followed immediately by *commitment*. Look at Verse 11 of Chapter 1. He says:

“O Lord, let thy ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants who delight to fear thy name; and give success to thy servant today,” {Neh 1:11a RSV}

To do what? You see, this man has a plan forming in his mind, even while he has been in prayer, of how to go about rebuilding the walls. He has something definite he wants to ask. He says:

“... and grant him [Nehemiah] mercy in the sight of this man.” {Neh 1:11b RSV}

What man? Well, you have it in the next verse:

Now I was cupbearer to the king. {Neh 1:11c RSV}

So here is a man who, out of his concern, and after the confession of his heart, commits himself to a project. He asks God to begin moving in the king's heart. Now this is always how any return to the grace of God must begin. We get concerned. Then we confess. Then we commit ourselves to action and ask God also to act in our behalf, for invariably in an enterprise like this there are factors over which we have no control, and God must arrange them.

At a men's conference some time ago, a man told how in the early days of his Christian experience someone had encouraged him to pray about the things that happen on his job, in his relationships with his boss and with his fellow employees. He said, “I didn't think praying was the right thing to do at first. But I tried it and I saw that it worked. You know, I thought it was quite an unfair advantage over

those poor heathen, but it worked so well that I could see that God had provided prayer for us.”

Nehemiah is well aware of this – God must move in the areas where Nehemiah cannot, so Nehemiah prays about going to the king. When he appears before the king, the king notes the sadness of Nehemiah’s face and asks what he wants. Since this is the very king whose wife is Queen Esther, he already has a great concern and knowledge of the Jews’ problems. He is responsive to Nehemiah’s plea for permission to return to Jerusalem.

4. The next necessary step in the program of reconstruction is *courage*. In Verse 9 of Chapter 2 we read:

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, {Neh 2:9-10a RSV}

Do you recognize these names? Whenever you read of Ammonites, Amorites, Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Perizzites, or any of the other “ites,” you have a picture of the enemy of God – the flesh. This satanic agency within man inevitably resists the work and the will and the ways of God. Here you have this same enmity; when the enemies of God

... heard this, it displeased them greatly that some one had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. {Neh 2:10b RSV}

Immediately courage is needed. Whenever a man like Nehemiah says, “I will arise and build,” Satan always says, “Then I will arise and oppose.” Satan makes things difficult when we start turning back to God.

We see, also, the need for caution. When Nehemiah comes back to Jerusalem and rides about the city at night he doesn’t just start putting bricks on top of one another. He doesn’t rush out and get all the people excited to build the walls. If he does, he would fall into the trap of his enemies. The first thing he does is arise at night when no one else

knows, ride around the walls of the city, and survey the ruins. He takes note of exactly what needs to be done. He makes an honest survey of the facts. Then he begins to lay his plans. These three principles of reconstruction – a display of concern, confession and commitment, and courage with caution – are basic to rebuilding.

In Chapter 3 we learn how he went about this task of reconstruction. If the walls of your life are broken down – if your defenses have crumbled so that the enemy is getting at you on every hand, and you easily fall prey to temptation – I suggest you pay special heed to the process of reconstruction set forth in the book of Nehemiah. We learn,

- First of all, that the people were willing to work;
- Second, that they became involved and immediately started doing something.

Nehemiah, in the wisdom that God gave him, set each of them to work building whatever part of the wall was nearest to each of their own houses so that they were personally involved in the work.

The rest of the chapter describes how they went about building. It all centered on the ten **gates of the city of Jerusalem**. The people would be assigned a certain portion of the wall defined by the gates that gave access to the city. As you read through this chapter, you will find the names of these gates; the Hebrew names have great significance. I would like to quickly describe these for your own edification, and we can draw the lesson from each at the same time:

- First of all is the Sheep Gate. This is the gate through which the sheep were brought into the city to be sacrificed at the altar. The Sheep Gate, of course, signifies the Lamb of God, whose blood was shed on the cross for us, and, therefore, it reveals the principle of the cross. That is always the starting place for strength in your life. You have to recognize the principle of the cross – the fact that God will be moving in your life to utterly cancel out your own ego, your own plans, and your own self-interest. The cross is that instrument in God’s program

that puts the ego to death. That is where we must begin building for strength.

- The account then moves to the Fish Gate. Now what does the name “Fish Gate” suggest to you? Do you remember how the Lord Jesus said to his disciples, “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17 RSV)? This suggests the witness of a Christian. Has that gate broken down in your life? Has the wall around the Fish Gate crumbled? If so, this gate for defense, and its wall, need to be rebuilt again, for the Lord Jesus said that every Christian is to be a witness for him. If this wall is broken down, you will find that through this the enemy will enter again and again. If you can never say a word for Christ, if there is never any witness in your life, then this wall is broken and the Fish Gate needs to be built again.
- The next gate is the Old Gate. You will find it in Verse 6. What does this gate symbolize? Well, I suggest that it represents truth. In many Christians’ lives this gate is broken down – they are no longer resting upon truth. Truth is always old, and it is upon old things that everything new must rest. Somebody has well said, “Whatever is true is not new, and whatever is new is not true.” These are the days when the old truth is being forsaken. Men are rapidly throwing away what the church has stood for. They are saying that we don’t need these things anymore. But if we allow this old truth to go, we find that the wall crumbles and the enemies outside gain access to our soul. The next gate is the Old Gate. You will find it in Verse 6. What does this gate symbolize? Well, I suggest that it represents God. Truth will never change. It was true when it was uttered. It was also true a hundred thousand years before it was uttered. And it will be true a hundred thousand years from now.

I often think of a story about the fellow who one day went to visit an old musician. He knocked on the musician’s door and said, “What’s the good word for today?” The old musician didn’t say a word. He turned around and went back across the room to where a tuning fork was hanging. He took a hammer and struck the tuning fork so that the note re-

sounded through the room. Then the musician said, “That, my friend, is ‘A’. It was ‘A’ yesterday. It was ‘A’ five thousand years ago; and it will be ‘A’ five thousand years from now.” Then he added, “The tenor across the hall sings off-key. The soprano upstairs is flat on her high notes. And the piano in the next room is out of tune.” He struck the tuning fork again and said, “That is ‘A’ and that, my friend, is the good word for today.”

That is truth. Truth is always the same. It never changes. We need to rebuild the old gates of truth.

- The next gate is the Valley Gate, and you can see immediately what it suggests. It is the place of humility, isn’t it? It is the place of lowliness of mind and humbleness of heart. God has said in every page of Scripture that he is against the pride of men. He looks for the lowly, the humble, the contrite, and those who have learned that they are not indispensable. They have learned to have a low opinion of themselves but a high opinion of their God. It is this attitude that he seeks. This Valley Gate often needs to be repaired.
- The Fountain Gate is next. That name reminds us instantly of the words of the Lord Jesus to the woman at the well, “The water that I shall give [you] will become in [you] a spring of water [a fountain] welling up to eternal life,” (John 4:14 RSV). It speaks of the Holy Spirit, which is the river of life in us – the flowing of the Spirit of God in our lives, to enable us to obey his will and his word.
- This is followed by the Water Gate. Water is always a symbol of the word of God. The interesting thing about this Water Gate (as opposed to the one in our nation’s capitol) is that it did not need to be repaired. Evidently it was the only part of the wall that was still standing. It mentions the people who lived by it, but it doesn’t mention its needing repair. The Word of God never breaks down. It doesn’t need to be repaired. It simply needs to be reinhabited.
- Then comes the East Gate. The East Gate faced the rising sun, and is the gate of hope. It

is the gate of anticipation of what is yet to come when all the trials of life and all the struggles of earth will end and the glorious new sun will rise on the new day of God. This gate needs to be rebuilt in many of us who fall under the pessimistic spirit of this age and are crushed by the hopelessness of our time.

- Next is the Horse Gate. The horse in Scripture is a symbol of warfare or, in this case, the need to do battle against the forces of darkness. “We are not contending against flesh and blood,” the apostle says, “but against the principalities, against the powers ... the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places,” (Eph 6:12 RSV). This is the battle!
- The ninth gate is the Muster Gate or, literally, the “examination gate.” This was evidently the place where judgment was conducted. We need to sit and take a look at ourselves every now and then – to stop and re-evaluate what we are doing.

That brings us around again in the last part of the chapter to the Sheep Gate, the gate of the cross. The cross must be at the beginning and the end of every life. Now, in this beautiful way, the book of Nehemiah is teaching us what needs to be done to strengthen the walls in our lives.

The next chapters, four through six, cover the persecution that arose from building the city walls. As I have already suggested, when you start to rebuild the strength of your life you will find that a force immediately arouses itself, both within yourself and outside yourself, and that resists God’s work in your life with every influence that can be used against you. The persecution revealed here can be summarized in three words – contempt, conspiracy, and cunning. The enemies tried to mock or heap contempt on what God was doing. When they failed, they attempted a conspiracy. They tried to involve the Israelites in a plot that would overthrow this work. When that failed, they tried to call Nehemiah away from his work by a very cunning scheme. But when you come to Chapter 6, Verse 15, you read this wonderful sentence:

So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. {Neh 6:15 RSV}

An amazing record!

In the latter part of the book, Chapters 7 through 13, is the story of **reinstruction**. This is the way to retain strength once it is rebuilt.

In Chapter 8 we have the great calling together of the people by Ezra the priest that is recorded also in the book of Ezra. Notice the steps here. It began with the reading of the Law, Chapter 8, Verses 5 and 6:

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people [this is the way to preach] for he was above all the people; and when he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God; and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. {Neh 8:5-6 RSV}

And Verse 8:

And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. {Neh 8:8 RSV}

This is nothing more or less than expository preaching. This was the first means of retaining the strength represented by the walls.

After this, the people celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles, when Israel dwelt in booths made of tree boughs to remind them that they were simply strangers and pilgrims on earth. Next was the remembrance of the lessons of the past.

In Chapter 9 you have Ezra’s tremendous prayer, when he recounted what God had done in the life of this people. It is always good to stop and remember what God has taught you in the past. That is always a sure way to preserve the strength that God gives you. Following this prayer, the people signed a covenant and agreed that they would do what the Law demanded. They covenanted; they resolved that they would take the step of obedience.

I can tell you out of my own experience as well that you will never be able to retain the strength that God gives you until you are ready to be obedient to what he says. You must obey him whenever you hear and know what he wants.

In the eleventh chapter is the recognition of gifts among the people. There are the Levites, the gate keepers, the singers, and various others who ministered in the temple. Similarly, in the New Testament we are told to discover the gifts that the Spirit has given us and to put them to work. “Rekindle the gift of God that is within you” (2 Tim 1:6 RSV), Paul wrote to Timothy. If you want to retain your strength, start using what God has given you.

Then, in Chapter 12, in the dedication of the walls, the people gathered and marched around them with instruments, singing and shouting, playing and rejoicing, and crying out with great joy. There is nothing that will add more to your strength in the Lord than to express the joy of the Lord in your life.

The book closes with the matter of resistance to evil. Your strength will be maintained if you will take the attitude that Nehemiah took for God. He was ready to say “No!” to the forces that would destroy what God was doing in his life. Look what he had to do. In Chapter 13, Verse 7, having gone back to Babylon and returned to Jerusalem, he says:

I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah [this man was first mentioned in the beginning of the book as an enemy of the Jews], **preparing for him [the enemy of God] a chamber in the courts of the house of God.** {Neh 13:7b RSV}

He had allowed Tobiah to move right into the temple! What did Nehemiah do? He said:

I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. {Neh 13:8 RSV}

He went in and threw Tobiah’s furniture out into the street. And that isn’t all. He found that the priests had been cheated, so he restored the money that belonged to them. Then he discovered that throughout the city the people were violating the Sabbath. They were bringing in merchandise and selling it in the streets. In Verse 19 he says:

When it began to be dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and

gave orders that they should not be opened until after the sabbath. {Neh 13:19a RSV}

He kept them all out of the city. Then he discovered that some of them were waiting outside the doors all night, hoping that someone would come out and do a little business. So what did he do?

I warned them and said to them, “Why do you lodge before the wall? If you do so again I will lay hands on you.” {Neh 13:21a RSV}

Then he discovered yet another problem. The people were still intermarrying with the forbidden races around them. Nehemiah became violent. In Verse 25 he says:

I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair [What a man!]; **and I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.”** {Neh 13:25 RSV}

But that still isn’t all. He found that one of the fellows who was his foremost enemy, who had done more than any other to oppose the building of the wall, was Sanballat the Horonite. In Verse 28 we read:

And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; [So what did he do with him?] **therefore I chased him from me.** {Neh 13:28 RSV}

Now perhaps you feel that Nehemiah was too severe. But here, you see, is a man who has learned that there can be no compromise with evil. He has learned one of the greatest lessons that the Spirit of God can ever teach anyone – to say “No!” when it needs to be said.

It was on this very note that the Lord Jesus began his ministry in Jerusalem. As he came into the temple and found it filled with the money changers, who were defiling the house of prayer, he made a whip of cords and drove them out of the temple. There is nothing gentle about that!

Here is a man who is thoroughly angry, with sparks flying from his eyes, and yet he is perfectly justified in what he does because he is resolutely

saying “No” to that which defiles the temple of God.

Those who have made a mark for God throughout the history of the church have been those who have learned to say “No,” and have said it at the right time. You read the story of the Covenanters, of Martin Luther, of John and Charles Wesley, of all those who have moved against evil in the world, and they were always men or women who had learned to say “No!” They stood against anything that defiles the temple of God.

Now these are the ways by which strength is maintained in our lives also. As we come to the close of this book we see that the walls of Jerusa-

lem stand once again and God’s testimony is re-established in this city.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this look into your word, into the truth that affects our own lives. We pray that we also may learn, as Nehemiah did, to be disciplined, courageous, confident in you, and willing to say “No,” willing to be absolutely ruthless against the forces that would undermine and sap the vitality of our lives in you. In Christ’s name, Amen.

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ESTHER: A Queen Under Control

by Ray C. Stedman

This little gem, tucked away in an obscure corner of the Old Testament, is a very rich book, and it is historical. Although there are unfortunately those today who suggest that some of the stories in the Old Testament are legends, there is substantial evidence that the events of Esther actually occurred. It took place in the days of Israel's captivity when as a nation it was under bondage to Babylon. During the days of that captivity a man arose who, as prime minister of Babylon, launched an attack on the Jews and tried to stamp out these people, just as Hitler tried in a more recent time. God moved in a wonderful way to deliver his people through Esther, who became the queen of this foreign kingdom.

In this book you have one of the most exciting stories of all time. It is more than simply a story of God's power in delivering the Jews. In one sense it is the most unusual account in the Bible because the name of God never appears in it. There is mention of neither heaven nor hell. There is no mention of anything particularly religious. It is the kind of story that you might find in the pages of a literary periodical, but here it is in the Bible. Many have wondered why that is so, and the answer is that this is a marvelous parallel to what is going on in our own lives. The thing that makes this book so fascinating is that this is our story. As we trace through the events of this book we can see how accurately it illustrates what is happening to us when God is at work in the human heart. Paul gives us the key in the New Testament when he says, "these things ... were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come," (1 Cor 10:11 RSV).

The story is that of a king and his kingdom. The king divorces the queen who is at his side when

the story opens, and thereby becomes a lonely man by his own decree. He is powerless to change the decree after it is issued, and in his loneliness he begins a search for a new queen. As we trace this story we will find that it runs exactly parallel to that of mankind. The book opens in a time of peace and blessing with the king throwing a great feast for his lords. There are hundreds and thousands of people there, and the feast lasts for six months. During this time the king has nothing to do but to lavishly display the glory and beauty of his kingdom.

Interestingly enough, we discover in the Scriptures that man was made to be king like this. We have seen this pattern before. Each of us is given a kingdom over which to rule. Our soul is the kingdom, including the faculties of mind, emotion, and, above all, the right to choose. Man's body is the capital city of this kingdom. The empire includes all that he influences and touches. The king, seated upon the throne of that kingdom, is the will. There is also a hidden member of our life – the inner life, or spirit, as we shall see. This is the deepest and most sensitive part of our being, the part designed to be in touch with God, the place where God himself is to dwell.

Now, as we see that this king had nothing to do but to display the glory of his kingdom, so also man, when he first appeared on earth, had nothing to do but display the glory of God who indwelt him and to rule in dominion over the earth given to him. But this king lifted himself up in pride and tried to destroy his queen. That is, he tried to disgrace her by summoning her to display her beauty before the whole court.

This is a picture of us, paralleling the account of the fall of man, when man chose to assert his

reason over the supremacy of revelation. In the palace of man's spirit, symbolized by the queen in this story, dwelt the God of glory and truth. It was there that the mind, emotions, and will of man were guided by fellowship with the living Lord, who dwelt in the royal residence of the spirit. Man was to subject his reason to revelation, and, in doing so, he would fulfill his destiny and utilize the full powers of his humanity in the purpose for which they were intended. However, as you know, there was introduced into life a principle that tempted man to assert the power of his reason over revelation. Man began to choose what he himself wanted to do, rather than what God wanted him to do, and with this came the fall.

This is portrayed for us in the opening chapters of Esther, when the king issued a decree that the queen was to be deposed from the throne. This decree became the law of the Medes and the Persians and the king could do nothing about it once it was issued. From then on he became a lonely king. In his loneliness he began to search for a new queen. The proclamation was sent out through all the kingdom to bring all the beautiful maidens before him. One by one they appeared, among them a beautiful girl named Esther, who was one of the captives taken from Jerusalem and brought over into the land of Babylon. With her was her cousin Mordecai. These two are the most important characters in this story. Esther pictures the renewed spirit that is given to man when he becomes a Christian, when he is regenerated, when his spirit is made alive in Jesus Christ. She is under the influence and control of her cousin, Mordecai, who throughout this book is a picture for us of the Holy Spirit and his activity in our lives. This man's name means "little man" – man in his humility – and he is thus a picture of Christ.

In Chapter 2 the Spirit is received when Esther, under the control of her cousin, Mordecai, is brought before the king and he falls in love with her. Because of her beauty, he immediately chooses her to be his queen and exalts her to the second place in the kingdom. In that scene you have a picture of what might be called the conversion of this king. He receives a new spirit, without understanding that the Holy Spirit also is involved – many of us today may have failed to understand this at the moment of our becoming Christians. But Mordecai is there in the background and we shall see how he becomes one of the prominent

characters in this story of the wonderful deliverance of the kingdom.

Now in Chapter 3 of this book we are introduced to the villain, a slimy character by the name of Haman the Agagite. As you trace this man's ancestry back through Scripture you discover that an Agagite is an Amalekite, and Amalek was that race of people, descendants of Esau, against whom God had said he would make war forever, (Exod 17:16). King Saul had been ordered to completely eliminate this people, but, in his folly, he chose to spare Agag the king of the Amalekites and thus perpetuated this faithless force in Israel. Throughout the whole of Scripture, this tribe of Amalekites represents the indwelling desire in our hearts that is continually opposed to all that God wants to do. This is what the New Testament calls "the flesh," and whenever the Spirit of God begins to move to bless us, this thing rises up to oppose the Spirit and do all it can in its subtle, clever, crafty way to hinder the work of God. Now that is Haman.

In Chapter 3 we read that as soon as Haman comes to wield power in a place of prominence just below the king, he is immediately antagonistic toward Mordecai. These two are instantly in direct conflict because Haman was "the enemy of the Jews." Learning that Mordecai is a Jew, he vows to eliminate him from the kingdom, and all through this account we read over and over again that the thing characterizing Haman is that he hates the Jews. Now why does he hate the Jews? Chapter 3, Verse 8, says:

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not for the king's profit to tolerate them." {Est 3:8 RSV}

In other words, here is a people who obey a different life principle. Just as the spirit of man indwelt by the Holy Spirit is immediately subject to a different rule of living, a different way of thinking, a different demand, so these Jews are obeying a different principle. Because they are God's people, Haman is furious in his rage against them, and he concocts a terrible strategy. This man was very clever, just as the flesh within us is very clever in its strategy to keep us under bondage. The story of

this book is about the way God works to get the wrong man out of control and the right man in. The reason we have problems as Christians – even after being born again – is that the flesh subtly and cleverly opposes all that God attempts to do in our lives. These words in Galatians accurately describe the whole struggle:

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. {Gal 5:17 RSV}

Now Haman immediately goes to work to persuade the king that, for the king's own benefit, he should eliminate these people. Haman, then, becomes the power behind the throne. He controls the king. The king does what Haman wants him to do, and issues an edict to eliminate the Jews from all the kingdom. Just so, in our lives the flesh continually strives to render inoperative the control of the Holy Spirit and to cause us to continually walk according to the old self-serving, self-loving, self-satisfying principles that prevail in the world around us. We read that when Haman and Mordecai come face-to-face this enmity begins. The Spirit is resisted and, at the close of Chapter 3, Haman has prevailed upon the king to give him the royal ring (the mark of authority and power) and to issue the edict which would destroy the Jews throughout the kingdom.

After he does this, the king in his folly thinks that Haman is his friend, and invites him in to have a drink and to pat him on the back. He congratulates himself on his cleverness with Haman. Often in our own lives we think that we too have displayed cleverness in standing up for our own rights and insisting that nobody walk roughshod over us. We feel that we have acted very cleverly, and congratulate ourselves for exercising control over a situation. Yet all the time we are unaware that in our utter folly we have done the very thing that will instead continue to wreak havoc in our lives and put us entirely at the mercy of this deadly enemy within, the flesh.

In Chapter 4 we have the story of how God begins to move. Mordecai is grieved. Haven't you had this experience of living with a grieved Spirit? The first thing that the Spirit of God does when we begin to walk in the flesh is to create a sense of

disquiet within, a sense of grief. It is deep within us. We hardly know how to put our finger on it. We know that something is not right, but we don't know what it is. Esther sees that Mordecai is very distressed and, not knowing what to do, she sends him a change of clothes, hoping that will take care of the problem. Many times when we are distressed and grieved in spirit because of our attitudes and our activities, we often think that some superficial change will correct the matter. We think the problem concerns only what we are doing, and not what we are.

Then Mordecai sends a messenger named Hathach (by the way, that means the truth) to convince Esther that she is up against a serious problem. He unfolds to Esther the whole deadly plot of this cunning Haman: how he is out to destroy the Jews, including the queen herself, although Haman does not know that Esther is a Jew. When Esther hears this she is disturbed and doesn't know what to do. Mordecai sends her further word, saying, "Now you must go to the king."

The problem is to get the king to understand that Haman is not his friend, just as the problem in our lives is to get us to really believe God when he tells us that the principles that characterize the flesh are not our friends. They are not on our side. When we get stubborn, belligerent, difficult, impatient – when we demonstrate qualities that characterize the flesh – we are not working for our own interests. We think we are. We think that these are the things that give us manliness, and humanity, and strength of character, and so on. And here we have a deluded king who doesn't know that his supposed best friend is really his worst enemy.

What Mordecai has asked Esther to do is a dangerous thing; to appear before the king without being summoned was in itself a sentence of death. So Esther sends word back to Mordecai, "You don't know what you are asking me to do. Don't you know that in asking me to go before the king like this you are literally sentencing me to death? The very moment that I step across that threshold, my life is forfeited. You are asking me to die." And she suggests that perhaps some other way can be worked out; and Mordecai replies bluntly, "Don't try to outwit Haman yourself. If you think you can outwit the strategy and cleverness of this man, you are wrong. He'll outwit you. He'll outmaneuver you. He'll move in behind you. He'll trap you. You will end up whipped." This is what

the seventh chapter in Romans so clearly teaches us. If we think that we can handle the flesh with our will-power alone, we are whipped.

This is one of the most difficult things to grasp about the Christian life. It is the most elusive thing to understand – that we must come to the end of ourselves, and that we must die to our own resources in order to handle the flesh. We cannot do this alone. We cannot do it by clenching our fists, or gritting our teeth, or signing New Year’s resolutions, or by determining we are not going to act in a certain way any longer. Esther must learn that the only one who is capable of handling Haman is Mordecai, and she must be willing to die to her own resources in order to handle this man.

As Esther faces this truth, she says:

“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” {Est 4:16 RSV}

“After three days and nights” – that certainly is significant, isn’t it? Three days and nights Jesus Christ lay in the grave on our behalf, dead for us. On the third day Esther puts on her royal robes and stands in the inner courts of the king’s palace opposite the king’s hall, waiting in fear and uncertainty, hardly knowing what will happen when the king sees her. But when he does, he sees her in the beauty of the resurrected life. “On the third day” she comes, on the day of resurrection, in power and glory, and his heart is captivated by her beauty. He says to Queen Esther, “Ask anything you want. I will give it to you, up to half of my kingdom.”

Then we find a strange thing taking place. Esther doesn’t ask him for anything; she simply asks him to dinner the next day and says to bring Haman along. What is the meaning of that? I think there is nothing more significant than this: we never can second-guess the Holy Spirit in the way he will handle a situation. We never know how he is going to work. The apparently logical response would have been that Esther immediately say, “Look, you asked me to make a request. What I want is the head of Haman on a platter.” But she doesn’t do that. Evidently in obedience to Mordecai’s orders, she waits. And while she waits, we discover that something interesting happens: Ha-

man is trapped by his own folly. Mordecai gives Esther directions to invite the king and Haman to dinner. After the dinner, the king asks her what she wants, and she says, “I want you to come back again tomorrow night for dinner.” Haman goes out walking on air, absolutely and completely thrilled with what has happened. He returns to his wife and his sons, and says, “I knew I was the king’s fair-haired boy, but now I discover that I am the queen’s favorite as well. I’ve got them eating right out of my hand.” He begins to boast of his exploits,

Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. {Est 5:9 RSV}

When the flesh within us boasts and becomes arrogant and proud, and we congratulate ourselves on the way we stick up for our rights and the way we can cleverly maneuver things around as we want them, there is One who remains totally unimpressed – the Holy Spirit. He is not at all intimidated by our cleverness. This grates on Haman and eats at his heart, and he says to his wife and sons, “I cannot live, I cannot stand it as long as this man Mordecai is in the court.” His wife says, “If he stands in your way, get rid of him. Hang him. Erect a gallows 75 feet high (that’s how high 50 cubits is) and in the morning go tell the king to hang him.” Isn’t that just like the flesh? If anything gets in your way, get rid of it. Don’t let anybody stand in your way. Move right on through. Assert yourself. Stick out your chest and walk right on in as tyrant – king of your world.

Well, it looks as though the wrong man is going to end up on the gallows, doesn’t it? But the plot is saved, and do you know what turned the trick? Pizza, late at night. At least that’s what I think it was, for we read,

On that night the king could not sleep; and he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. {Est 6:1 RSV}

He found how certain men, Bigthana and Teresh, two of his own guards, had plotted against his life. He read that Mordecai had found it out and reported it, so that these two men were put to death

as traitors against the king. This was recorded in the book and it was by the book that deliverance began to come, for there the king discovered who his real friend was. And as he read, he noted that he had done nothing to honor Mordecai.

Have you ever had that experience while reading in the book of memorable deeds about the most memorable deed of all history? You learn that One took your place and died in your stead and fought off all the powers of darkness and hell for your sake, laying down his life on your behalf; and it suddenly dawns on you that you have done nothing to honor him, nothing to thank him. When the king reaches this point he calls for whoever is in the outside court to come in – and who is there but Haman! He comes in and the king asks him for advice:

“What can the king do to the man in whom he delights?” {cf, Est 6:6}

Of course the flesh always knows who that is. Haman thinks, “Well, who else would be the king’s favorite but me?” Thus he thinks of the greatest honor he could possibly enjoy. He says to the king, “If you really want to honor the man in whom you delight, then give him your crown, your robe, your authority, everything you are, and set him on your horse. Then appoint some prince to lead him through the city and cry out, ‘This is the man in whom the king delights!’” So the king says, “Haman that is wonderful. Go do it for Mordecai.”

I would love to have seen Haman’s face right then! But the interesting thing is that he does it. He does it! He goes through with this grinding, humiliating thing. He takes Mordecai, his hated enemy, and puts him on the horse and leads him through the city. Can’t you see him calling out as he goes along, “This is the man the king delights to honor.” But in his heart he is burning with furious rage and envy against this man. The point is, however, that the flesh does it. It will do anything for the sake of survival. It will get religious. It will come to church. It will sing in the choir. It will preach. It will pass out the hymn books. It will take up the collection. It will usher. It will give a testimony. It will do anything in order to survive.

Recently a converted Christian actor, a wonderful Christian man, told me of being in a great church in New York City – and, as a member of the young people’s band, he went out with others to

give testimonies before a group. He said the language was exactly the same as evangelicals use but the whole thrust of it was to the exaltation of the people who were giving the testimonies. There was a brassy brilliance about it that marked it as something not genuine. He said, “I learned there how the flesh can do everything religious and still be the flesh.” That is what is pictured here by Haman’s action.

The next day the king, Haman, and Esther come together, and there Queen Esther reveals the perfidy of Haman. The king is horror-struck. He doesn’t know for a moment what to do. He goes out in the garden and paces up and down, just as you and I do when the spirit of God suddenly reveals to us that this thing we have been protecting and building fences around and excusing in ourselves is the great enemy of our souls. We realize, like the king, that a drastic change is called for. For it is a drastic thing to kill a prime minister, but that is what Queen Esther is asking for. The king knows that there can be no deliverance in his kingdom until this matter is ended, so he gives the orders: “Hang him on the gallows prepared for Mordecai.” So Haman is hanged on that gallows.

In Chapter 8 we read:

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, {Est 8:1a RSV}

Mordecai is now in the place of power. This is the fullness of the Spirit.

- In Chapter 2 the Spirit is received.
- In Chapter 3, the Spirit is resisted.
- In Chapter 4, the Spirit is grieved.
- In the last part of Chapter 4, the Spirit is quenched.
- Now you have the fullness of the Spirit.

With Mordecai coming to power in this empire everything begins to change. Instantly another decree goes out, allowing the Jews to fight their enemies and slay them.

Just so, in Chapter 8 of Romans we are told that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has now been issued. It sets us free from the law of sin and death and when we act in obedience to that new law – standing against these enemies that are at work in our own life, refusing to acknowledge their power – we discover that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus lifts us up and gives us victory and power in the place where we were once defeated. Here at the end of the book we discover the same king and the same kingdom – just as you are the same person, living in the same home, among the same people, working in the same shop – but with a different government, a different management. Mordecai is now on the throne.

One brief passage in the book of Romans outlines the whole story of this book. It says:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh [Haman-minded] but according to the Spirit [Mordecai-minded]. {Rom 8:3-4 RSV}

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this beautiful story and pray that we might grasp it and understand it. May this book speak to us and teach us what is happening in our own lives, so that we may discover the victory that is available to us today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

JOB: The Hardest Question

by Ray C. Stedman

The gripping and challenging book of Job is perhaps one of the most fascinating books of the Old Testament, and it begins a new division in the Scriptures. The books from Genesis to Esther are all narrative books, and are vitally meaningful to us as living parables, as types worked out in actual history by which we can see what is going on in our own lives.

Job begins another section – the poetical books of the Bible – which also includes Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and the little book of Lamentations, tucked in behind Jeremiah. Job is a great poem. Some have said that it is perhaps even the greatest poem in all literature. Perhaps nothing that Shakespeare has written exceeds this book in beauty of expression. It is admired everywhere as one of the most beautiful writings that man has ever known. But it is more than an expressive, dramatic writing; it has a very great message, as we shall see.

It is a drama, an epic drama much like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the poems by Homer from the Greek world. But the book of Job is also history. Job was an actual, living person and these events actually took place, but God recounts them for us in this beautiful style so that we might have an answer to the age-old, haunting question, “Why does apparently senseless tragedy strike men?” Any time you get into difficulties it is well to turn to the book of Job. Here is a man who experienced an agony of human despair and desolation of spirit which accompanied the apparently meaningless, senseless tragedies that came into his life.

Now, the ultimate answer to that question is given right at the beginning of the book. At the opening we are handed certain program notes that explain to us something about the drama, some-

thing which even the actors themselves are not permitted to know. The answer given is that senseless suffering arises out of Satan’s continual challenge to the government of God.

So, as the book opens, we find God meeting with the angelic creation. Among them is Satan, who strides in sneering and swaggering, convinced that self-interest is the only real motive for human behavior. Satan’s philosophy is that the question “What’s in it for me?” is the only accurate explanation for why people do anything.

And here, in the presence of God, he asserts that anyone who claims that human beings act from any other motive is simply a religious phony; furthermore, he claims he can prove it. God says, rather patiently, “All right, we’ll test your theory.” Then he selects the man Job to be the proving ground.

In World War II at the opening of the war between Japan and the United States, it looked as though this conflict would be staged in the Pacific Ocean – very likely the islands of Hawaii, for the battle began at Pearl Harbor. But very early in the war, as you will remember, events took a sudden startling turn and without a word of warning the whole theater of battle shifted abruptly to the South Pacific. For the first time, Americans began to hear of strange names of islands, like “Guadalcanal” and others. There, in those quiet, obscure, out-of-the way corners of the earth, the greatest powers on earth were locked in mortal combat. The islands became the battleground for the great fight between empires.

And something like this happened in the story of Job. Here is a man going about his private affairs, unaware that he has suddenly become the center of God’s attention. For the time being all of

God's activity has focused upon him, and he has become the battleground for a conflict between God and Satan in which God is planning to pull the rug out from under Satan, and to reveal him as the phony that he is. Job is that battleground, and Satan immediately moves in with shock troops.

In Chapter 1 we read that, one by one, the props are pulled out of Job's life. It is as though some Western Union telegram boy delivers a series of messages to Job about terrible catastrophes. Hard on the heels of the first comes another one, and the messages keep coming in. First, all Job's oxen have been taken by enemy raids, and then all his asses have been decimated. Next, word comes that his sheep have been killed by a terrible electric storm, and crowding in after that is the news that his great herd of camels, true wealth in the oriental world, has been wiped out in a natural catastrophe. Then comes the heartrending news that his seven sons and three daughters were together in one home enjoying a birthday celebration when a great tornado hit and the house was demolished. All of his children were killed in one fatal blow.

Job takes it all in stride. At the end of Chapter 1 his response to this terrible series of tragic, senseless accidents is:

“Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gives, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” {Job 1:21 RSV}

I wonder if we would have responded that way? Satan is somewhat taken aback, so he asks God to change the rules of the game. Satan has decided to attack Job more directly and petitions God for the right to strike Job's own body. This God grants. Without warning, Job is suddenly stricken with a series of terrible boils, or carbuncles.

There was a time in my life, during a period of about a year and a half, when I had some twenty-five boils on my body, though no more than two or three at one time. Since then I have had a deep sympathy for dear old Job. There is nothing more aggravating than a painful boil which is not relieved by any kind of medication. You can only grit your teeth and endure agony until the boil comes to a head, and heals itself.

Consider how Job is stricken with these from the top of his head to the sole of his foot. He

hardly knows what to do, but is determined to wait it out. As the malady continues, his wife is the one whose faith succumbs. She turns on him and says, “Are you still holding fast to your integrity? Why don't you curse God and die?” Job has to stand alone, but he is determined to be faithful. Then comes the final test, when he receives a visit from three of his friends.

At this point the whole book slightly shifts its focus. We now are no longer looking only at Job but also at his controversy with these three friends, and their discourse occupies the major part of the book. From their human (very human) point of view, they attempt to answer that same haunting question, “Why do senseless tragedies afflict men?” The major part of the book, written in beautifully poetic language, records the attempts by these men to come to an answer. And the three friends' answers are all the same. They answer the question of Job's problems with smug, dogmatic assurances that only one explanation is possible: he has committed some awful sin. They try to break down Job's defenses with arguments.

Now, they are not necessarily wrong in their explanation. There are tragic events – catastrophes, heartache, pain, and suffering – which do occur because of sin. Any time that we violate the laws of God's universe, including the laws of health, there is an immediate and sometimes violent physical reaction and much suffering comes from that. But the problem in his friends' arguments – and their evil – lay in their dogmatic assertion that this is the only explanation possible for all kinds of suffering.

They each take three rounds with Job. Each of them presents three arguments, nine arguments in all, and each plays the same tune. They try various approaches. First they try sarcasm and irony. Then they appeal to Job's honesty. Then they accuse him of specific crimes and misdeeds. Finally they act hurt and go away, miffed and sulking, proudly appealing to Job's conscience not to insult them any more. All the time they are attacking his integrity with the argument that if God is indeed just, then the righteous are always blessed and the wicked always suffer; therefore, if an individual is suffering, it must be because there is something wrong in his life. This is their argument. To these men, the explanation is a simple matter of cause and effect and is quite logical. It is neat and tidy

and explains everything – that is, unless you happen to be the sufferer.

At first Job is slightly irritated with these friends. But then he becomes angry and, finally, sarcastic. In the opening lines of his reply, he delivers a cutting piece of irony: “I am sure you alone are the people and wisdom is going to die with you,” (cf, Job 12:2). “You’ve got all the answers, you’ve solved all the problems, you know everything. So there’s no use talking to you any longer!” With bitter sarcasm he replies that their explanation of his suffering is in error. Resentful, he openly entreats them to understand. He says he can’t confess sin because he is genuinely unaware of anything he has done that has offended God. Moreover, he can’t believe in justice any longer because their arguments that the wicked always suffer simply are not true. He points out that many people who are very wicked, notoriously wicked, are prospering and flourishing and living in ease, and nothing horrible is happening to them.

Furthermore, he says, he doesn’t know what to do because God won’t listen to him; he doesn’t even have a chance to plead his case before God, and he complains that God hides from him and cannot be found. Eventually Job actually shouts at these friends in the turmoil of his confusion, bewilderment, anger, hurt, and frustration. He says he is afraid of this God, who is not the God he has known. He doesn’t know what has happened to this dear old friend whom he could always rely upon. Job has taken a strange turn in his attitude now that these awful things are happening to him. He is uncertain what to think or say.

The glorious thing about this dear man is that, throughout the whole book, he is utterly and completely honest. Confused and bewildered and puzzled by what is happening, he simply blurts out his thoughts. He refuses to admit things that he cannot accept: “All these pat answers don’t help at all!” In his desolation he expresses in various ways the ultimate cry of the human spirit. Some wonderful verses emerge from this discourse by Job. Stripped as he is to his very soul, he cries out again and again with some of the deepest expressions of the human heart. In Chapter 9 he says of God,

**For he is not a man, as I am, that I might
answer him,
that we should come to trial together.
{Job 9:32 RSV}**

In Hebrew, his words are literally,

**Would that there were an umpire between
us,
oh that there were a daysman, a mediator
between us
who might lay his hand upon us both.
(Job 9:32-33)**

That is the cry of a heart that recognizes that God is higher and greater and richer and holier than man, and man can’t reach him. It is the cry for a mediator to come between them.

Then in Chapter 14 comes another expression out of this man’s faithful heart:

**If a man die, shall he live again?
All the days of my service I would wait,
till my release should come.
(Job 14:14 RSV)**

“If I knew that after I die I would live again, I would gladly wait until that time to argue my case before God!” “If a man die, shall he live again?” This great cry – the question uttered by so many – wells up from the depths of this man’s desolation and suffering.

Then in Chapter 16 Job cries out,

**Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven,
and he that vouches for me is on high.
{Job 16:19 RSV}**

Earlier he had cried out for a mediator: “Oh, that I might have somebody step in between me and God.” Now at last, born of his desperation, “I realize now that the only one who can adequately argue my case for me is God himself. If any cause of mine is going to be fairly presented before God, God himself has to do it.”

In Chapter 19 comes another distressed cry, in which he sounds this note of awful intensity:

**“Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were graven in the rock for ever!”
{Job 19:23-24 RSV}**

That prayer was fulfilled in this record, the book of Job. Then, at last, a ray of light shines in his darkness:

**“For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then from my flesh [“in my flesh,” in the
Hebrew] I shall see God.” (Job 19:25-
26 RSV)**

Out of the dark, deep distress of this man come these cries which find their fulfillment in the coming of Jesus Christ. He came to be mediator. He came to give assurance that man shall live again. He came to stand between man and God. He came to stand in the flesh upon the earth that man might see him face-to-face.

Now comes the final blow to Job, after all these so-called friends have had their chance with him and have tried to beat him down their arguments pounding him again and again like a club. Poor Job – bruised, defeated, puzzled, bewildered, and confused – now meets with a young man who happened to be standing there all along but who is only now interjected into the picture. His name is Elihu. Speaking for youth, he stands up to say, “You are all wrong. You friends of Job are wrong because you accuse him unjustly, and Job is wrong because he blames God for his difficulty. He is accusing God in order to exonerate himself.” Elihu points out the weaknesses in both arguments but still offers nothing positive to answer the question of Job’s misery.

But suddenly the Lord himself answers Job. In a whirlwind’s fury he comes to him and says, “Do you want to debate, Job? You have been saying that you want some answers to your questions and that I have been hiding and am not willing to debate with you. Do you want to debate your case? All right. First, let me see your qualifications. I have a list here of forty questions I would like to ask you, to see if you are competent to understand problems. These are very simple problems, very simple questions, and if you are able to handle these ABC’s, then perhaps you are able to debate with me the questions you have in your heart.”

Then, in Chapters 38 through 40, you have one of the most remarkable passages in all of the Bible. God takes Job on a tour of nature and asks him question after question about Job’s ability to deal with this kind of thing or that kind of thing in nature. Gradually these three chapters draw the picture of a vastly complicated, intricately intertwined

universe for which is required a tremendous super-human mind to direct all these activities, to keep life in balance and to answer all the questions that the Lord is asking Job to answer.

At the end of this overwhelming display of the wisdom of God, Job falls down on his face and says:

**“I had heard of thee by the hearing of the
ear,
but now my eye sees thee;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”
(Job 42:5-6 RSV)**

God’s essential argument is that life is too complicated for simple answers. If you are demanding that God come up with simple answers to these deep and complicated problems, you are asking him to do more than you are able to understand. He is simply saying that only God can adequately deal with the answers to these kinds of questions. Therefore, man must take the position of trusting him – not arguing with him. God has displayed in the most amazing way his ability to work out complicated situations while keeping human life and the life of the entire world – with all their tremendously involved complexities – in beautiful balance. Now if you really see that, then you must trust God to work out these complicated problems of life.

Job, overwhelmed by the vast might and wisdom and majesty of God, falls on his face, repents, and learns the lesson that God wants him to learn. Only God has the right to use men for whatever purpose he desires. In other words, God does not exist for man but man exists for God. God is not a glorified bell-boy at whom we can snap our fingers and have him run up asking, “May I take your order?” We exist for him. We are God’s instruments for the working out of his purposes, some of which are so vastly complicated they are quite beyond our ability to understand. There are many questions which simply cannot be answered because our calculating machinery is so inadequate.

The last of the book is a beautiful picture of what James calls the tender mercies of God toward Job (cf, Jas 5:11). God says to Job, “Now I want you to pray for your friends – these three dear men, so stubborn, so sure that they had all the answers, so well meaning, so sincere, so dedicated, but such utter blunderers. Pray for them, Job.”

Then God said to Job, "How many sheep did you have?" Job said, "Seven thousand." God said, "All right, I will give you fourteen thousand. How many oxen did you have?" And he said, "Five hundred." God replied, "I'll give you a thousand. How many camels?" "Three thousand." "All right, Job, you will have six thousand camels. How many asses did you have?" "Five hundred." "I'll give you a thousand. How many sons and daughters?" "Seven sons and three daughters." "All right, you will have seven sons and three daughters more, doubled. Twice as many. Seven sons and three daughters in glory and seven sons and three daughters on earth." God restored twice as much to Job and he lived the rest of his life in blessedness and happiness. The account closes with the words,

And Job died, and old man, and full of days. (Job 42:17 RSV)

Now the remarkable thing about this book is the answer we are given: the fact that the backdrop to human suffering is the age-long conflict of Satan's challenge to God's righteous government of the universe. This answer is never given to Job, at least while he lives. At the beginning of the book you find God, Satan, and Job. At the end of the book, Satan has faded out of the picture entirely and God stands before Job with his arms akimbo, saying, "All right, I am responsible. Any questions?" The great lesson of the book is that there are times when we cannot be told the whole picture. There are times when God does not adequately explain life to us. There are times when we must trust that not all suffering occurs because we are bad, but because it can also be the source of some final good. The deepest note in the book may be struck when, out of the desolation of his heart and yet with the Spirit of God within him urging him on

to faith in the midst of his bewilderment and confusion, Job says,

**But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tried me, I shall come forth
as gold. {Job 23:10 RSV}**

That is the lesson of this book. Life is too complicated for us to handle alone. It gets so involved that we can't even be given some of the answers at times, but God is saying, "If you just take a look at all the problems that I keep solving on the very simplest levels of life and which even then are far beyond your ability to cope with, can't you trust me to work this one out as well?" In Romans Paul rejoices, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose," (Romans 8:28).

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this look into Job's heart. Thank you for recording for us the struggles of this dear man as he frankly, openly, and honestly voices his doubts, airs his grievances, addresses you with his complaints. Lord, we hear ourselves, in our irksome petulance crying out to you, blaming you for our circumstances, unwilling to believe that you have a purpose behind them and are able to work them out. Lord, teach us to rest in you through the great and wonderful revelation that in every circumstance we are privileged to be instruments in the working out of victory over the enemy of man; to demonstrate once and for all that the only life worth living is a life lived by faith. We pray in your name. Amen.

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PSALMS: The Worship of an Honest Heart

by Ray C. Stedman

There are 150 psalms in this book, making it the longest book in the Bible. Have you discovered that it is really five books in one? It divides very easily and obviously into five different books, and each of these divisions is closed by a doxology. You will find the first one at the end of Psalm 41, and every other section as well ends with this kind of doxology. Psalm 41 ends:

**Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!
Amen and Amen. {Psa 41:13 RSV}**

These books were deliberately compiled with a special purpose in view. It has often been pointed out that the book of Psalms is the book of human emotions. Indeed, every experience of man's heart is reflected in this book. No matter what mood you may be in, some psalm will reflect that mood. For this amazing book records every one of man's emotions and experiences. Those who have discovered the "secret of perpetual emotion" certainly ought to get acquainted with the book of Psalms. For instance,

- If you are fearful, read Psalm 56 or Psalm 91 or Psalm 23 (you know that one, of course). And
- If you are discouraged, read Psalm 42 – one example among many.
- If you happen to be feeling lonely, then I would suggest Psalm 71 or Psalm 62.

- If you are oppressed, with a sense of sinfulness, there are two marvelous psalms for you: Psalm 51, written after David's double sin of adultery and murder; and Psalm 32, a great expression of confession and forgiveness. And then,
- If you are worried or anxious, I'd recommend Psalm 37 and Psalm 73.
- If you are angry, try Psalm 58 or Psalm 13.
- If you are resentful, read Psalm 94 or Psalm 77.
- If you are happy and want some words to express your happiness, try Psalm 92 or Psalm 66.
- If you feel forsaken, try Psalm 88.
- If you are grateful and you would like to say it, read Psalm 40.
- If you are doubtful, if your faith is beginning to fail, read Psalm 119.

And we could go on and on, because all 150 psalms have to do with experience.

Most of us think the psalms are David's work. In fact, more than half of them were written by David, the sweet singer of Israel, who was given by God the gift of capturing the emotions of his full life's varied experience and putting them in beautiful lyrical terms. These became the psalm book or

hymn book of Israel. Many of these psalms were written to be sung in public, which is why you will often find at the head of the psalm “To the chief choirmaster” or “To the choirmaster,” and in some of our Bibles is the word “Maskil” which is simply the Hebrew word for “psalm.”

You may be interested to know that one psalm, Psalm 90, was written by Moses, and two were composed by King Solomon. Still others were written by a nameless group called the sons of Korah who were especially charged with leading the singing of Israel. Also, a man named Asaph wrote many of the psalms, and even good King Hezekiah wrote ten of them. As you look into the book of Psalms, you can see that in many cases the titles refer to the author.

Now, the **five books of psalms** that I have already mentioned parallel the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible. Those first five books were designed by God to give us the pattern of God’s working in a human life, or in the whole of creation, or in the whole of world history, and God always follows the same pattern, whether with an individual or with a nation. He takes them through the same steps. And those five steps were revealed by divine inspiration in the first five books of the Bible. The psalms follow the same steps, reflecting the reactions of the human heart to this pattern of God’s working in man’s life.

1. To begin with, the first book of psalms – Psalms 1 through 41 – is equivalent to the book of Genesis and has essentially the same message. It is the cry of human need. It is the expression in beautiful, poetic terms of the human heart’s deepest need. You will find that it follows closely the story of the book of Genesis. It begins in Psalm 1 with the picture of the perfect man just as Genesis begins with man in the Garden of Eden. Then in Psalm 2, you have man in his rebellion. It is a notable psalm, beginning with the words:

**Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and his anointed,
saying,
“Let us burst their bonds asunder.”
{Psa 2:1-3a RSV}**

It describes man in his rebellion, just as Genesis pictures him in the Garden of Eden. In the third psalm we see man in his rejection, and right on through in the following psalms in this first book. Then the grace of God is introduced. Here is the picture of God seeking man out in the darkness – just as he did in the shadows of the Garden, crying out, “Adam, where art thou?” – and moving to restore man to his lost estate. And as you read through this book you will hear the human heart’s expression of deep-seated longing, of its separation from God, its calling out to God in need.

2. The second book of psalms, Psalm 42 through Psalm 72, corresponds to the book of Exodus in the Pentateuch. Here is the experience of a new relationship. Just as Exodus tells us the story of Israel in captivity in Egypt – learning of the sorrow, the bondage, and the slavery of sin, and then learning something of the great grace of God in his power to deliver them, to bring them out of Egypt – the second book of psalms traces the same account, carefully capturing the theme of Exodus. Psalm 45 is the psalm of God the king, concerning God in his sovereign rule over man and man’s experience of God as king. And in Psalm 46 we read the promise of God’s delivering help – that God is a present help in time of trouble. In Psalm 50 the strength of God is exemplified and Psalm 51 reveals the delivering grace of God to man in his sin. And in Psalm 72, the last psalm of this book, God is pictured in his mighty, conquering power, setting man free from the bondage in which sin has enslaved him.
3. The third book of psalms, Psalm 73 through Psalm 89, corresponds to the book of Leviticus. Leviticus is the book of the tabernacle of worship, the discovery of what God is like when man comes before him and what he himself is like in the presence of God. And Leviticus is the book that reveals the inner workings of man’s heart: we see his need, his deep consciousness of his own sin, and the discovery of what God offers to do about it. And in these psalms, 73 through 89, the same pattern is carried out. Psalm 75, for instance, is an ex-

quisite expression of man's awareness of God's judgment in the inner heart. Psalm 78 is a record of God's unbending love: although God loves man, he will never let him get away with anything. He never compromises, he never bends; he gives in to man's plea for mercy, but is absolutely relentless in cutting away sin. Then, when man is ready to acknowledge his sin, and to agree with God's judgment concerning sin, God deals with him in love. Psalm 81 describes the new strength that God offers man, and Psalm 84 wonderfully portrays the continuous provision that God offers us.

4. Psalms 90 through 106 make up the fourth book, paralleling the book of Numbers – the wilderness book – which sets forth the experience of human failure. Throughout this book you will find victory alternating with devastating defeat. Just as in our experience, God steps in and delivers the Israelites in the desert – working mighty miracles and ministering to their needs, feeding them with bread from heaven, opening the rock for them so that water would flow – and then, in the next chapter, Israel murmurs and complains and falls into defeat. This pattern is pictured in the fourth book of psalms.
5. The fifth book, Psalm 107 through Psalm 150, corresponds to the book of Deuteronomy, the experience of the new resource in God. Here these psalms picture the person who has come to the end of himself, and is now ready to lay hold of the fullness of God. And this final book of Psalms is nothing but thanksgiving and praise, from beginning to end. It sounds one triumphant note all the way through and the closing part of it is a constant “Hallelujah, praise the Lord!” It is the expression of someone so excited that all he can do is shout “Hallelujah!” And that is the way the entire book of Psalms closes.

Now that is the experience of man as he learns to understand the pattern of God's work in his life.

It may be of interest to you to know that the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon form a separate section of the Bible. These are **the books of poetry**.

- In Job we read the cry of man's spirit, the deep cry of a man needing faith – needing trust in God – even though everything seems to go wrong, and everything seems inexplicable. When suffering reaches such an intensity that it seems senseless and no longer of any obvious value, then man's only recourse is quiet faith. Man was made to believe in God.
- Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes join together to express the cry of man's soul, and just as the soul has three divisions – the emotions, the mind, and the will – so these books express these divisions.
 - Psalms is the book of emotions.
 - Proverbs is the book of the will. And
 - Ecclesiastes is the book of the mind, the story of Solomon's searching examination of all the philosophies of men and concluding on the basis of human reason what is right and good.

Here then, you have the soul's expression of its need pointing to one great answer – hope. Just as the answer to the cry of the spirit is faith, the answer to the cry of the soul is hope.

- Then in the Song of Solomon you have, essentially, the cry of the body for love. Our deepest need as men and women is love. Children cannot grow up adequately and rightly unless they have love. And this cry of the body is expressed in the most beautiful love poem ever written, the Song of Solomon.

Many have had difficulty getting much out of the psalms. They read through psalms that seem to be filled only with David's cry against his enemies, or that seem to be only a record of handicaps and trials. Many are quite troubled by what are sometimes called the imprecatory psalms, those psalms that speak with bitter and scorching words against enemies, calling God's wrath down upon them, wishing that enemies be torn limb from limb and hung from the nearest lamp post. This disturbs people. “What kind of writing is this?” they say. “This doesn't agree with the New Testament's message that we are to love our enemies!” But I think we can understand even these troubling psalms if we will remember what the New Testa-

ment tells us about the Old Testament, that “these things,” Paul says, “were written down for our instruction,” (1 Cor 10:11). And if we put ourselves in the place of the psalmist, right into his world, we will see that the enemies that he faced then are the same enemies that we face today. The New Testament tells us that “we are not contending against flesh and blood,” (Eph 6:12). Sometimes people are confused about this, thinking that whoever opposes them is their enemy. But people are not our enemies. Rather, the principles of evil, the philosophies of the world, the attitudes of the flesh are our enemies; our real enemies are within us. Jesus said, “not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth,” {Matt 15:11 RSV} ... “for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication,” {Matt 15:19 RSV} and all these other things. There is your enemy. And if you read the psalms with this understanding, whenever you read “enemy” you will think of those temptations toward covetousness or jealousy or pride or ambition within yourself as the enemy that is spoken of in the psalms, and you will see that this severe language makes sense. We must deal severely with these things. They have no right to live in a Christian’s heart, in a Christian’s life. They have no right to be honored.

This is right in line with what the Lord Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away;” {Matt 5:29a RSV}. “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away;” {Matt 5:30a RSV}. Now he doesn’t mean to do that literally; he simply means that we are to deal with temptation absolutely ruthlessly. Don’t entertain these things at all. And so these ruthless psalms are simply a picture of the way we must deal with the real enemies of the heart of man.

Let me give you an example: **Psalm 43** is a very brief psalm and we will look at it together so you can see what I mean. Here is the cry of the psalmist:

**Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from deceitful and unjust men deliver me!
For thou art the God in whom I take refuge;
why hast thou cast me off?
Why go I mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?
{Psa 43:1-2 RSV}**

Now when you read such a psalm, don’t think of the enemy as being people – the neighbors across the back fence, or your overbearing boss. The enemies are within you. Think of them that way. And when you do, you are treating Scripture as it was intended to be treated. These are instructions for us, as Paul tells us. As you read this psalm, you can see how easily it divides itself:

- The first two verses record an attitude of attack. And who has not felt this way? These things within us, these burning jealousies, these desires to strike back at people and avenge ourselves and get even with them – these are the enemy. Such an attack ought to drive us, like the psalmist, to cry out, “Lord defend my cause against these things. Thou art the God in whom I take refuge.” And if you feel you don’t seem to be getting through to God right away, you can understand what the psalmist means when he says, “Why hast thou cast me off? Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”
- But now move to the second group, the third and fourth verses. There is an appeal from the heart, a prayer:

**Oh send out thy light and thy truth;
let them lead me,
let them bring me to thy holy hill
and to thy dwelling! {Psa 43:3 RSV}**

In other words, take hold of some promise out of Scripture, some light, some verse that speaks directly to your heart, some truth that you need to remember about the adequacy of Jesus Christ who has already put these things to death on the cross. Then you read:

**Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise thee with the lyre,
O God, my God. {Psa 43:4 RSV}**

This means that your own soul will respond in prayer and praise.

- Then in Verse 5 is the application, as you begin asking yourself:

**Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within
me? {Psa 43:5a RSV}**

“Look, you’ve already gone through this, and we’ve seen what the answer is: God is adequate. All right then, why do you feel the way you do? Why are you going on with this disgruntled mood? Why are you still unpleasant and vexatious to everybody around you? Why do you snap at people so? Why are you disquieted?”

**Hope in God; for I shall again praise
him,
my help and my God. {Psa 43:5b
RSV}**

“Just hang on. It’s going to work out in a little while and you’ll feel a lot better. Just hang on.”

You see? Now that is using the psalms the way they were intended to be used.

Also, the psalms wonderfully reveal **the person of Jesus Christ**. Remember that on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, Jesus said to the two disciples who were so troubled, “Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled,” (Luke 24:44 RSV). And here in the Messianic psalms you have a great picture of Christ. They give us an inside glimpse into some of the very same crises in the Lord’s earthly life that are described in the Gospels. For instance,

- Psalms 2 pictures Christ as the man of destiny, the focal point of all history. God says that every nation, every tribe, every people, every individual will find its value or its lack of value in how it relates to the Son.

**Kiss his feet,
lest ... you perish ... {Psa 2:12 RSV}**

- Psalm 22 records the Lord’s anguish on the cross. This amazing psalm takes you right to the cross itself:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? {Psa 22:1 RSV}

And he describes the scene of people standing at the foot of the cross, looking on him whom they pierced and numbering him with the transgressors; how they took his garments and cast lots for them; and how his own heart was broken as he felt abandoned by God. This is a vivid, beautiful description of the Lord’s prayer and experience on the cross, followed by the prayer of triumph in his resurrection.

- Psalm 40 is another of the prayers of the Lord and is quoted in the New Testament as a reflection of the person of Christ.
- Psalm 45, one of the most beautiful psalms, pictures the beauty of the character of Jesus Christ – the splendor of the king. And
- Psalm 72 is a magnificent psalm describing the reign of Christ over all the earth. It is one of the greatest shouts of triumph in the whole Bible.
- Psalm 110 is the great psalm on the deity of Christ and is quoted in the first chapter of Hebrews.
- Psalm 118 is the psalm of direction,

**This is the day which the Lord has
made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
(Verse 24)**

That day is when the stumbling block of men was taken and made to be the cornerstone on the day of resurrection (Verse 22).

All the psalms are designed to teach us to do one thing – to **worship**. These psalms reflect every human emotion, but they do so in a distinct and important way: they are emotions seen in relationship to God. Every psalm is written in the presence of God. This book, therefore, teaches us how to be honest before God.

- If you have a problem, tell God about it. Don’t hide it. Don’t cover it up. Especially, don’t get pious and sanctimonious and try to smooth it over.

- If you are angry with God, say so.
- If you are upset about something he has done, tell him so.
- If you are resentful, bring it out.
- If you are happy and glad, express that.

That is what worship is – a heart’s honesty. As Jesus said to the woman at the well in Samaria, “The true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth” (John 4:23). God is looking for that kind of worshiper. And as you worship in Spirit and truth, you will discover a new source of strength. If you can be honest before God, even about those troublesome problems of wrong moods and attitudes, you will find grace answering your needs.

There is an old story of a converted miser who had always been known as an exceedingly stingy individual. After his conversion, one of his neighbors sustained a serious loss. When the former miser heard about it, his immediate reaction was, “Well, they need help and food. I will go to my smoke house and get a ham and take it over to them.” But on the way to the smoke house his old

nature began to whisper to him, “Why give them a whole ham? Half a ham will be plenty.” And he debated this all the way to the smoke house. Then he remembered what he had learned in the presence of God. He remembered that he had resolved then and there that by God’s grace he would stand against all the evil qualities of his former life whenever they asserted themselves. The tempter kept whispering, “Give him half a ham,” and the old man finally said, “Look, Satan, if you don’t pipe down, I’ll give him the whole smoke house!”

Now, you see, that is adequate grace. Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more. And that is the purpose of the psalms: to bring us to grace.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that we may immerse ourselves in this marvelous book of experience and find here not only that which speaks of our own moods and attitudes, but also that which answers them in grace. We thank you for this revelation, written not merely with pen and ink, but with blood and sweat and tears, heartache and sorrow, happiness and joy – in the lives of men and women like ourselves. In Christ’s name. Amen.

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PROVERBS: That Men May Know Wisdom

by Ray C. Stedman

No other book of the Old Testament appears to be quite as difficult to outline as the book of Proverbs. Like the dictionary, it seems to change the subject with every verse. As a matter of fact, though, the book of Proverbs is logically and helpfully constructed; and if you note the divisions of it, you can easily follow the argument of this book.

- Proverbs begins with a brief introductory preface in the first six verses.
- This is followed by a series of ten different discourses from a father to his son, filled with very practical exhortations on how to face some of the problems of life. That carries us over to the beginning of Chapter 10, and so far there have been no proverbs.
- But in Chapter 10 we have a collection of proverbs that are noted for us as the proverbs of Solomon, the wise king of Israel, the son of David. When Solomon became king he had a vision of God in which God asked him what his heart desired above everything else. Solomon asked that he be granted wisdom. Because he asked for this instead of riches or fame, God gave him all three. Therefore, these are the wisdom proverbs of the wisest king that Israel ever had. This second division runs through to –
- Chapter 25 which begins another collection of proverbs said to be the proverbs of Solomon which were copied down by the men of Hezekiah, the king of Judah, after Solomon's death.

- The book closes with a postlude in Chapters 30 and 31 that brings before us the words of two unknown individuals, Agur, son of Jakah, in Chapter 30, and Lemuel, king of Massa, in Chapter 31.

The book of Proverbs expresses the conclusion of the will of man. Together, the books of Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes give us the cry of the soul of man. In Psalms you have the emotional nature, which is one part of the soul function. Ecclesiastes deals with the function of the mind – the search of man's reason throughout the earth, analyzing, evaluating, weighing, and concluding on the basis of what is discoverable under the sun, that is, by human reason. But in the book of Proverbs we have the appeal to the will of man and the conclusion of the will; therefore, this book is all about the things man should decide, the choices of life. This is beautifully set before us in the introduction to the book.

First, there is a title in Verse 1:

**The proverbs of Solomon, son of David,
king of Israel. {Prov 1:1 RSV}**

And then we read the purpose of the book (Verses 2-6):

**That men may know wisdom and instruction,
understand words of insight,
receive instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
that prudence may be given to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth –**

**the wise man also may hear and increase in learning,
and the man of understanding acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.**
{Prov 1:2-6 RSV}

In other words, this is designed for man in every division and age of his life, from childhood through youth and maturity, in order to understand what life is all about. The book of Proverbs is very practical and is recommended especially for those who are just beginning to try to solve some of the mysteries of life. Also, if you are just moving out for the first time into contact with the world and its ways and mysteries, this is an excellent book of admonition.

Verse 7 gives the key to the whole book. And, since Proverbs is the book that deals with life, this is also the key verse to all of life and is one of the greatest verses in the Bible. It states the summary and conclusion of this book:

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge [or wisdom];
fools despise wisdom and instruction.**
{Prov 1:7 RSV}

This whole book approaches life from the position that God has all the answers – God is all-wise; God knows everything. There is nothing that is hidden from his knowledge. He understands all mysteries, sees the answer to all riddles. He sees below the surface of everything. Therefore, the beginning of wisdom is to reverence and fear God.

The “fear of the Lord” mentioned in the Old Testament isn’t a craven sort of fear that God is going to do something to you. There are two kinds of fear:

- There is the fear that God might hurt us, a fear experience by those who are trying to run from God.
- But the fear spoken of here is the fear that we might hurt him – that something we do might offend him or might grieve his loving heart in concern for us.

This word *fear* really means “reverence or respect.” Obviously, if God has all the answers, then the one who has the key to life is the man or woman, boy or

girl, who learns early to respect God and believe him and understand that he tells us the truth.

The greatest thing in my Christian experience is that here in the book of God I have found the truth. I can’t trust many of the other sources from which I get information and counsel and advice. I have found, through very sad experience sometimes, that what I thought was right was very wrong. But here is the source of truth – God has spoken. Therefore, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. It is not the end; it is the beginning. And only the man who has in his heart a continuing respect for God’s wisdom can begin properly to evaluate and understand life.

In Chapter 1, Verse 8, you have the beginning of the ten discourses to a son from his father. They begin with the child in the home, dealing with his first relationships. Then they move to the time when the child begins to broaden his experience and widen the circle of his understanding and make friends. There are very wise and helpful words here concerning a youngster’s choice of friends, pointing out the powerful influence friends can have at this age. Therefore, the most important thing for a child to learn as he grows up is how to evaluate and choose his friends.

Then, in Chapter 3, you have the young man as he grows up and leaves home. As he makes his way into the city, he is immediately confronted with all kinds of pressures and temptations. There is a thoughtful word of warning here concerning some of the temptations he will meet. It speaks very delicately and yet frankly about the pressures of sex and about what wrong steps in response to these pressures can do to a life. Also, there is an admonition concerning getting involved in wrong financial transactions. These are very practical warnings. The whole of this section is summed up in Chapter 3, Verses 5 and 6:

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.**
[There never was more valuable advice given to youth than that!]
**In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.**
{Prov 3:5-6 RSV}

This is a word to the young man or woman who wants to find the secret of life, who wants to be a success. I have never yet met young people who

didn't want to be successful. In my experience with young people no one has ever said, "My ambition is to be a bum down on skid row." The way to success is to trust in the Lord with all your heart, and although God has given you reason and expects you to use it, don't rely on that as the final answer. Where God's word or God's ways have shown you something different, trust that instead of what you feel. Here is the result (Verses 6-8):

**In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.**
{Prov 3:6-8 RSV}

How I wish that someone had given me those verses when I first began to move out into the world.

A young man sat in my study not long ago and told me a heartbreaking story. When he left his home and moved out into the city, he did what he thought was right and what he hoped would supply fulfillment to his life. But he drifted downward and got involved in dope until he was mainlining heroin and experimenting with LSD, having fantastic hallucinations. He ended up as a procurer for a prostitute on the streets of San Francisco before God suddenly awakened him and he realized what had happened.

That is the kind of thing that the writer of Proverbs is seeking to avoid by pointing out that life can never be understood except in relationship to God. Life is simply too big for us to handle by ourselves. No matter how good the advice seems to be, if it isn't consistent with what God has told us, it is not to be trusted. And that is the conclusion that is reached through these opening chapters. Chapters 8 and 9 personify the two ways of life. Wisdom is seen as a beautiful woman, calling those who follow her to come away into the place of victory and achievement and success in life, while folly, or foolishness, which thinks everything it does is right in its own eyes, is personified as an evil woman – attractive, alluring, tempting us to step aside into death. It is a marvelously beautiful poetic passage.

Beginning with Chapter 10 we have this first collection of the wisdom of Solomon – all very pithy, practical words of advice covering every

possible situation of life. Therefore, this is a book that ought to be read again and again, until its wisdom permeates your life. Much of it will be committed to the mind and memory, and you will be able to recall it in times of pressure.

This first collection is made up mostly of contrasts, in which the writer sets two things side by side and shows the good and evil results of various attitudes and actions. As you read this section through, you will see these antitheses. For example, in Chapter 10, Verse 10:

**He who winks the eye causes trouble,
but he who boldly reproves makes peace.**
{Prov 10:10 RSV}

That, of course, is the contrast between the sly, deceitful, stealthy look that is expressed in a wink, in contrast to the man who frankly and forthrightly speaks his mind, even though what he says is not very welcome. But the result of that kind of frankness is peace.

Also in Chapter 10, Verse 26, is a very expressive proverb:

**Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes,
so is the sluggard to those who send him.**
{Prov 10:26 RSV}

Any parent who has sent his child on an errand and the child has dawdled along the way knows what this means. As vinegar sets the teeth on edge and smoke burns the eyes, so is the man who is entrusted with a message who dawdles along the way.

Chapter 11, Verse 22, is descriptively practical:

**Like a gold ring in a swine's snout
is a beautiful woman without discretion.**
{Prov 11:22 RSV}

Can you imagine that? An ugly pig with swill dripping from its mouth and a gold ring affixed to its nostrils! Gold signifies value – but in the wrong place. So is a beautiful woman who hasn't learned that beauty is not the outward form but the inward beauty of spirit.

One man gives freely, yet grows all the richer;

**another withholds what he should give,
and only suffers want. {Prov 11:24
RSV}**

There is the value of generosity over stinginess.
Then, in Chapter 12, Verse 4:

**A good wife is the crown of her husband,
but she who brings shame is like rotten-
ness in his bones. {Prov 12:4 RSV}**

These are self explanatory, aren't they?

Verses 16 through 22 give a little discourse on
the tongue and the dangers and the blessings of it:

**The vexation of a fool is known at once,
but the prudent man ignores an insult.
{Prov 12:16 RSV}**

That is, a fool blurts out what he feels and never
tries to control himself. He simply reacts to every-
thing that comes along. But the prudent man learns
to control himself, ignoring insults, and moving to
the heart of the matter.

Chapter 12, Verses 18-19, 22:

**There is one whose rash words are like
sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
Truthful lips endure forever,
but a lying tongue is but for a moment.
{Prov 12:18-19 RSV}**

**Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,
but those who act faithfully are his de-
light. {Prov 12:22 RSV}**

Then, in Chapter 13, Verse 24, is that well-
known verse for parents:

**He who spares the rod hates his son,
but he who loves him is diligent to disci-
pline him. {Prov 13:24 RSV}**

That is the basis for the saying, "This hurts me
more than it does you."

Chapter 14, Verse 12, again refers to the un-
derlying secrets of life.

**There is a way which seems right to a man
[And how often we think that we know
the answers! But the whole counsel of
this book is that our own reason and
wisdom are never enough],**

**but its end is the way of death. {Prov
14:12 RSV}**

Therefore, "Trust in the Lord and lean not to your
own insight" {cf, Prov 3:6}, that is the application.
Then Chapter 14, Verse 31:

**He who oppresses a poor man insults his
Maker,
but he who is kind to the needy honors
him. {Prov 14:31 RSV}**

Here is the word on the need to recognize the unity
of life. The "I - It" relationship is an insult to
someone. The "I - Thou" is the only thing that ex-
presses the concern of a Christian.

Chapter 15, Verse 11:

**Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the
Lord,
how much more the hearts of men! {Prov
15:11 RSV}**

What a wonderful way to say that the deepest
mysteries of life are known to God. We don't un-
derstand Sheol. We don't know what Abaddon –
the pit – involves, but God does. How much more
does he know the secrets of the human heart, and
can tell us the right way.

Verse 17 of the same chapter is very pointed:

**Better is a dinner of herb's where love is
than a fatted ox and hatred with it. {Prov
15:17 RSV}**

Who would not prefer to sit down at a table where
there is only bread and water but a wonderful at-
mosphere of love, than to a table loaded with
goodies where everyone growls at each other?

Chapter 16, Verse 13:

**Righteous lips are the delight of a king,
and he loves him who speaks what is
right. {Prov 16:13 RSV}**

There are other verses in Proverbs about a
king. When you read them, remember that God
looks at every man as a king; therefore, this is
about you. God sees you as a king over the king-
dom of your life. If you read with this perspective,
these words on rulership and kingship will be of
great profit to you.

Verses 20 and 22 link together:

**He who gives heed to the word will prosper,
and happy is he who trusts in the Lord.
Wisdom is a fountain of life to him who has
it,
but folly is the chastisement of fools.
{Prov 16:20, 22 RSV}**

And what is wisdom? Well, it is stated in Verse 20, "He who gives heed to the word shall prosper."

In Chapter 16, Verse 32 is one that many of us need to hear:

**He who is slow to anger is better than the
mighty,
and he who rules his spirit than he who
takes a city. {Prov 16:32 RSV}**

That verse is often quoted but seldom believed. What a change it would make in life if we really understood that the man who learns to control his anger and subdue his own spirit, by God's grace, is a greater hero than the man who takes a city.

Chapter 17, Verse 15:

**He who justifies the wicked and he who
condemns the righteous
are both alike an abomination to the
Lord. {Prov 17:15 RSV}**

Yet how often we fall into that error – justifying the wicked and making excuses for people who do wrong, condemning the righteous and finding fault with them.

Verse 28 of the same chapter is very wise:

**Even a fool who keeps silent is considered
wise;
when he closes his lips, he is deemed in-
telligent. {Prov 17:28 RSV}**

Or, as someone has well put it, "It is much better to remain silent and let everybody think you are a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."

Chapter 18, Verse 8:

**The words of a whisperer are like delicious
morsels;
they go down into the inner parts of the
body. {Prov 18:8 RSV}**

There is the explanation of why we love to gossip. What sweet morsels these are. How we love to

sink our teeth into the reputation of another; how good it tastes, and yet how evil to do.

Then in Verse 22 there is a word for lovers:

**He who finds a wife finds a good thing,
and obtains favor from the Lord. {Prov
18:22 RSV}**

This from a man who had a thousand of them!

Verse 24:

**There are friends who pretend to be
friends,
but there is a friend who sticks closer
than a brother. {Prov 18:24 RSV}**

This is a reminder that there is one who will tell you the truth, even if it hurts, and that is God. There are many friends who will tell you anything they think you want to hear, but they are no friends.

Chapter 19, Verse 3:

**When a man's folly brings his way to ruin,
his heart rages against the Lord. {Prov
19:3 RSV}**

Isn't that strange? When a man's own foolishness brings him into trouble, who does he blame? The Lord. Or, if he is married, he takes it like a man and blames it on his wife, as Adam did in the Garden.

Chapter 20, Verse 9:

**Who can say, "I have made my heart clean;
I am pure from my sin"? {Prov 20:9 RSV}**

That is a question that no one can answer, but anyone who asks it honestly is on his way to finding the Savior.

And Verse 27 of that same chapter is one of the most important verses in the Bible on understanding human life:

**The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord,
searching all his innermost parts. {Prov
20:27 RSV}**

That is what God made our spirits for: Our essential nature is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He is the light. We are the lamp. When the lamp of the spirit holds the light of the Holy Spirit he searches the innermost part of a life and we begin to understand ourselves for the first time.

Chapter 21, Verse 9, gives a straightforward comment from a married man:

**It is better to live in a corner of the house-top
than in a house shared with a contentious woman. {Prov 21:9 RSV}**

And Verses 30 and 31 of the same chapter:

**No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel,
can avail against the Lord.
The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but the victory belongs to the Lord. {Prov 21:30-31 RSV}**

God overrules. Someone once said to Napoleon, "Man proposes but God disposes." Napoleon, in his arrogant ignorance, replied, "No, Napoleon proposes and Napoleon disposes!" That was before the battle of Waterloo.

Chapter 22, Verse 6 is a famous verse:

**Train up a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not depart from it. {Prov 22:6 RSV}**

I think this should really be translated, "Train up a child according to his way," which means "find out what is in a child and bring him up so that what God has hidden in him may be developed and brought out. And when he is old he will not depart from that."

Verse 16 ends this type of contrasting proverb.

Beginning with Verse 17 of Chapter 22, a different kind of proverb is brought before us. These are general discourses, two or three verses long, upon various subjects, and there are some very helpful words in this section. For instance, Chapter 23, Verses 13-14:

**Do not withhold discipline from a child;
if you beat him with a rod, he will not die.
[He may sound like it, but he won't be dying.]
If you beat him with the rod
you will save his life from Sheol. {Prov 23:13-14 RSV}**

That advice is for small children. When you talk about adolescents, that is a different thing; they may be bigger than you are.

Chapter 24, Verses 28-29 give a practical word on relationships with your neighbor:

**Be not a witness against your neighbor
without cause,
and do not deceive with your lips.
Do not say, "I will do to him as he has done to me;
I will pay the man back for what he has done." {Prov 24:28-29}**

Even here, you see, is a clear recognition of the golden rule.

In Chapter 25 the second collection of proverbs begins – those copied by the men of Hezekiah. Verse 2 is a wonderful one:

**It is the glory of God to conceal things,
but the glory of kings is to search things out. {Prov 25:2 RSV}**

If you want to have a royal experience, I suggest you start searching out things that God has concealed in his Word. That is the glory of kings – to find what God has hidden.

Verse 17 of that chapter:

**Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house,
lest he become weary of you and hate you.
{Prov 25:17 RSV}**

Very practical.

Chapter 26, Verse 2:

**Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying,
a curse that is causeless does not alight.
{Prov 26:2 RSV}**

Therefore, if somebody says something nasty about you and it is not true, don't worry about it. Nobody will believe it. Those who do are not important.

This chapter has some very helpful words about troublesome people in general:

- In Chapter 26, Verses 3 through 12 there is a series on fools and how to handle them.
- Verses 13 through 16 tell what to do about sluggards and what is wrong with lay people.

PROVERBS: That Men may know Wisdom

- Verses 17 through 23 concern meddlers and how to handle them.
- Then, Verse 24 to the end of the chapter is about the loveless – those who hate.

As we skim through quickly, we read this in Chapter 28, Verse 27:

**He who gives to the poor will not want,
but he who hides his eyes will get many a
curse. {Prov 28:27 RSV}**

No man is an island. We must not shut ourselves away from life. Those people who say they are too sensitive to visit the slums are coming under the condemnation of the truth in this verse. We need to see what life is like around us.

Chapter 29, Verse 1 is an often-quoted one:

**He who is often reprov'd, yet stiffens his
neck
will suddenly be broken beyond healing.
{Prov 29:1 RSV}**

Then, in Chapter 30 you have the words of Agur. No one knows exactly who this man was, but the words are very practical, concerning some of the wonders of the earth. And in Chapter 31 the

words of King Lemuel are recorded, concerning what his mother taught him on how to be a king. The last of the book is a wonderful description of a virtuous woman. Many feel this is King Lemuel's description of his own mother – and what a woman she was! If you are a young girl looking for a model woman, I recommend this passage to you. If you are a young man looking for a model wife, I suggest you read it through. It sets forth marvelously the strength and glory and beauty of womanhood and the unique contribution that women can make to life.

This is the book of Proverbs. You might read it through once a month. It has thirty-one chapters, which would fit every month that has thirty-one days. One chapter a day will do it. Why not try it?

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this very practical book and for the admonition it gives our hearts to remember that life can never be understood, can never be handled, can never make sense until we approach it with trust in you and remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

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ECCLESIASTES: The Inspired Book of Error

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Ecclesiastes, or “the Preacher,” is unique in Scripture. There is no other book like it, because it is the only book in the Bible that reflects a human, rather than a divine, point of view. This book is filled with error. And yet it is wholly inspired. This may confuse some people, because many feel that inspiration is a guarantee of truth. This is not necessarily so. Inspiration merely guarantees accuracy from a particular point of view; if it is God’s point of view it is true; if it is man’s point of view it may be true, and it may not. If it is the Devil’s point of view it may or may not be true, as well, but the Devil’s ultimate end, of course, is evil. Inspiration guarantees an accurate reflection of these various points of view.

Therefore the Bible does have much error in it. Whenever false views of men are quoted or set forth, the Bible is speaking error. Whenever Satan speaks, most of his statements are in error, and even the truth that he uses is twisted and distorted, and therefore is erroneous.

So it is quite possible to “prove” all kinds of utterly false things by quoting the Bible, because, in that sense, the Bible is filled with error. But the Bible always points out the error which it presents and makes it clear that it is error, as in the case with this book. Because of its remarkable character, Ecclesiastes is the most misused book of the Bible. This is the favorite book of atheists and agnostics. And many cults love to quote this book’s erroneous viewpoints and give the impression that these are scriptural, divine words of God concerning life.

But right away in its introduction this book is very careful to point out that what it records is not divine truth. It presents only the human view of life. You’ll find that over and over, throughout the whole course of Ecclesiastes, one phrase is repeated again and again: “under the sun,” “under the

sun.” Everything is evaluated according to appearances alone – this is man’s point of view of reality and is utterly exclusive of divine revelation. As such, Ecclesiastes very accurately summarizes what man thinks.

Ecclesiastes is not atheistic; to be atheistic is to be unrealistic, and the Bible is never unrealistic. An atheist is one who has convinced himself by long argument that there is no God, even though every inward testimony of his conscience and the structure of the universe around him are constant witnesses to the fact that there is a God. For the most part, only the educated man is an atheist. Or, the man who does not desire to face life’s realities, because he wants to convince himself that there is no God to whom he must answer. But this book is not atheistic, even though it is written from a humanistic point of view.

Ecclesiastes views God as men in general view God – as a not very vital concern of life, sort of a high-calorie dessert which you can take or leave. There is no understanding of God as a vital, living Lord, an authority in life with whom one can have a personal relationship.

The book opens with this introduction:

The words of the Preacher, {Eccl 1:1a RSV}

I think that it is to Martin Luther that we owe this translation of the Hebrew word, but, in context, it is not the best choice. The word can mean “preacher,” but I think it is much better translated as “debater” or “arguer,” and as you read this book you will see that it is a series of arguments set forth as man views the world around him. The debater was none other than Solomon, the son of David, king in Jerusalem, the wisest man who ever lived, according to Biblical record.

Solomon was in an unusual position to undertake the experiments and investigations reflected in this book, because during the forty years of his reign there was utter peace in the kingdom of Judah and Israel. There were no tribes around stirring up warfare or strife. Since he did not have to bother himself with military life, he had all the time he needed to pursue his investigations into the meaning of life. Furthermore, he had all the wealth he needed, and he had a keen, logical, discerning mind which had gained for him the reputation as the wisest man in the world. He had all that he needed, and he set himself to discover what life is all about. Therefore, the value of Ecclesiastes is that it sets forth life from the standpoint of the natural man, apart from divine revelation.

As you read through the book you'll notice that it all centers on this text (Verse 2):

**Vanity of vanities, says the Debater,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
{cf, Eccl 1:2 RSV}**

Unfortunately, that word *vanity* doesn't mean today what it used to. At least, we seldom use it in quite the same sense. To us, *vanity* is conceit over personal looks. We think that a woman who spends a half hour primping before a mirror every time she goes through her bedroom is a victim of vanity – or a man, if he does the same thing. And of course that is true.

I think of the woman who said to her pastor one day, "I must confess to you, pastor, that I am suffering from a terrible sin. I suffer from the sin of vanity. Every morning before I leave, I admire myself in the mirror for half an hour." He said, "My dear lady, it is not the sin of vanity you are suffering from, it is the sin of imagination."

But *vanity* here in Ecclesiastes means "emptiness, futility, meaninglessness."

The Debater has completed his survey of life, and he gives this conclusion at the beginning of the book. He says everything is futile, empty, meaningless – there is no sense to anything.

He supports this conclusion with a series of arguments that he has gleaned after sifting through the philosophies of life. And perhaps the most interesting thing about this book is that all the philosophies by which men have attempted to live are gathered together here. There is nothing new under the sun, the book says – and how true that is. Here

we are, almost thirty centuries removed from the time of the writing of this book, and yet nothing more has been produced in the world or in the ideas of men than what is reflected right here:

First there is what we might call **the mechanistic view**, or the scientific outlook if you prefer. This outlook sees the universe as nothing but a great, grinding machine, and the Debater in his investigation of it is lost in the monotonous repetition of nature's processes. And yet, in many ways, this is a most remarkable passage. Some revelations here are of scientific import and were written long before men of science ever discovered these things. Notice, for instance, the circuit of the wind:

**The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
{Eccl 1:6 RSV}**

Men didn't discover the circuit of the wind until centuries after this was written.

And then there is the evaporation cycle of circulating waters:

**All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again. {Eccl 1:7 RSV}**

That is, the rivers run down to the sea, evaporate, come back up to the mountains again as rainfall, and run down to the sea again. The writer has discovered this in his observation of nature, and he says all this is vanity, empty. He feels the utter weariness of this endless circuit. So what is his outlook? Life goes on and we are lost in the meaninglessness of the universe. Nothing is to be heard but the clanking of gears. You may recognize this philosophy to be very common today, and the end of it is emptiness. What is man in the midst of a universe like that? Just a tiny speck with no meaning or significance at all.

In Chapter 2 the writer examines **the philosophy of hedonism** – the pursuit of pleasure as the chief end of life. What gives life meaning? Well, millions today say, "Just enjoy yourself! Have a good time, live it up, do as you like, seek pleasure.

That's the purpose of living. That's why we are here!" But the Debater says:

I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. {Ecc 2:1 RSV}

Then he proceeds to itemize pleasure. He says that first he tried pleasure in the form of laughter, or mirth. Maybe this is what is needed to make life thoroughly enjoyable. So he sought out opportunities to give himself to genial, gracious, laughing, happy company. But he says that after a time, even this yielded a weariness of spirit.

Then he says he tried the acquisition of possessions; perhaps meaning comes from wealth:

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; {Ecc 2:9-10a RSV}

And he gave himself to the accumulation of wealth and possessions. (How many are living on that level today!) He says it too was emptiness of spirit and didn't satisfy his longing.

And then he says:

I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly [That is, he considered opposites in the realm of ideas]; for what can the man do who comes after the king? Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. {Ecc 2:12a, 2:13a RSV}

He says, "This is better, at least. Here is something that is interesting: pursuing all these various ideas about life. Ah, but," he says, "I found that it comes out at the same place." The fool and the wise man alike die. And as far as their lives are concerned, one is as utterly insignificant as the other. It doesn't make any difference.

Then, he comes to this terrible conclusion:

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind. {Ecc 2:17 RSV}

Here is a man who has given himself to pleasure, to possessions, and to the pursuit of wisdom in the realm of ideas, and he says, "I hated life. I

hated all my toil. I turned about and gave my heart up to despair." That is what he came to, isn't it? Just as it is what anyone will come to: only despair.

Then in Chapter 3 he views life from what we might call **the existential viewpoint**. That is a popular term today. It is fashionable to believe in existentialism and it is, of course, thought to be something new on the stage of world ideas. But it is nothing new at all. It is as old as the thinking of man. Actually, we might call this viewpoint *fatalism*, because there is always a fatalistic element in existentialism.

We in America can hardly realize why existential thinking has so powerfully gripped the minds of people in our world. The popularity of existentialism was born at the end of World War II, when Europe was left in shambles. The great cities of Europe were in ruins, and all that men had previously pinned their hopes on – in government and religion, as they knew it – had been powerless to arrest the catastrophe and terrible chaos of World War II. At the end of it, men were left with utterly shattered hopes concerning what they had believed in. They asked one another, "What can we trust? We can't trust religion. It did nothing to stem the awful tide of tyranny under Hitler. And we can't trust government, because it is the very tool of such power. So what can we trust?" And somebody suggested that the only thing that we can trust is our own reactions to life as we live through things. We experience feelings and reactions to events, and even though no two of us may have the same reaction, at least each person's reaction is real to him. So they said, "All we can really trust is our own reaction to events, to existence." And that is existentialism.

Now this writer says, "I tried that. I discovered that I reacted to events, that I had certain inescapable experiences in life." We read that there is:

**a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep ... [and so on.] {Ecc 3:2-4a RSV}**

The writer sees that all these events come upon us. And he sees also that man has a desire for

something deeper, for finding significance, for finding meaning in life:

He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, {Ecc 3:11a RSV}

In other words, man can never rest with simply external explanations of things. He has to look deeper. Eternity is in his heart. And this writer says he saw all this. He saw that events of life are inescapable and are experienced by all men – but he saw that all men go to one place when it is all over. All turn to dust.

And there is nothing better for man than to enjoy his work,

... for that is his lot; who can bring him to see what will be after him? {Ecc 3:22b RSV}

He sees futility, hopelessness. What's the use?

In Chapter 4 he turns to **capitalism**, of all things. Here he sets forth the competitive enterprise of life. When we Americans hear the word "capitalism" perhaps we think it is a wonderful word. We think it describes the vigorous young insurance executive out to join the million-dollars-a-month club, or some high-powered executive in business who is building his own empire. We admire this. We say, "Capital is the answer."

Remember that the Word of God always ultimately looks at life as it really is. And capitalism is not a final answer to things. It may be a better answer than communism, and I'm convinced that it is, but this writer says he tried this competitive-enterprise approach and saw that it resulted in injustices and oppression. And he discovered that selfish motivation lies behind it, resulting in inequities. So, he says it all comes to the same thing:

Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king, who will no longer take advice, {Ecc 4:13 RSV}

What good does it do to get to the top of the heap when a young man at the bottom with nothing but a few smart ideas can surge ahead of you? What's the difference? What is the good of it all?

Then in Chapter 5 he tries **religion** – religion which recognizes that God exists – and he tries to do good and to be good. And yet he points out that there is no practical value to it. Religious people can do very unethical things and oppress the poor. Furthermore, there is no power in deadly, religious formalism to arrest wrongs or change inequities. He says, then, that religion of that sort doesn't work either. It comes to the same thing – emptiness and vanity.

Chapter 6 sets forth his experiments along the line of **materialism** – the philosophy of "the good life." His conclusion is that even though a man has everything,

If a man begets a hundred children [children are wealth to the Hebrew], and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but he does not enjoy life's good things, and also has no burial, I say that an untimely birth is better off than he. {Ecc 6:3 RSV}

If you have everything, but in trying to satisfy yourself you discover that there is still a craving that these things can't meet, then you are no better off than if you had never been born. It all comes out to the same thing.

In Chapter 7 Solomon approaches life from the standpoint of **stoicism** – a cultivated indifference to events – and his conclusion is that in order to view life this way, aim for a happy medium. Be moderate in all things:

In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness [righteousness doesn't always pay], and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing [wickedness sometimes does pay, judging by evidence "under the sun"]. {Ecc 7:15 RSV}

Therefore he says:

Be not righteous overmuch, and do not make yourself over wise; why should you destroy yourself? Be not wicked overmuch, neither be a fool; why should you die before your time? {Ecc 7:16-17 RSV}

That is, aim for a happy medium. How many times have you heard these verses quoted as exactly reflecting what the Bible teaches? But, rather, these are the words of a man looking at life who says the best policy is “Moderation in all things” – avoid extremes as much as possible, don’t volunteer for anything, try just to get through. That is his viewpoint.

Chapters 8 through 10 and the first eight verses of Chapter 11 are a connected discourse examining what might be referred to as **the wisdom of the world**, or **the common-sense view of life**. In Chapter 8 anyone approaching life from this point of view is exhorted to master the power structures of the world in which he lives. He says, “Try to understand who is an authority and who isn’t, and do your best to be on the right side at the right time.” That is his philosophy. You recognize that, don’t you? Here is his conclusion:

then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. {Ecl 8:17 RSV}

Now he says, “I don’t offer you much hope along this line, but if you get on the right side and get in good with the powers that be, you will at least get along pretty well, but you won’t find any answers to life. It’s all futility, don’t you see?”

Then in Chapter 9 he examines the world’s value judgments and points out again that they all come to the same thing:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. {Ecl 9:11 RSV}

Here he says, “You see these men who say, like Benjamin Franklin, ‘Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise,’ and, ‘A penny saved is a penny earned.’ All these things,” he says, “have an aura of wisdom about them – but they don’t really work. I have seen times when the race was not to the swift and the battle didn’t go to the strong nor bread to the wise nor riches to the

intelligent. It doesn’t always work. I have seen some very stupid rich people.” So these worldly values and judgments are not accurate, and they too all end in death:

For man does not know his time. Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare [suddenly, unexpectedly, with a heart attack] so the sons of men are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. {Ecl 9:12 RSV}

What difference, then, do worldly values make?

In Chapter 10 he exhorts us to maintain discretion in life – be temperate, diligent, cautious, accommodating – try to get by as best you can. But this is only an enlightened expression of selfishness, which is the motive underlying it all. We read in Chapter 11 that success is simply a matter of diligence – in order to get something out of life, you need to work and apply yourself:

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. {Ecl 11:6 RSV}

But then he concludes:

For if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. {Ecl 11:8 RSV}

You see? He has proved his case hasn’t he? All the way through it is the same thing: Life lived apart from God all comes out to the same thing.

At this point comes **the change in viewpoint**, the recognition that life is meaningful and significant when the person of God is enthroned in it. This is Solomon’s true conclusion to all of his findings, and it begins this way:

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. {Ecl 11:9 RSV}

That doesn't mean punishment. It means examination: God will bring you into an examination of your life. But "Rejoice!" (That is Solomon's very word!) The Debater's final conclusion is thus directly opposite his previous conclusion. Six times in this account you find him playing one string on his violin, over and over again. The only thing he has to say to the man who approaches life without a genuine commitment to God, is this: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you must die."

There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. {Ecc 2:24 RSV}

Again:

So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, for that is his lot; who can bring him to see what will be after him. {Ecc 3:22 RSV}

And again:

What I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life which God has given him, for this is his lot. {Ecc 5:18 RSV}

Similarly:

And I commend enjoyment, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat, and drink, and enjoy himself, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of life which God gives him under the sun. {Ecc 8:15 RSV}

Also:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do. {Ecc 9:7 RSV}

And yet again:

**Bread is made for laughter,
and wine gladdens life,
and money answers everything.
{Ecc 10:19 RSV}**

Practical isn't it? And devilish. Do you see? When you hear people talking this way today, when you see worldly man thinking and acting on the basis of "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die," don't blame him. What else can he say? This is the inevitable conclusion of any approach to life that erases God from the picture. And there is nothing more descriptive of utterly blind pessimism than those words. Think of it. Eat, drink and be merry. In other words, live like an animal. This denies the glory of manliness and manhood. It reduces man to the level of the animal. It is the most hopeless statement one can ever make. "What is life? Nothing at all. Utterly insignificant. Without any meaning. Utterly futile. All that we can do, therefore, is to make the best of it. Eat, drink and be merry. Life goes out like a candle flame in the end." Utter pessimism rules in a life that is lived without God.

Now contrast that with what the writer says in the last chapter:

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, {Ecc 12:1a RSV}

And he goes on to describe in a beautiful, poetic passage what death is:

Before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, {Ecc 12:6a RSV}

And he teaches this final conclusion:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. {Ecc 12:13a RSV}

What is his final advice?

Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole of man. {cf, Ecc 12:13b RSV}

"Wait!" you protest. "You left out a word! It says, 'this is the whole duty of man.'"

No, I didn't leave it out. The translators put it in. That word doesn't belong there. The Hebrew says, "this is the whole of man" or "this is what makes man whole," if you like. "Fear God." Now that doesn't mean that you are to be afraid of him, but to have a loving respect that obeys him.

Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole of man.

This is what makes man whole. And the secret is to enthrone God in the days of your youth. If you want to find the secret of living so that the heart is satisfied and the spirit is enriched and fulfilled according to God's intention for you, then "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come." Enthroned God in the center of your life and you will discover all that God has intended your life to be. And you will be able to rejoice all the days of your life.

I can remember well when as a teenager I would wonder from time to time whether these Christian ideas that I knew were right, and would feel allured and enticed by other ways of thinking. And I felt the awful uncertainty of not knowing which was right. What is the answer to life's questions? Looking back upon that time I have great sympathy for young people; I see their deep inner desire, just as I felt it then, not to waste their lives but to live significantly. Every young person feels that. But now, from the perspective of more than thirty years, I can say that God in grace led me to commit myself, as it says in Proverbs:

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.**
{Prov 3:5-6 RSV}

I sing with the hymn, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come," but I can also say, "'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

I can testify to the fact that the Debater's conclusion is apt: Life is fulfilled only when God is enthroned in the center of an individual's life and that individual acts in obedience to his ruler. But the philosophy that begins and exists and ends in the dust, and then says that the dust is everything – that this is all life is intended to be, that vanity is everything – is utter folly.

The Debater's conclusion is that everything is indeed vanity unless you put God in the center of life.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father for these words of wisdom, and for having recorded it for us in this ancient book so that in our hunger for fulfillment we need not go down all these paths ourselves. We can believe this word to be genuine and accurate, and build our lives upon it. We pray that our young people will have the courage to believe this word and to act upon it – to enthrone you as the Lord of life, and thereby live their lives in grace and strength and beauty. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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SONG OF SOLOMON: A Love Song and a Hymn

by Ray C. Stedman

I hope you are discovering the magnificent character of the Bible, its keen insights, and how deeply it probes into human life. The Scriptures were given to us so that we might understand ourselves and our God, and the Old Testament books make a tremendous contribution to such an understanding.

The Song of Solomon is regarded today as probably one of the most obscure and difficult books in the Bible. But it may surprise you to know that throughout the Christian centuries it has been one of the most read and most loved books of all. During the dark days before the Protestant Reformation when the Albanese fled the Catholic church and John Huss led his small bands of Christians up into Bohemia, this was one of the books of the Bible that was frequently read, quoted, referred to, and memorized. It was a great comfort to them. In the days after the Reformation, in the time of the bitter persecution of the Covenanters of Scotland, out of which came the Presbyterian Church under the leadership of John Knox and others, this again was one of the most frequently read and most often quoted books. It brought the Covenanters great comfort and sustained the spirits of those men and women who were hunted like animals throughout the mountains and glens of Europe.

This is the last of the five books of poetry in the Old Testament. Job is the first, then Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and last, the Song of Solomon. Each of these books reveals one of the basic elements of man:

- Job is the voice of the spirit, the deepest part of man's nature, which is why the book of Job is perennially a puzzle to us. In the words of one

of the Psalms, it is one of those books in which "deep calleth unto deep" {Psa 42:7 KJV}, you can't read it without recognizing its profundities. It is almost impossible to exhaust them. Here is the voice of man crying out through pain and struggle for God. Job says, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him," (Job 23:3 RSV)

- The books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes form a trilogy which sets forth the voice of the soul. The soul of man is made up of three parts: mind, emotion and will; and in these books you have the expression of these elements in man's character.
- Psalms is the book of the heart, of the emotions, and in it you will find reflected every emotion known to man. This is the book to turn to whenever emotion is strong in your life to find an answering psalm that will reflect and meet your mood. That is why the Psalms have always been such loved portions of Scripture.
- The book of Ecclesiastes is the voice, or expression, of the mind of man. It is a penetrating inquiry into life, searching after answers, and in that book all the philosophies that man has ever discovered find their expression. Ecclesiastes speaks of man searching for answers. And the answer it comes up with, because it approaches life only on the level of the intellect, is that all is vanity and emptiness; futility is stamped upon all things. That is what the mind discovers without Christ.

- The book of Proverbs is the expression of the will in man, summed up in the most quoted of the proverbs, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him [that is the choice of the will], and he will make straight your paths,” (Prov 3:5-6 RSV). The mind and the heart together must apply knowledge to the direction of the will to choose the right way. All through Proverbs you will find the emphasis is on the appeal to the will.
- Now if the book of Job is the cry of the spirit, and Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes the cry of the soul, the Song of Solomon is preeminently the cry of the body in its essential yearning. And what is the essential yearning of the body? For love. Therefore, the theme of this book is love. It is an eastern love song, an oriental love poem, and there is no use denying that. It is frankly and fully that. It is a revelation of all that was intended in the divinely given function that we call sex. It is sex as God intended sex to be, involving not just a physical activity, but the whole nature of man. For sex permeates our lives; Freud was right about that.

But sexual response and impulse touches us more than physically. It also touches us emotionally, and even spiritually; God made us that way. There is nothing wrong with this. But this is where Victorianism went astray. It was pushed to extremism by the enemy. (This is always the devil’s activity – to push attitudes toward sex into extreme positions.) So sex went into prudishness, as though it were some unmentionable subject, as though it were something that should be kept locked up in drawers and hidden away behind curtains. But that is not the way you find it in the Bible. In the Bible, sex, like every other subject, is handled frankly and dealt with forthrightly. It is set forth as God intended it to be. So first and foremost, the Song of Solomon is a love song describing with frankness and yet with purity the delight of a man and his wife in one another’s bodies. There is nothing pornographic or obscene about it, nothing licentious. As you read though it, you can see how beautifully and chastely it approaches this subject.

The book comes to us in what we would call musical play form. The characters in this play are Solomon, the young king of Israel – this was written in the beginning of his reign, in all the beauty and manliness of his youth – and the Shulammitte. She was a simple country lass of unusual loveliness who fell in love with the king when he was disguised as a shepherd lad working in one of his own vineyards in the north of Israel.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon tells us that he undertook expeditions to discover what life was like on various levels. Once he disguised himself as a simple country shepherd lad, and in that state he had met this young lady. They fell in love, and after they had promised themselves to each other, he went away and was gone for some time. The Shulammitte girl cries out for him in her loneliness.

Then comes the announcement that the king in all his glory is coming to visit the valley. While the girl is interested in this, she is not really concerned because her heart longs for her lover. But suddenly she receives word that the king wants to see her. She doesn’t know why until she goes to see him, and discovers that he is her shepherd lad. He takes her away and they are married in the palace.

The play is set in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, and a chorus of singers, referred to as the daughters of Jerusalem, asks certain leading questions from time to time during the account of the events leading up to the courtship, betrothal and marriage. The Shulammitte girl addresses them on three occasions. It is interesting to note that the word *Shulammitte* is the feminine form of “Solomon.” Therefore we would call this lady Mrs. Solomon. She is the bride, and we read of her encounter with this young man their courtship and the strength and the methods and the delights of love.

The language of the book is highly poetical and figurative and there may also be some difficulty determining who is speaking at any one time. But you can distinguish the different speakers in this way: the bridegroom always refers to her as “my love,” and the bride calls him “my beloved.” And as each describes the other you can see the passion and the rapture of love. Here is the language of love as she describes him:

**My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand.
His head is the finest gold;
his locks are wavy,
black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves
beside springs of water,
bathed in milk,
fitly set.
His cheeks are like beds of spices
yielding fragrance.
His lips are lilies,
distilling liquid myrrh.
His arms are rounded gold,
set with jewels.
His body is ivory work,
encrusted with sapphires.
His legs are alabaster columns,
set upon bases of gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as the cedars.
His speech is most sweet,
and he is altogether desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.**
{Song 5:10-16 RSV}

And he describes her in similar language:

**You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love,
comely as Jerusalem,
terrible as an army with banners.
Turn away your eyes from me,
for they disturb me –
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead.**
{Song 6:4-5 RSV}

Now you can see how figurative this language is. If any young swains were to take this literally today and try to pass this language along I am sure they would be misunderstood. But this is the impressionistic approach and there is beauty of expression here:

**Your teeth are like a flock of ewes,
that have come up from the washing,
all of them bear twins,
not one among them is bereaved.**
{Song 6:6 RSV}

That means that she didn't have any missing. She had a full set and they had just been washed.

**Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
behind your veil.
There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,
and maidens without number.
My dove, my perfect one, is only one,
the darling of her mother,
flawless to her that bore her.**
{Song 6:7-9 RSV}

Obviously, this is the language of love.

The book describes married love as God intended it to be. It is important to see that. For the full abandonment to one another in mutual satisfaction which is described in this book is possible only because it is experienced within that total oneness which only marriage permits. That is strongly emphasized throughout this book by a three-fold warning which the bride addresses to the unmarried girls – the chorus referred to as the daughters of Jerusalem. Three different times the bride, turning from her rapture and her delight with her love, gives these girls the secret of this delight:

**I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem ...
that you stir not up nor awaken love
until it please. {Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4 RSV}**

This is the secret of delight like this in marriage. What does she mean? She means, do not prematurely stimulate love. Wait until it develops on its own. Do not arouse it by artificial means before it is ready. Let it begin of itself in its own good time.

It is monstrous to watch foolish and even fatuous mothers who encourage their children to ape adults in dancing and dating and petting even before they enter their teens. Why? Because they are trying to stir them up to adult activities, the activities of love, before their time. It is like trying to open the bud before it is ready to open; you simply destroy it.

We are seeing the results of much of this in our own society. For the young people who want the best in love, the greatest, the most, this book teaches them to leave off petting and necking and so forth until they can say, as this bride says,

**He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his banner over me was love.**
{Song 2:4 RSV}

Or as the bridegroom says:

**Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is cruel as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.**

{Song 8:6-7 RSV}

God has ordained that all these delights reflected here be a part of the experience of men and women, but only in the relationship which makes it possible, which is marriage. Therefore, this book is a powerful plea for chastity and purity in life until the time of marriage comes.

But of course we have not heard the deepest message of this song until we pass behind the description of this purely physical human love, perfect as it is, to read it as an expression of communion between man and God, between Christ and his church. From the very earliest Christian centuries, this book was taken in that way. Even the Jews took it allegorically in that sense. The preface to this song in one of the Jewish books, or Targums, reads something like this:

This is the Song of Solomon, the prophet king of Israel, which he sang before Jehovah the Lord.

You see, he wasn't singing just a purely human love song. He sang this before Jehovah. This was a song about his own relationship to his God, and the early church fathers took it in that light. It was because of this interpretation that this song was such a comfort to the persecuted saints of the Reformation and the post-Reformation periods.

Someone has well said, "If you love Jesus Christ, you will love this song because here are words that fully express the rapture of the heart that has fallen in love with Christ." When you read the book of Ecclesiastes, you read of man's search throughout the world for something to satisfy his heart, and the message of that book is simply that if a man gains the world it isn't enough. His heart is still empty because the heart is greater than its object. But the message of the Song of Solomon is that Christ is so tremendous, so mighty, so magnificent, that the heart that has fallen in love with him will never be able to fully plumb the depths of

his love and his concern and his care. The object, Christ, is greater than the heart.

Every passage in this song, therefore, can be reverently lifted to this higher level of a heart enraptured with its Lord. Taken thus, it reveals a highly significant truth: It reveals that marriage is the key to human life. This is not to say that those who are not yet married should be discouraged by that. For, regardless of whether you find marriage or not on the physical level, this is still true.

What is marriage? Have you ever thought about marriage? About what lies behind the institution of marriage? It has been my privilege many times to marry people, and I have to deal with certain state laws. Marriage is not the product of human society. It is not something that people invented after they began to live together. Marriage goes back to the very dawn of the human race. Marriage is an absolutely integral part of human life, and physical marriage, between man and wife, is simply a picture of a deeper relationship that is true of everyone.

This principle is discussed in Romans 7, as the Apostle Paul opens that great argument with an illustration of a married woman. While she is married, she is bound by the law to her husband. And if, while she is married to him, she falls in love with another man, she will gain the stigma of an adulteress, that is, she will expose herself as breaking the basic law of life. But if the husband dies, then she is free to be married to another man {cf, Rom 7:1-3}. Why does he say all this? Because it is an illustration of what happens in the life of every one of us. Paul says we were married to the old life, to the old Adam. We were joined to an evil man. And that is the problem with human life. Man was made to be mastered and he simply cannot exist without a master. Every one of us has a master whether we like it or not. The whole story of the Bible is that it is either God who masters us or it is the devil. It is one or the other. Both Christ and the apostles make it very plain that the whole world, every man and every woman, is mastered by another force, either God or the devil. This is why Jesus said that no man can serve two masters {cf, Matt 6:24}. You can't give yourself to both of them. There must be a choice in life. Either you hate the one and love the other, or cling to one and separate from the other. You can't do both.

So man must be mastered. In other words he is made for marriage since marriage is a picture of the

mastery of one life by another. And this book says that the master who was made for man, the master that God intended for man to have, is the Lord Jesus Christ. Man mastered by Jesus enters into his fullness and glory, all that God intends for man.

As you read in this book of the rapturous delight that the bride and the bridegroom experience in one another you are reading a magnificent and beautiful description of what God intends the relationship to be between himself and each individual. That is why the great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," (Matt 22:37 RSV). That is the first and greatest commandment, for out of that flows everything else, including loving your neighbor as yourself. So this book is very important in that it deals with a very important relationship. In Christ we have the true bridegroom, and the church is his bride, as Paul puts it in Ephesians:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, {Eph 5:25 RSV}

He goes on to describe the work of Christ for his church and then he says again:

This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church; {Eph 5:32 RSV}

So the love of a husband and wife is a picture of the love of Christ and his church. In other words, the love of a husband and wife is simply a manifestation and a picture of that deeper love which is God's intention for human life.

So in this book we have a picture of what God will fulfill in the heart and life of one who loves him. Listen to these beautiful words of the bridegroom to the bride:

**"... for lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away." {Song 2:11-13 RSV}**

There is the springtime of life. But it doesn't lie in the past. It lies in the future. One day this whole world will experience a springtime like that. The Lord Jesus Christ, returning at last to claim his waiting bride, will greet her in words very much like those. The springtime will come, the time of singing, the time when earth shall blossom again and the curse will be lifted and the flowers will appear on the earth. This is a picture of what can take place in the heart of one who falls in love with Jesus Christ and enters into springtime. The cold winter of loneliness, misery, and selfishness is past and the time of singing has come.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this beautiful little passage that sets forth so magnificently all the possibilities of satisfaction that are your intention for the human heart. Oh Lord, that we might enter into this kind of a relationship with you, that our hearts might sing like this concerning you who have come and won us, who have overcome all our prejudices and our wrestlings against you, so that we cry out, "Nay but I yield, I yield, I can hold forth no more; I sink by dying love compelled and own thee conqueror." In your name we pray. Amen.

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ISAIAH: The Salvation of the Lord

by Ray C. Stedman

Isaiah was the greatest of the prophets and a superb master of language. If you enjoy beautiful, rolling cadences and marvelous literary passages, you will enjoy this book for that reason alone.

Isaiah is the fullest revelation of Christ in the Old Testament – so much so, that it is often called the Gospel according to Isaiah. To acquaint yourself with these magnificent, prophetic passages looking forward to Christ is to experience much of the richness and depth of Scripture.

Also, the prophetic nature of the book of Isaiah is one of the great proofs that the Bible is the word of God, for Isaiah lived some 724 years before Christ. The many passages looking forward to the Messiah point so clearly to Christ and are fulfilled in him, and thereby constitute an unanswerable argument for the divine inspiration of the book.

Any time we approach a new book, we always want to look for a key. I am afraid, however, that this is sometimes a rather weak approach. Sometimes these Bible books seem like locked houses, barred and shuttered, so that you can't get anything out of them unless you find the key. And some people feel that the only duly-licensed real estate agents are the Bible teachers, who alone have the keys to the Scripture's "real estate."

But scriptural books are not like that. They are more like national parks. They are open to everyone to roam in, and are a delight to explore all by yourself. But each park has a characteristic peculiar to itself that distinguishes it from the others; and you appreciate a park better if you know what that characteristic is. I have learned to appreciate some of the distinct characteristics of the great national parks in the West. For instance,

- If you want to see nature's various moods, go to Yellowstone Park. There she pulls all the tricks out of her bag and throws everything together.
- If you want to see mountain grandeur and cool lakes, Glacier Park in Montana is the place to go.
- If you want to be awed and humbled and stirred, then go to the Grand Canyon.
- If you are looking for a quiet valley in which to rest and reflect, Yosemite fills the bill – that is, any time other than midsummer, when some twenty thousand people are in the valley with you.

Sometimes I think of these books of the Bible like this. The book of Revelation is to me very much like Yellowstone National Park. It is full of spouting geysers and all kinds of weird symbolism and a variety of formations. The Gospel of John is more like Yosemite; quiet and deep and reverent. But there is no question that the book of Isaiah is the Grand Canyon of Scripture. Geologists tell us that the Grand Canyon is a miniature history of the earth – a condensed history, a pocket volume of the past – just so, the book of Isaiah has long been recognized as a miniature Bible.

I am very inclined to think that the order in which the books of the Bible occur is divinely inspired, because of their unique arrangement. By no means are they placed in an order we would expect them to be, and I think this is highly significant. It is particularly interesting that the book of Isaiah is

exactly in the middle of the Bible. It comes right at the center and is often called a miniature Bible.

How many books does the Bible have? Sixty-six. How many chapters does Isaiah have? Sixty-six. How many books are there in the Old Testament? Thirty-nine, and therefore twenty-seven in the New Testament. And the book of Isaiah divides exactly in that way. The first half of the book comprises thirty-nine chapters. There is a distinct division at Chapter 40, so that the remaining twenty-seven chapters constitute the second half of this book.

The New Testament begins with the history of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, as he came to announce the coming of the Messiah, and it ends in the book of Revelation with the new heaven and the new earth. Chapter 40 of Isaiah, which begins the second half, contains the prophetic passage that predicts the coming of John the Baptist:

A voice cries:

**“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” {Isa 40:3 RSV}**

And this, John says, was fulfilled by himself when he came. And when you read on to the end of the book you will find that Chapter 66 speaks of the new heavens and the new earth that God is creating. So you find here in the book of Isaiah a remarkably close analogy that parallels the entire Bible.

Visitors to the Grand Canyon are always astonished by one thing when they go there. They stand at the rim and look out over the vast, jumbled, silent canyon – down to the Colorado River, which seems but a silver thread more than a mile below them – and sooner or later some tourist cries in amazement, “I don’t understand how a tiny thing like that river could have carved a canyon like this!” They are amazed by that concept.

Now if you read the book of Isaiah thoughtfully and carefully, you sense immediately the grandeur and the power of God. You hear the powerful, rolling cadences of this book’s language. You sense the insignificance of man when compared with the might and the wisdom and majesty of God. And if you ask yourself, “How could Isaiah, just a human being like myself, write a book like this?” to answer seems impossible.

We know very little about Isaiah himself. He lived during the reigns of four kings of Judah – Ussiah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His ministry began some 740 years before Christ when the ten tribes that formed the northern kingdom of Israel were being carried away into captivity by Sennacherib, the Assyrian invader. And Judah, the southern kingdom, was plunged into idolatry toward the end of Isaiah’s ministry in 687 B.C., and was carried captive into Babylon. So the ministry of this prophet spans the time between the captivity of the northern kingdom and the captivity of the southern kingdom – about 50 years. Isaiah was a contemporary of the prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah. And tradition tells us that Isaiah the prophet was martyred under the reign of Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings recorded by the Old Testament. The story is that he hid in a hollow tree to escape the reign of Manasseh, and the king’s soldiers, knowing he was in that tree, sawed the tree down. Thus, he was sawn in half. Some scholars feel that when the epistle to the Hebrews, in its great chapter about the heroes of faith, lists being sawn in two as one of the ways the prophets were martyred, that it refers to the prophet Isaiah (Heb 11:37).

He was the human author of this book, and it is indeed amazing to think that a man could write language as beautiful as this and reveal the tremendous things found here. But, when visitors go down the long trail to the Colorado River, they are no longer amazed that a river could carve out the great canyon, because they can actually hear the grinding rocks being swept along by the force of the current, and they can sense the powerful and invisible force of this river. The book of Isaiah is something like that. Here is a man carried along by an amazing force and speaking magnificent prophecies because of it.

In his second letter, Peter says of the Old Testament prophets,

“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because,” [he says,] “no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God,” (2 Pet 1:20-21 RSV)

and this explains how Isaiah could speak and write as he did.

Now the amazing thing is that prophets who spoke like this were very much aware that an invisible power within them was speaking through them and that what they spoke and wrote was greater than their own. They actually searched through their own writings to discover hidden truths, and in this sense they ministered to themselves. They studied their own writings. Peter says the same in his first letter:

The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when they predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. {1 Pet 1:10-12 RSV}

Now if any key is needed to this book, this is it. Isaiah was a man who was searching for something. Peter says he was searching after the salvation that was to come from God. And the interesting thing is that the name *Isaiah* means “The salvation of Jehovah.”

Now what sets this man searching? Why does he pore over his writings, puzzling over this matter? Well, when you read this book you can see his problem. Isaiah lived in a time of national stress, when man’s true nature was visible and was exposing itself for what it was just as in our day. He was terribly bothered over man’s innate rebelliousness, as he cries out in the opening chapter. The nation has deliberately forsaken the ways of God and their stupid obstinacy is simply beyond his understanding. “Why,” he says, “even the ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib...” (cf, Isa 1:3). Even an animal knows where its bread is buttered, where it gets blessing and help. But he says, “Not Israel. They don’t know where to go.” They are wandering off stupidly, ignorantly, and this amazes him. He simply cannot understand their stubborn refusal to turn back – and the other nations around are just as bad.

Then God gives Isaiah a vision. He sees God in his awful purity and holiness. This amazing

revelation of God is in Chapter 6, Verses 1 through 3:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

**“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”
{Isa 6:1-3 RSV}**

Imagine this! As he is in the temple one day, he sees God. In the year King Uzziah died, when the throne was vacant, he saw the throne that was never vacant. He saw a God of wrath and power. As you read on, you see beautifully described how God has power to shake the earth to its foundations – an immense God, infinite and mighty, speaking in thunder and moving in strength. Isaiah asks, “How can such a God do anything but destroy the rebellious creatures that are men? Where is salvation for men like this?”

His problem grows worse as, in the second part of this book, he is made aware of man’s helplessness. Chapter 40 begins on that note. Here is the prophetic passage concerning John the Baptist:

A voice says, “Cry!” {Isa 40:6a RSV}

Go to this nation and cry, cry.

And I said, “What shall I cry?” {Isa 40:6b RSV}

God said, cry that,

**“All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. {Isa 40:6b RSV}
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand for ever.” {Isa 40:8 RSV}**

Man is just like the grass. He is temporary – here for only a little while. His life spans but a brief period of time and then ends. Isaiah sees in this man’s utter impotence and helplessness as he blindly stumbles on to his doom.

But then Isaiah begins to see the answer. Woven beautifully throughout this book is the ever-growing revelation of God's love, of Jehovah's salvation, found in the figure of someone who is to come – the Messiah, the servant of God. At first it is dim and shadowy, but gradually it grows brighter and still brighter until, in Chapter 53, the figure of Christ steps right off the page and fills the whole room and you realize that he is the answer.

But what Isaiah was given to show especially was that the God of transcendent glory that he saw in Chapter 6 – the God who frightened him so much that he cried out, "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;" (Isa 6:5b RSV) – is the same God who would one day be,

**despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with
grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
... {Isa 53:3a RSV}**

**But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made
us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed... {Isa
53:5 RSV}**

**He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth; {Isa 53:7a
RSV}**

And Isaiah saw how God's love would break the back of man's rebelliousness and meet his helpless need.

Then, at last, he sees beyond the darkness and gloom of the centuries yet to come, to the day when there will come a morning without clouds, the day of righteousness, when all God's glory will fill the earth. And man will make war no more, and they will beat their swords into pruning hooks and their spears into plows, and nothing shall hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain.

You can find these two themes, or characteristics of God, brought together in the book of Revelation. In the fourth chapter, John tells us of a mighty vision of God: "And lo, a throne stood in heaven..." (Rev 4:2). Then, in Revelation 5:6 he says, "And between the throne and the four living creatures ... I saw a Lamb ..." There, then, are the

two themes of Isaiah: a throne and a Lamb. In Isaiah 6:1 you see the throne: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up..." And you find the Lamb in Chapter 53, Verse 7:

**like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is
dumb,
so he opened not his mouth. {Isa 53:7b
RSV}**

This is God's plan, you see. God doesn't choose to come with power and might and warfare to wipe men off the face of the earth – although that is the way we try to solve our problems! As God declares to Isaiah (55:8-9):

**"... my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the
Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the
earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."
{Isa 55:8-9 RSV}**

God's method is to break through man's rebelliousness not by might, not by power – but by love, by love that suffers. And when he does, and the heart responds by opening up, then all the majesty and the power of God are poured into that life to bring to it the fulfillment that God has intended for human hearts.

It is remarkable how up-to-date this book is. The first part of the book presents the threat of the king of Assyria; the last half of the book describes the threat of the kingdom of Babylon; and the middle part of the book, Chapters 37 through 39 are the "filling" in this historical sandwich – an interlude carrying us from Assyria to Babylon. These two nations – Assyria and Babylon – are in the world today and have been since before the time of Isaiah.

The king of Assyria stands for the power and philosophy of godlessness – the idea that there is no God and that we can live as we please; that we are in a deterministic, materialistic universe that runs on in its clanking, grinding way and there is nothing we can do about it but try to enjoy ourselves and make the most of things. It is the philosophy that might makes right, and that man has no one to answer to but himself. This is the Assyrian philoso-

phy so prominent in our own day, and it is also the philosophy behind Communism.

The second force is the power of Babylon. In Scripture, Babylon is always the symbol of apostasy, of religious error and deceit. Again, this is what we experience today, on all sides. The voices from which we should be able to expect guidance – the voice of the church itself in many places – are often voices crying out against God, by preaching the things that encourage wrongdoing and destruction in human life. So we are living in the very times described in Isaiah.

The dominant characteristics of human life are basically rebellion and helplessness. Have you ever noticed how true that is? I read recently in the papers of a man who was given a speeding ticket. When the officer handed him the ticket, the man read it, handed it back to the officer, threw his car into gear, and sped off. The officer jumped into his car and they wound up in a high-speed chase in which the man finally ran his car off the road and destroyed it, killing both himself and his six-year-old daughter who was in the car with him. Now what made him do that? Wasn't it simply that same innate rebelliousness of the human heart which does not want to be confronted with authority? That is the problem with all of us, isn't it?

People often say to me in counseling: "I know what I ought to do, but I have to confess that I don't want to do it." Why not? We all have this problem don't we? Rebelliousness and helplessness. It is reflected in the growing despair and sense of futility that grip so many people today – the loneliness and apparent meaninglessness of life. And twice in this book – once in the beginning and once toward the end – you find the great words that God addresses to a world that is gripped by rebellion and helplessness. God says in Chapter 1, Verse 18:

**"Come now, let us reason together ...
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool."
{Isa 1:18 RSV}**

He offers forgiveness, pardon. Again, in Chapter 55, Verse 1:

**"Ho, every one who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price."
{Isa 55:1 RSV}**

You see, God's message to man is not condemnation. His message to man is, "Come, come; the salvation of Jehovah is available to all." And when a man accepts what Isaiah says –

**All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. {Isa 53:6 RSV}**

– he will discover the answer to his deepest need; that the rebellion can be cured and the helplessness canceled and man can become what God intended him to be.

I often think of what occurred years ago to one of England's Bible teachers. As he hurried down to catch a train after one of the services at which he had been speaking, a man ran along the platform after him and caught him just as he was about to board the train. And the man said, "Oh, sir! I was in your meeting tonight and I heard you tell about a way by which man can find peace with God. I need help. I want to find my way to God. You help me." The teacher said, "I'm sorry. I haven't time. I've got to catch this train. But I will tell you what to do. Take this Bible and go to the nearest lamppost. Turn to Isaiah 53:6. Stoop down low and go in at the first *all* and stand up straight and come out at the last *all*." Then he boarded the train and off he went. The man stood there for a minute, puzzled. He didn't know what to make of it. Then he said, "I'll do what he said." He took the Bible that the teacher had given him and went over to the nearest lamppost. "Now what was it he said?" he thought. "Oh, yes, find Isaiah 53:6." He found it. "All we like sheep have gone astray." What did he say to do now? "Stoop down low and go in at the first *all*, stand up straight and come out at the last *all*. 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.'" "Oh," he said, "I see what he meant. I'm admit that's the case with me. Stoop down low and go in at the first *all*. Acknowledge that I've gone astray, that I've turned to my own way. Well, then what? Well, I'm to

stand up straight and come out at the last *all*. ‘But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ He bore it.” In a moment the man saw it. The next night at the meeting he came up, handed the Bible to the teacher, and said, “Here is your Bible, and I want you to know that I stooped down and went in at the first *all*, and I stood up straight and came out at the last *all!*”

Well, that is Isaiah’s message. It is the message of the Bible – the message of the Word of God. Let’s stand up straight and come out at the last all.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for the ministry of this great prophet of old. When we think that this book was written over seven long centuries before the Lord Jesus ever appeared on earth, yet so beautifully and accurately describes every aspect of his ministry, we can see that your hand is behind it, and that you have provided for us this great deliverance from ourselves. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way. Thou hast laid on him our iniquity. He bore our transgressions. Because of this we are accepted in your sight and can discover all the wonders that you have for us. We thank you in Christ’s name. Amen.

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JEREMIAH: A Profile of Courage

by Ray C. Stedman

What if some present-day preacher stood in his pulpit and persistently declared that God was on the side of the Communists? That God was against America and that he was raising up the Communists to be his people and his servants? That God cared nothing for the Declaration of Independence or the American Constitution or the long heritage of religious worship that our nation has had? In fact, that the things we emphasize were an offense to God? And what if this preacher even advocated that Christians renounce their loyalty to their country and join the Communist Party? And what if the preacher – subjected to house arrest, or flung into prison, or slapped in the face in public and his writings burned, or half-drowned in a pit of slime – would not only stubbornly refuse to take back one word of what he had said but would only repeat it again?

Well, this is something like the situation that is recorded in the book of Jeremiah. This is exactly what Jeremiah was called to do.

Imagine yourself as that preacher. Imagine how you would feel when no one listens to you and persecution hounds you every step of the way. You are unable to seek comfort in marriage because the days are too difficult and God has said to remain unmarried. You feel abandoned, and alone; all your friends turn from you.

And if you try to quit, and refuse to be this kind of a preacher, you find that you cannot quit – that the word of God burns in your bones and you have to say it whether or not you want to. And despite the message that you are called upon to deliver, your love for your country is genuine and deep – as you see it surrounded by its enemies and ravished and conquered and despoiled, you are overcome by a deep sorrow that breaks out in grief's lamentations.

Now, perhaps, you can understand why Jeremiah, of all the prophets, was unquestionably the

most heroic. Isaiah wrote more exalted passages and perhaps saw more precisely the coming of the Messiah and the fullness of his work. Other prophets speak more precisely concerning some of the future events that were to be fulfilled, but Jeremiah is outstanding among the prophets as a man of heroic, dauntless courage. For many years he endured this kind of persecution in his life without quitting. That is an amazing record, isn't it? As you read through this book you can see that here indeed is an amazing man.

Jeremiah lived in the last days of a decaying nation. He was the last prophet to Judah, the southern kingdom. Judah continued on after the ten tribes of the north had been carried into captivity under Assyria. (Isaiah prophesied about sixty years before Jeremiah.) Jeremiah comes in at the close of the reign of the last good king of Judah, the boy king Josiah, who led the last revival the nation experienced before it went into captivity. (This revival under King Josiah was a rather superficial matter; in fact, the prophet Hilkiah had told him that though the people would follow him in his attempt to reform the nation and return to God, they would only do so because they loved him and not because they loved God.)

Jeremiah, then, comes in right in the middle of the reign of King Josiah and his ministry carries us on through the reign of King Jehohaz, who was on the throne only about three months. And then came King Jehoiakim, one of the most evil kings of Judah, and then the three months' reign of Jehoiachin who was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and taken into captivity in Babylon. And Jeremiah was still around at the time of Judah's last king Zedekiah, at the end of whose reign Nebuchadnezzar returned, utterly destroying the city of Jerusalem and taking the whole nation into Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah's ministry covered about forty years, and during all this time the prophet never once saw

any signs of success in his ministry. His message was one of denunciation and reform, and the people never obeyed him. The other prophets saw in some measure the impact of their message upon the nation – but not Jeremiah. He was called to a ministry of failure, and yet he was enabled to keep going for forty long years and to be faithful to God and to accomplish God's purpose: to witness to a decayed nation.

Two important things are woven into the fabric of this entire prophecy. One concerns the fate of the nation, and the other concerns the feelings of the prophet. And both of them are instructive.

First of all, the prophecies of Jeremiah that have to do with **the fate of the nation** reflect the familiar theme of all the prophets. Jeremiah reminds this people that the beginning of error in their lives was their failure to take God seriously. They looked lightly upon what he said. They did not pay much attention to what he had told them, and they did what was right in their own eyes rather than carefully examining their behavior in the light of God's revelation and word.

As we read in the historical books, they had sunk so low in the early days of Josiah's reign that they had actually lost the copy of the Law. As far as we can tell, no one in the land of Judah any longer had access to the Word of God, and the copy which was in the temple – and which ought to have been in the central place of worship – was lost somewhere in the back room. Only by accident was it finally found, and its discovery stimulated the revival led by Josiah.

But that is how far off base the nation had gone. They had actually lost contact with the Word of God. They had adopted the dangerous principle of doing what was right in their own eyes. What they thought was right. Many people do what they know is wrong in the sight of God. That is bad enough. But it is equally dangerous to judge for ourselves what is right for we have no ability to judge properly – and this is what was happening in Israel.

As a result, they adopted the values of the worldlings around them and ended up worshipping the gods of the other nations. This brought on, as it always does, a torrent of bickering and strife and lowered morals and perverted justice. They made military alliances with godless nations around

them, and the country gradually sank deeper and deeper and lower and lower on the moral scale.

It was to this people that Jeremiah came. And the message that he was told to proclaim was judgment: that the national rebellion would lead to national ruin. Throughout this whole book you find these prophecies clearly delineated as he told exactly how God was raising up a terrible and godless people, a fierce and cruel people, who would sweep across the land and destroy everything in their path. They would be utterly ruthless; they would break down the walls and destroy the temple and take all the things that the nation valued and Israel would be carried away into captivity. Thus God would judge Israel.

But Jeremiah also makes very clear throughout these passages of judgment that God judges with a sorrowing heart, a weeping heart, and then the prophet looks beyond the 70 years of captivity he predicts. (Later on, while reading this very book of Jeremiah, the prophet Daniel realized that God had predicted that the captivity would last exactly 70 years. That is how Daniel knew that the end of the time was coming and he could look forward to seeing the nation restored again to the land.) Jeremiah looks beyond the captivity to the restoration of the people and then, in that peculiar way that prophets suddenly extend their view from immediate to far-distant events, he looks even further beyond – to the ultimate dispersion of the peoples of Israel, and then to the final regathering of the nation into the land. He looks to the days that will usher in the millennial reign when Israel – restored and blessed and called by God – shall be the world's center.

In the middle of this book, in Chapters 30 through 33, is an amazing and beautiful prediction written when Jeremiah was in a dungeon. He was in a deep slime pit, the mud two or three feet thick on the bottom and only a little bit of daylight trickling through from above. In the midst of those depressing and deplorable circumstances, the prophet was led of the Spirit of God to write the flaming vision of the days when Israel will be called back again, and God promises to be their God and to walk among them and put away their sins. There in the middle of Chapter 31 is the great promise of the new covenant which will be made with Israel.

These words are picked up by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (cf, Heb 8:8-12). Also, our Lord himself referred to this same prophecy when

he gathered with his disciples on the night before the cross and instituted the Lord's Supper. As he took the cup after the bread and held it up to them, he said, "For this is my blood of the [new] covenant," (Matt 26:28a). He was referring back to the days of Jeremiah's prophecy of the covenant that God would make with his people in that far-off day yet to come.

Now in the ultimate sense the fulfillment of that covenant is still in the distant future. God is fulfilling it today among the Gentiles in the church (which is made up of both Jew and Gentile), but the ultimate fulfillment of it for the nation Israel remains in the future, as Jeremiah predicted:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." {Jer 31:31-34 RSV}

What a wonderful picture that is. This is the fulfilling of the vision that was given to Jeremiah, in Chapter 18, when God told him to go down to the potter's house. That is a strange place for a prophet to go but that is where God sent him.

As Jeremiah watched the potter at work, he saw him making a vessel on his wheel, and as the wheel turned the potter shaped the vessel. And as Jeremiah watched, the vessel in the potter's hand was marred and broken. Then the potter took the vessel and once more pushed it all down into a lump of clay, and shaping it the second time, made it into a vessel after the potter's heart.

All through this book you will find visual aids, or object lessons. The prophets are good at giving such lessons, and Jeremiah does that here. This is God's great object lesson of what he does with a

broken life. He takes it and makes it over again – not according to the failures and foolish dreams of an individual, but after the potter's heart, for the potter has power over the clay to shape it as he wishes. Jeremiah speaks a prophecy of ruin – of desolation and destruction and judgment – but beyond that is the hope and glory of the days when God shall reshape the vessel. This applies not only to the nation but to the individual as well.

Now, the second theme in Jeremiah relates to **the feelings of the prophet**. There is a great lesson for us in Jeremiah's honest reactions to the situations he faces. You will find that he constantly fights a battle with discouragement. Who wouldn't with a ministry like his? He sees absolutely no signs of his ministry's success and the grim specter of discouragement and depression dogs his footsteps through all those forty years.

One of the amazing things about this prophet is that when he is in the public eye, he is as fearless as a lion. He speaks to kings and murderers and captains who hurl enraged threats against him, and he is utterly fearless. He looks them right in the eye and delivers the message of God that speaks of their own destruction. But when he is by himself, all alone with God, he is filled with discouragement and depression and resentment and bitterness, and it all comes flooding out. The prophet turns to God and cries:

**Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed? {Jer 15:18a RSV}**

That is, "This problem just keeps after me all the time. It never stops. It never gets better; it is unceasing, refusing to be healed." And then he says to God:

**Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail? {Jer 15:18b RSV}**

Or, as another translation has it,

**Wilt thou be to me like a liar,
like waters that fail?**

He is accusing God of being a liar and undependable. Strong words? Undoubtedly. Honest words? Absolutely. He is pouring out exactly how he feels. He has begun to wonder if the trouble

might after all be with God that he cannot be depended upon. As you look back through this brief account, you will see that what is bothering the prophet first of all is persecution:

**O Lord, thou knowest;
remember me and visit me,
and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. {Jer 15:15a RSV}**

Here is a man who is being hounded everywhere he goes. Not only does he suffer persecution but also mocking scorn, and contempt:

**In thy forbearance take me not away;
know that for thy sake I bear reproach.
{Jer 15:15b RSV}**

The third element of his problem is loneliness:

**I did not sit in the company of merry-makers,
nor did I rejoice;
I sat alone, because thy hand was upon me,
for thou hadst filled me with indignation.
{Jer 15:17 RSV}**

Aren't these usually the ingredients of discouragement for us? We feel put upon. We feel persecuted. We feel that we have tried to do the right thing but everybody either just disregards it or comes back to make trouble for us. Or they mock and deride us and we are weighed down by loneliness and depression of spirit. We feel forsaken.

Ah you say, "I know the trouble with this man. He's obviously permitted himself to backslide." Disobedience – that is the quick and easy answer we glibly hand somebody who is suffering like this. But that isn't the case with Jeremiah. Notice that this is a man who is praying:

**O Lord, thou knowest;
remember me and visit me. {Jer 15:15a RSV}**

And he is feeding on the word:

**Thy words were found, and I ate them,
and thy words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart;
for I am called by thy name,
O Lord, God of hosts. {Jer 15:16 RSV}**

He is reading his Bible, feeding on the word. And he is witnessing.

**know that for thy sake I bear reproach.
{Jer 15:15b RSV}**

He has been talking to them about the Lord. And he is separated. Look again at Verse 17:

**I did not sit in the company of merry-makers,
nor did I rejoice; {Jer 15:17a RSV}**

This is not a backsliding man, is it? For these are the very things you need to do if you get discouraged and depressed. You need to pray and read your Bible and witness to others and keep away from evil. Isn't that the answer? Isn't that the formula? But here is a man who is doing all these things and he is still defeated, still discouraged. Well, what is the problem?

The problem is that he has forgotten his calling. He has forgotten what God has promised to be to him. So God calls him back to it:

**Therefore thus says the Lord:
"If you return, I will restore you, ..."
{Jer 15:19a RSV}**

In Scripture, God always gives that answer to a heart that has grown discouraged. "Come back," God says. "Return. Go back to the beginnings, to the original things." And he says:

**"If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what
is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth.
They shall turn to you,
but you shall not turn to them.
And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you,**

**says the Lord.
I will deliver you out of the hand of the
wicked,
and redeem you from the grasp of the
ruthless." {Jer 15:19b-21 RSV}**

That is what God said to him at the beginning. Notice this man's call back in Chapter 1:

**Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you:
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."
{Jer 1:4-5 RSV}**

And Jeremiah said:

**"Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." [He was probably about seventeen years of age when this call came to him.] But the Lord said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am only a youth';
for to all to whom I send you you shall go,
and whatever I command you you shall speak.
Be not afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the Lord."
Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations
and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant." {Jer 1:6-10 RSV}**

And when from a mire of depression and discouragement, the prophet is called back to the promise of God; when he is reminded that God is greater than circumstances and that no matter how

depressing they may be, or how negative, the God who calls him is the God who is able to sustain him in the midst of it; when he gets his eyes off himself and back on to God (like Peter walking on the water), he begins to walk again.

And in the strength he receives through this lesson he continues with his ministry, through all the discouraging circumstances, to at last be taken as a prisoner to Egypt, where he died. We have no record of his death, but Jeremiah was faithful to the end as he learned to walk in the strength of the Lord his God. And he gives us this wonderful prophecy of the grace of God in restoring lives and taking broken, battered, wounded, defeated spirits and making them over again into vessels pleasing to him.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for the encouragement of this great prophet as we see the decay in our own nation, and the defeat of so many endeavors undertaken for your name's sake. We see the scorn and contempt for your word and for the things concerning you. We pray that you will help us to realize and remember that you are the God who opens and no man shuts and who shuts and no man opens, who does your will in the nations, who sets up and overthrows, who builds and plants, and who accomplishes all your purposes. May we get our eyes off ourselves and our circumstances and on to you and to your great purposes and be strong in you and in your power. We ask it in your name. Amen.

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LAMENTATIONS: The Therapy of Trouble

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Lamentations is sandwiched between the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. This unusual book properly follows the book of Jeremiah the prophet and priest because it was written by him. It is the Lamentations of Jeremiah as he wept over the city of Jerusalem following its desolation and captivity by Nebuchadnezzar. In the Septuagint version of this – the Greek translation of the Hebrew – there is a brief notation to the effect that as Jeremiah went up on the hillside and sat overlooking the desolate city, he uttered these lamentations.

As you read through this book, you will find many foreshadowings of our Lord weeping over the city of Jerusalem. In the Lord's last week, when he went up to the Mount of Olives and sat looking out over the city, he wept over it saying,

“O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” {Matt 23:37 RSV}

The tears ran down his face as he looked out over the city that had rejected him; this people that did not know the hour of their visitation, and had turned their backs upon the one who was their Messiah and their deliverer.

You will also find several foreshadowings of our Lord's ministry in the book of Jeremiah's Lamentations. For example, Chapter 1:

**How lonely sits the city
that was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
{Lam 1:1a RSV}**

This is highly suggestive of our Lord's weeping over the city. Farther on we read:

**“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see
if there is any sorrow like my sorrow ...”
{Lam 1:12a RSV}**

This would certainly bring to the believing heart an immediate remembrance of the cross and those who watched the Lord as he hung there on it.

Then in Chapter 2, Verse 15:

**All who pass along the way
clap their hands at you;
they hiss and wag their heads
at the daughter of Jerusalem;
{Lam 2:15a RSV}**

This recalls the mockery of the multitudes at the cross. Then in Chapter 3, Verses 14 and 15:

**I have become the laughingstock of all
peoples,
the burden of their songs all day long.
He has filled me with bitterness,
he has sated me with wormwood.
{Lam 3:14-15 RSV}**

Again in Verse 19 of Chapter 3:

**Remember my affliction and my bitterness,
the wormwood and the gall!
{Lam 3:19 RSV}**

And Verse 30 of that chapter:

**let him give his cheek to the smiter,
{Lam 3:30a RSV}**

This recalls Isaiah's prophecy, "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;" (Isa 50:6). This was fulfilled by the smiting of the Lord by the soldiers when Jesus was brought before Pilate for judgment. So this little book captures the agony and sorrow that was so much a part of our Lord's ministry at the cross that it earned him the title, "A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," (Isa 53:3).

The book of Lamentations is also unusual in the way it is put together. There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, which begins with *aleph*, the equivalent of our 'a' and ends with *tau* which is the equivalent of our 't.' (The letter 'z,' by the way, comes around the middle of their alphabet.) In this book of Jeremiah's Lamentations, Chapters 1, 2, and 4 form an acrostic, each chapter consisting of twenty-two verses, and each verse beginning with one of each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, beginning with aleph and ending with tau. Chapter 3 is interesting in that it consists of sixty-six verses in triads, or triplets, in which every verse making up each triad begins with the same letter of the alphabet, so that there are twenty-two groups of three altogether, one for each letter of the alphabet. These chapters have been written very, very carefully, according to the rules of Hebrew poetry. Chapter 5 does not follow this acrostic plan, although it does have twenty-two verses.

This is certainly an intriguing structure, but the real interest of this book is in its content. It is a study in sorrow, a hymn of heartbreak. This is the kind of book you might read when sorrow strikes your own heart, and sorrow comes to all of us at times. As Jeremiah was looking out over Jerusalem, he saw its desolation and he remembered the terrible, bloody battle in which Nebuchadnezzar had taken the city and sacked it, destroying the temple and killing the inhabitants.

Each chapter stresses and develops a **particular aspect of sorrow**:

Chapter 1 gives us a description of the utter depths of sorrow, the desolation of spirit that sorrow makes upon the human heart, the sense of abandonment, of complete loneliness. Here you can see how vividly the prophet has captured this feeling as he pours out the feelings of his own heart. The people have been vanquished and taken

into captivity; the city has been set on fire and totally destroyed. Verse 16:

**"For these things I weep;
my eyes flow with tears;
for a comforter is far from me,
one to revive my courage;
my children are desolate,
for the enemy has prevailed."**

{Lam 1:16 RSV}

Chapter 2 describes the thoroughness of judgment. At the beginning of this chapter you have a description of how the armies of Nebuchadnezzar utterly devastated the city. Jeremiah, however, does not attribute this destruction to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, but to the Lord. He looks behind the immediate circumstance to what God is doing. As you read through the chapter you can see how he points out that everything has been destroyed, nothing is left. There is nothing he can put his hand on that has been preserved because of the thorough judgment of God.

Then in Chapter 3 – this long chapter of 66 verses where you have the triads of the alphabet – the prophet speaks of his own reaction, his personal pain as an individual contemplating this devastation. He begins with these words:

**I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;
he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.
He has made my flesh and my skin waste
away,
and broken my bones;
he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
he has made me dwell in darkness
like the dead of long ago.**

{Lam 3:1-6 RSV}

In Chapter 4 you have what we might call the incredibility of judgment, an attitude of unbelief as the prophet remembers all that happened. Anyone who has been through this knows about these aspects of the times of grief. First, there is a sense of utter desolation. Then comes an awareness of complete devastation and deep personal pain, and then, as Jeremiah seems to feel, a kind of unbelief that this could happen, a sense of incredulity as he

contemplates the destruction of Jerusalem.
Verse 2:

**The precious sons of Zion,
worth their weight in fine gold,
how they are reckoned as earthen pots,
the work of a potter's hands! {Lam 4:2 RSV}**

As he looks out and sees the bodies of the sons of Israel – these precious young people who have been destroyed, turning to clay and dust in the streets – he says:

**Happier were the victims of the sword
than the victims of hunger [There had
been a terrible famine in the city],
who pined away, stricken
by want of the fruits of the field.
{Lam 4:9 RSV}**

And so devastating had this siege been that,

**The hands of compassionate women
have boiled their own children;
they became their food
in the destruction of the daughter of my
people. {Lam 4:10 RSV}**

This was of the most terrible sieges of all time. As the report went out, it was unbelievable (Verse 12):

**The kings of the earth did not believe,
or any of the inhabitants of the world,
that foe or enemy could enter
the gates of Jerusalem. {Lam 4:12 RSV}**

In Chapter 5 there is the utter humiliation of judgment, the feeling that Jeremiah has been thoroughly disgraced. He hardly dares lift up his head again. He says (Verses 1-5):

**Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us;
behold, and see our disgrace!
Our inheritance has been turned over to
strangers,
our homes to aliens.
We have become orphans, fatherless;
our mothers are like widows.
We must pay for the water we drink,
the wood we get must be bought.
With a yoke on our necks we are hard
driven;
we are weary, we are given no rest.
{Lam 5:1-5 RSV}**

He describes how in Verse 13:

**Young men are compelled to grind at the
mill;
and boys stagger under loads of wood.
{Lam 5:13 RSV}
The old men have quit the city gate,
the young men their music. {Lam 5:14
RSV}
The joy of our hearts has ceased; ... {Lam
5:15a RSV}
The crown has fallen from our head;
woe to us, for we have sinned! {Lam 5:16
RSV}**

What a description of the utter despair of the human spirit in the grip of deep distress and sorrow! And yet, in each of these chapters an insight is revealed, a lesson that God teaches through sorrow that otherwise would never have been learned. That is what we should look for in this book.

The book is designed to teach us through what might be called the therapy of trouble, what sorrow teaches us. All through Scripture we are told that pain and suffering are God's instruments by which he teaches us. Through suffering comes strength of character. Do not be surprised that this is true. We read in Hebrews of the Lord Jesus, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered," (Heb 5:8 RSV). There were things the Lord Jesus had to learn and could learn only by living as a man through times of suffering and sorrow. If he was not exempt, why should we expect to be?

This is why it is never right for a Christian to say, as so many of us do, when trouble strikes, "Why should this happen to me?" Well, why shouldn't it happen to you? As Hebrews 12, Verse 10, reminds us, it is a mark of God's love. He sent it to discipline us, to teach us, and to train us.

Each chapter also reveals one particular aspect of sorrow as **teaching one particular lesson of grace**:

In Chapter 1 there is the sense of desolation and abandonment in spirit, when suddenly the prophet says in Verse 18:

**"The Lord is in the right,
for I have rebelled against his word;"
{Lam 1:18a RSV}**

While he was looking out over Jerusalem and feeling this awful sense of desolation, he suddenly realized that this was a sign that God is right. So he says, "I have rebelled against his word."

That is the problem, and the lesson. Most of us are in the habit of blaming God, either directly or indirectly, for whatever happens to us, and our attitude is usually, "Well, I don't know why this should happen to me! After all, I have been doing my best. I have been trying hard, and still these kinds of things happen." And our implication is that God is unjust, God is not right.

The Apostle Paul says, "Let God be true though every man be false," (Rom 3:4 RSV). It is impossible for God not to be right. It is impossible for man to be more just than God, because our very sense of justice is derived from him. It is impossible for man to be more compassionate than God, for our feelings of compassion come from him. You see, it is impossible for us ever to sit in judgment on God. God is right. When Jeremiah saw the utter desolation around him he learned this. As long as he had anything to prop himself up with, he could find fault with God, but when he was left utterly desolate he realized that the Lord was right.

In Chapter 2 he gains more insight into this truth. He is made aware of the thoroughness of judgment, of how meticulously God has used the armies of Nebuchadnezzar to lay everything to waste. In fact, how ruthless the Lord has been. But then he learns another insight (Verse 17):

**The Lord has done what he purposed,
has carried out his threat;
as he ordained long ago,
he has demolished without pity;
he has made the enemy rejoice over you,
and exalted the might of your foes.**
{Lam 2:17 RSV}

In other words, God is faithful. Suddenly Jeremiah realizes that this is consistent with the character of God. If he says he is going to do something, he will do it. Nothing can make him change. If you look back over the history of Israel you discover that in the book of Deuteronomy, God had said to Moses, "Moses, if my people walk in obedience to me and love me and follow me, I will pour unlimited blessing upon them. I will open the windows of heaven and just simply bless them until they can't stand it. But if they turn, if they go aside, I will plead with them and send prophets to

them and work with them and have patience with them." (And the record is that for four hundred years, God put up with the intransigence of Israel.) But God also promised that if Israel followed after other gods, he would raise up a nation to come in and devastate the land. That is exactly what God said and that is exactly what he did.

It is interesting that Jeremiah predicted how long that captivity would last. It would last seventy years (Jer 25:11). Why seventy? Well, in the Law, God required Israel to allow the land to rest fallow every seventh year. They were not to plow the soil or use it; they were to let it rest. (This is a very practical principle of agricultural conservation.) During the sixth year, to make up for the lack of food, the Lord would bless them with a superabundance of crops so they would have enough food to carry them through that seventh year. But Israel never obeyed that command. They continued using the land from the time they entered it. In a sense they robbed God of seventy years of rest for the land. They used it continuously for 490 years so God sent them out of it and rested the land for 70 years.

How faithful God is to his promise. The Lord is utterly faithful. There is a widespread belief that God is so loving, so tenderhearted, that he just gives in when you pressure him a little, that he won't do what he says he is going to do. But that idea has been put to rest forever by one of the greatest verses in the Bible (Rom. 8:32): "He who did not spare his own Son..." Think of that. When he was made sin for us, God did not spare him. That is how unflinching God is in following through on his word. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all..." And yet that verse ends in glory, doesn't it? "... will he not also give us all things with him?" One side of it is just as true as the other. Jeremiah learned that God is faithful by the thoroughness of judgment.

Then in Chapter 3 where you read of Jeremiah's personal pain, we come to a tremendous passage. Suddenly, in the midst of a long wail, he says (Verse 22-33):

**The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness.
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."
The Lord is good to those who wait for him,**

**to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.
It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.
Let him sit alone in silence
when he has laid it on him;
let him put his mouth in the dust –
there may yet be hope;
let him give his cheek to the smiter,
and be filled with insults.
For the Lord will not
cast off for ever,
but, though he cause grief, he will have
compassion
according to the abundance of his steady
love;
for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve the sons of men.**
{Lam 3:22-33 RSV}

In many ways, this is one of the most beautiful passages in all the Bible. It reveals the compassion of the heart of God. Judgment, as Isaiah says, is his strange work. He does not like to do it. He does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men. His mercies are fresh every morning. In his own pain Jeremiah remembers this: that behind all the desolation is the work of love. God destroyed Jerusalem because it was heading the wrong way. He destroyed it so that he could restore it later, and build it up again in joy and peace and blessing. The Lord does not cast off forever; though he causes grief, he will have compassion.

At the end of Chapter 4, the prophet says in Verse 22:

**The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter
of Zion, is accomplished,
he will keep you in exile no longer;
but your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he
will punish,
he will uncover your sins.**
{Lam 4:22 RSV}

The daughter of Zion is Israel. The daughter of Edom refers to the country bordering Israel that was always a thorn in their flesh. Edom is always used in scripture as a picture of the flesh. The Edomites were related to Israel. They were the children of Esau, who is always a picture of the flesh. The prophet is saying, "God will set a limit to the punishment of his own. He never drives them too far. He never disciplines them too

harshly. There is a limit. The punishment is accomplished. He will keep them in exile no longer; but as to the flesh, it has been utterly set aside and Edom will be punished."

Chapter 5 describes the humiliation of judgment, but in the end, Jeremiah comes to another flash of insight (Verse 19):

**But thou, O Lord, dost reign for ever;
thy throne endures to all generations.**
{Lam 5:19 RSV}

What does this mean? Well, it means that though man may even perish in sorrow, God endures. And because God endures, the great purpose and workings of God endure. God never does anything temporarily; all that he does endures forever. Jeremiah sees that what God has taught him in his grief will have a practical use. Even if he were to die in the midst of his grief, God's purposes endure. God is simply preparing now for a work yet to come. God is not limited by time. He is eternal. His throne, his authority, endures to all generations. In practical terms, the prophet is realizing that after he has been through this time of grief, he will have learned a truth about God that will make him absolutely impervious to any other kind of test. Once he has been through this, nothing can reach him, nothing can upset him, nothing can trouble him, nothing can touch him or overthrow him. He is now ready for anything. And in God's great purpose there will be an opportunity to use that strength.

I often think of those words of our Lord recorded in the fourteenth chapter of Luke when he tells his disciples the two parables about counting the cost. One involved the man who went out to do battle and met a king coming against him with an army. Jesus said, "What man of you will do that and not sit down first and count the cost?" Or, in the other parable about building a tower, who will not count the cost to see if he has enough to finish the building? Usually we interpret this as our Lord saying to us, "If you are going to become a Christian, you should think it through. You should count the cost. You should see if you really mean business and are going to carry this through." Nothing could be further from the Lord's meaning. What he is saying is, "I am the one who has to count the cost. I, as your Lord and Master, do not go out to build a tower without sitting down first and count-

ing the cost. Nor do I go out to do battle with a fierce king without first being sure that I have what it takes to win this battle.”

In this passage, Jesus is explaining why he said to the disciples, “Except a man forsake his mother and father and son and daughter he cannot be my disciple.” As they wondered at this, he said “You are wondering why I am so severe with you. I will tell you. It is because I am going out to do a great work of building. I will build my church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. I am going out to do battle with a great foe, a foe of cleverness and ruthlessness, and I have to be sure that the men who follow me are men on whom I can depend. I have to count the cost.”

In other words, “I have to get you ready for a battle that is going to go on far beyond this life. So I want men who will be mine, who will be absolutely, wholly mine so I can train them, prepare them, and bring them through trials and hardships, teaching them the great principles. When we finally get up against it, up against the real conflict, I will have men that I can depend upon. But I will have counted the cost.”

That is what he is talking about. When we learn our lessons here – when we learn how to handle sorrow and heartache and desolation of spirit in this limited way here – we will be prepared so that nothing can overthrow us; we will be unconquerable in the battle that God faces in the subjugation of the entire universe.

I often think of this: What lies beyond? Is not God preparing us now to do a mightier work in the future? Is he not getting us ready to carry on a conflict that will extend to the uttermost reaches of this vast universe of ours? Of course he is. God never does anything without a purpose. He never creates anything without intending to use it. And all this lies ahead of us. That is why it is so important that we learn how to face up to sorrow and to learn what God would have us to learn in the midst of it.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this book of Lamentations. for its lesson to our hearts, that we may learn to be strong for your name’s sake. to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might, to be ready for that great day and that greater conflict yet to come. In Christ’s name, Amen.

EZEKIEL: Wheels, Bones, and Restoration

by Ray C. Stedman

A man was up on his roof fixing his television aerial when he slipped and began to slide down toward the gutters. He tried to catch himself, but he went over the edge. He managed to grab hold of the eaves troughs as he dropped, and he hung there, suspended from the eaves. He couldn't look down and he didn't know how far it was to the ground, and in his desperation he cried out. "Oh, God help me!" And a voice replied, "I am ready to help you." And he said, "Tell me what to do." The voice asked. "Do you trust me?" He said, "Yes, I trust you." The voice said. "All right then. Let go." And man asked, "Is there anybody else up there who can help me?"

This is always the problem of men who, because of circumstances, will not believe in God, who refuse to put their faith and trust in a God who has revealed himself to them as perfectly adequate and perfectly trustworthy and perfectly faithful. The French philosopher Montaigne, writing quite apart from Christian revelation, said, "Every man carries within himself the history of the world." By that he meant that history is simply a written record of what is already written in the confines of the human heart.

The history of the world is only an extension of any individual life. The book of Ezekiel traces the causes of the captivity of the nation Israel, and why it was in so much trouble. This is the story of the nation, but it is the story of any individual as well. And because it is the story of any individual, it is the story of the whole of mankind. The books of the Old Testament were written with this principle in mind. They are, therefore, extremely valuable

for us – what happens to the nation is exactly what happens to us. By looking carefully, we can see our problems and circumstances exemplified in the problems and circumstance set forth in these books.

Ezekiel was a captive in the land of Babylon. He had been carried away by Nebuchadnezzar when the nation of Judah was taken captive, as described by Jeremiah's great prophecy. So, Ezekiel is the first prophet of the captivity. There were two prophets during the captivity – Ezekiel and Daniel. Ezekiel was older than Daniel and prophesied during the first twenty or twenty-five years of that seventy-year period when Israel was held captive by Babylon.

The story of this book is the story of human life and the book begins with a tremendous vision of God, because all life starts with God. God is the greatest fact in existence, in history. If you are going to think about anything, you have to start somewhere. Anyone who wants to think logically about life must always begin with God. That is where the Bible begins. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," {Gen 1:1 RSV} This book of Ezekiel begins, then, with a mystic vision of God. The glory of the prophet Ezekiel was that he saw God more clearly than any of the other prophets. If your heart needs to be set on fire by the revelation of the character and glory of God, read Ezekiel. He is the great prophet who saw the glory of God.

The book opens dramatically with the vision that Ezekiel saw by the River Chebar in the land of Babylon:

As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming bronze. {Ezek 1:4 RSV}

That is a sight dramatic enough to arrest anyone's attention. Then he says,

And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. {Ezek 1:5a RSV}

And he describes these creatures to us. Each had four faces – the faces of a man, an eagle, an ox, and a lion. These four faces turned in every direction, faced every way. After he saw the four living creatures, he saw certain wheels. (These are described in an old song: “Ezekiel saw a wheel, way up in the middle of the air; the big wheel ran by faith and the little wheel ran by the grace of God, a wheel in a wheel, away in the middle of the air.”) Ezekiel saw that these wheels were turning, one wheel within the other. As he watched he also saw a firmament above, shining in splendor, and above the firmament, as he lifted his eyes higher, he saw a throne. And on the throne sat a man.

Now, if you have read the book of Revelation you will recognize great similarities to what John saw. John also saw four living creatures. He, too, saw a throne, and on the throne a man. This, then, is a revelation of the greatness and the majesty of God, told in symbolic form.

We can't interpret all of this, because there is a mystery about the person of God. But what Ezekiel sees is, generally speaking, the power and the majesty of God. It is interesting that the four living creatures setting forth the character of God are always described as having the faces of a lion, a man, an ox, and an eagle. And throughout all of history these things have symbolically represented certain qualities. A lion is always a picture of sovereignty, of supremacy – “the king of the beasts.” A man is the picture of intelligence, of understanding. An ox is always the symbol of servitude, of sacrifice. And an eagle is the symbol of power and deity, of soaring over all creation. Now the significant thing is that the four gospels present exactly these same qualities in Jesus Christ:

- He appears first in the Gospel of Matthew as the king – the lion, the king of beasts, the sovereign of all.
- He appears in the Gospel of Mark as the servant, the ox.
- In the Gospel of Luke, he is man in his intelligence, in his insight, in his understanding of life.
- And in the Gospel of John he is deity.

These four reflect the character of Jesus Christ.

Now, even though Ezekiel doesn't understand this, even though he doesn't perceive the significance of his vision; he saw nonetheless the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (cf, 2 Cor 4:6). That is because God reveals himself through Christ. Ezekiel saw as clearly as he could the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Then Ezekiel moves quickly into prophecies that have to do with the failure of man. And these are described at great length. As Ezekiel watches in visions, he sees the glory of God departing from the temple in Jerusalem, leaving the inner court and moving to the outer court, and then rising and moving out to the Mount of Olives, and rising up from there.

Of course, this prophecy was fulfilled when our Lord moved out of the temple, down across the Kidron Valley, up the side of the Mount of Olives, and into the Garden of Gethsemane. And later, after the crucifixion and the resurrection, he ascended from that mountain into glory.

At this point there comes a lengthy passage where Ezekiel traces the degradation of man, the result of men's rejection of God's grace. And he tells how God struggles with those people, calling them; how he tries to win them, to waken them to the foolishness of turning their backs on the glory of God. At last they go through times of difficulty and heartache and punishment, as God seeks constantly to bring them to their senses, to waken them to what they are doing – to show them that man is made to fellowship with God and that without God he only goes farther and farther into weakness and folly and degradation.

The prophet is called upon to convey God's message in symbolic and dramatic ways. On one

occasion he is asked by God to lie on his left side every day for 390 days (that is more than a year of lying on his left side!), and then to lie on his right side for 40 days – all of which is a picture of the 390 years that God had struggled to try to bring this nation to its senses and the final 40 years when judgment was imminent. God kept his hand back from judgment all those years, until at last he allowed Nebuchadnezzar to come in and sweep the people away, sacking the city and desolating the temple and taking all the people into the land of Babylon.

Here you find the reasons why man is debauched and degraded, and Ezekiel sets forth the righteousness of God's judgment. When man chooses to avoid the God who made him, what else is there but judgment? If we neglect God, who is utterly essential to our being, and we refuse to give heed to his love and his grace, then the only thing left for us is to experience the results of turning our backs to him.

The prophet sees through all the judgment that came upon this people, he sees through to the forces behind. In Chapter 28 there is a remarkable passage where the prophet speaks about the judgment upon the land of Tyre and Sidon. He speaks of the prince of Tyre and, behind him, an individual whom he calls the king of Tyre.

Most Bible scholars have recognized that, because of the height of vision from which this prophet speaks, he is talking not only about the actual prince of the city of Tyre – the man who was then on the throne in that seafaring city – but he is looking beyond him and the visible things of Tyre, to that sinister individual he calls the king of Tyre. This king symbolizes what are referred to in the New Testament as principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness who manipulate things on earth and cause events we see recorded in our daily newspapers. In other words, these are the Satanic powers.

In Chapter 28 you have a passage that many Bible scholars think can be fully understood only as it applies to the fall of Satan himself. And this is one of only two passages in the whole Bible that describes the fall of Satan:

**“Your heart was proud because of your beauty;
you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.**

**I cast you to the ground;
I exposed you before kings,
to feast their eyes on you.
By the multitude of your iniquities,
in the unrighteousness of your trade
you profaned your sanctuaries;”
{Ezek 28:17-18a RSV}**

The reason for Satan's fall is given in Isaiah 14, where the Prince of Darkness says “I will” five times {Isa 14:13-14}. And here God judges that pride, which exalts self instead of God.

Now the prophet turns to the restoring grace of God, and in Chapter 37 is the remarkable vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones. This, also, has given rise to well-known song. The prophet see this vision as he looks out over the valley of dry bones: the bones join together at the command of God, but there is no breath in them. And then God comes and breathes upon them and they come to life again. This picture of God's restoring grace illustrates what God intends to do with the nation Israel. As far as God is concerned, it has been lying now for more the nineteen centuries in a state of death, but a day is coming when God will breathe upon this nation. Like these dry bones, it will receive new life, and God will use it to re-establish his kingdom on earth.

In Chapters 38 and 39 the prophet sees into the far distant future to the last attack upon Israel, when enemies of the land will be met by heavenly forces that will judge them upon the mountains of Israel and bury them there.

Then, beginning in Chapter 40, the restoration of the millennial temple is foreseen. In this great vision the prophet is shown the temple in precise detail: the glory of God returning to the Holy of Holies, the Shekinah establishing itself in the Holy of Holies once more. The book closes with the wonderful passage in Chapter 47 that describes his vision of the throne of God. Underneath the throne comes the river of God, sweeping through the temple, out into the eastern side, down across the land, and into the Dead Sea to heal its waters. It is a marvelous picture of the Spirit of God in the day of the millennial kingdom.

Now that is the literal interpretation of this book – a prophecy of the restoration of Israel. But that does not by any means exhaust the meaning of this book. If we read this as referring only to that literal fulfillment, we will miss much of the value and all of the beauty of this book, for this entire

story can be applied to you as an individual. What God does on a large scale in the history of the world, he is ready to do on a smaller scale in the history of your life. As he is ready to call back out of death and to give life to a nation that turns to him in the midst of its degradation and weakness – as he was ready to do for Israel – so he is ready to do with an individual. Here, then, is a beautiful picture of the saving grace of Jesus Christ, making us alive in him, calling us back into the glory of the manhood and womanhood that God intends for us. Then follows a picture of the enemies we face, and how God goes before us and destroys them one by one as we walk by faith.

Finally, there is the wonderful picture of the restored temple in man. Now what is the temple in man? In the New Testament, Paul says that “we are the temple of the living God,” (2 Cor 6:16b RSV). But what in us is the temple in which God dwells? It is the human spirit. Our spirit was made to be a holy of holies in which the living God dwells. The secret, then, of a full human experience – an exciting life, a life of continuing significance and meaning – is a life in which the resources of the Holy Spirit are discovered. Now this is beautifully portrayed for us in this picture in the forty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel. I want to end with this, for I think this highlights the whole emphasis of the book:

Then he [the angel] brought me back to the door of the temple; and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside of the outer gate, that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

Going on eastward with a line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the loins. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a

river that could not be passed through. And he said to me, “Son of man, have you seen this?”

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw upon the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the stagnant waters of the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live, and there will be very many fish; for this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes.” {Ezek 47:1-9 RSV}

Does that remind you of anything? Do you read in that and hear in that our Lord’s words recorded in John 7 when he stood at the temple on the last day of the feast and said, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. ... ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive;” (John 7:37b-39a RSV). This is the resource of the Christian life.

Let us look at the various aspects of this resource:

1. First of all, there is the source of the river. Where does it come from? Ezekiel said, “I saw a throne and issuing out from under the throne came the river.” The waters of the Spirit come from the very throne of God, from the supremacy of his authority, the highest point in the universe, the place where our Lord Jesus received the promised gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

As the prophet watches, he sees that it takes its way down past the altar, the place of sacrifice. And one of the great things that we have to learn as Christians is that we can never drink of the river of the Spirit unless we are willing to do so by means of the cross of Calvary. It is only as we are willing to accept the judgment of death upon the flesh – the natural man and his abilities, ambitions, and desires – that we can drink of the river of the Spirit of God.

2. Then, notice the power of this river. It has quickly grown large enough to swim in, yet there is no other river adding to it. No tributary streams are coming in. It is a great, gushing, mighty torrent of life coming out from under the throne of God. As you read this, notice the experience of the prophet. He is led into this step-by-step; three times he says, “And he led me through.”

Is God leading you through? Have you ever had that experience?

- The first step is to the place where the waters are ankle deep. Isn't that a picture of a man who has experienced only a shallow sense of God's grace and power in his life? He is a Christian but he is what the Scriptures call a carnal Christian – still filled with bickerings and fightings and inner turmoils. He has not learned anything of the peace of God. He is disobedient. He fights against God's grace every time he turns around. He's in just ankle deep. And a lot of people stay there.
- But then the prophet says, “He led me through, and it was knee deep.” The waters get hold of his knees. Have the waters got there with you yet? Have you begun to hunger and thirst and to pray and to seek the face of God? Here is a man who is not satisfied any more with just being born again. He is hungering after something. He is on his knees. He is crying out to God, yearning for more.
- “And he led me through,” he says, and the waters come up to the loins. It is beginning to possess him. There is less of him now, and more of the grace of God. The loins are always the symbol of power and he has come, then, to the place where he has begun to grasp something of the power of God, to grasp the fact that it is “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord” that the Christian life is lived (Zech 4:6b RSV). It is not his eager desire to do something for God, or his consecrated zeal to follow it through, but rather, his quiet dependence upon an indwelling Spirit that is the secret.

- Then he goes one step further and says, “He led me on and the water had risen and it had become a river to swim in.” Here is someone who is utterly committed. He is over his head. He is out there where he is swept along in the current of God's grace. And what is the effect of this river on the land? As the prophet is led back along the banks he says, “I see trees on either side of it” – fruitfulness. The barrenness of the land has been healed. The river is fertile; everywhere the river flows, things begin to live.

Have you learned this yet? All of this is written for us. John sees the same river, in Revelation. “Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God ... through the middle of the street of the city;” (Rev. 22:1-2a RSV). It flows right through the middle of life. Have you found the river of the Spirit yet? It is as we learn these mighty truths that Christian life begins to make sense. Until then, it is nothing but a plodding, dogged, difficult path, a struggle to try to keep things straight. But when we begin to experience the mighty, gushing torrent of the rivers of living water – the flow of the Spirit of God right through the center of life – everything begins to live, and life becomes significant and full for us.

The prophet sees this. And he closes this beautiful book with a description of the temple (which, by the way, may ultimately picture the resurrection body which is the new temple for God). But look at the last verse of the prophecy. He says:

The circumference of the city shall be eighteen thousand cubits. [Vast, unlimited, a great city.] **And the name of the city henceforth shall be, “The LORD is there.”** {Ezek 48:35 RSV}

That is what Ezekiel called it. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch {cf, Acts 11:26}. They did not call *themselves* Christians. They were *called* Christians. *Christian* means “Christ-one” – one who belongs to Christ. And as the people in Antioch looked at these peculiar people, they called them “Christ-ones” because the Lord was there.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that this may be our experience, that we may see this mighty flow of the river of God in our lives and, discovering its power and its grace and its depth, commit ourselves to you so that there may be healing and fertility and escape from barrenness in our lives. Thank you, Lord, for this beautiful picture and for

the truth that lies behind it. Thank you that these things can be our experience right now through Jesus Christ our Lord, the one who is the fulfillment of the image of God – that as we look at him, we are changed from glory to glory, even into the same image. We thank you for these mighty things, and ask that they be true in our experience as well as in our faith. In Christ's name, Amen.

DANIEL: On the Way to the Future

by Ray C. Stedman

Almost everyone looks at the book of Daniel with a sense of wonder and anticipation, because this is usually regarded as a prophetic book foretelling the future. This is true. The book of Daniel, together with the book of Revelation, marvelously unfolds future events as God has ordained them in the program of history. By no means has this book yet been fulfilled, neither has the book of Revelation. These two books, one from the Old and one from the New Testament, remarkably complement each other in their symmetry and harmony. The book of Revelation explains the book of Daniel. The book of Daniel lays the basis for the book of Revelation. If you would like to know God's program for the future, it is essential that you understand this book of Daniel.

But knowledge of the future can be a very dangerous thing. Imagine what would happen if any or all of us possessed the ability to know what is going to happen in the days ahead. Think what an advantage that would give us in the stock market, in the buying of insurance, and in other practical matters of life. By and large, God does not unfold the future to us – certainly not in detail and certainly not any individual's future. But what he does show us in the prophetic Scriptures is the general trend of events and where it will all end. Anyone who investigates this area thoughtfully, carefully, and scripturally will discover significant and helpful things about what is happening in our world today. Everything that is happening is working out God's purposes on earth. These will all end exactly as God has foretold. We can understand what is happening today if we know what the prophetic program is. God has taken two precautions in this matter of unveiling the future:

1. First, he has clothed these prophetic passages in symbolic language. He has given them to us

in figurative form. That is why in these prophetic books unusual things appear, strange beasts with many different heads and horns sticking out here and there, and images of all kinds, and other indescribable visions. You have the same thing in the Book of Revelation – bizarre beasts with strange combinations of characteristics.

These have always puzzled people. You can't just sit down with the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation and read them through and understand them as you would a novel. You have to study them, taking the whole of the Bible to interpret the symbols in the books of Daniel and Revelation. This is one of the locks that God has provided to keep curious minds from getting into these books without an adequate background in Scripture. You cannot understand what is going on in them without first knowing a great deal of the rest of the Bible. These symbolic things are signs erected by God, and signs are given to us so that we may understand facts that are otherwise hidden. God's program for the future is hidden from us until we spend time understanding the signs, and these books are full of signs.

2. A second precaution God has taken in Daniel, and even more especially in the book of Revelation, is that he doesn't introduce the prophetic section first, but brings us through six chapters into an understanding of the moral character he requires of the reader before the prophetic program can begin to make sense. In other words, you can't understand the last section of Daniel unless you have lived through and understood what is involved in the first six chapters.

There is no way to understand what the prophetic program means unless you first grasp the moral lessons of the first part of the book. There is no way to cheat on this. You can't just read it through, and then turn to the prophetic program and hope to understand. You will find that you get nothing out of it. You really have to carefully analyze these initial chapters, think them through, begin to walk accordingly, and experience them, before the prophetic program comes to life. That is the glory of God's book. You can't understand it with just the intellect.

You can sit down with the prophetic outlines of Daniel and of Revelation, draw charts, spend your time explaining to people what all these things mean and how God's program is going to work out, and analyze it down to a gnat's eyebrow – but unless you have incorporated these lessons of the first part of the book into your own life, you will discover nothing there to enrich your life.

The Lord Jesus himself points this out during the Olivet Discourse when his disciples asked him to name the sign of his coming and what the symbol of his return to earth would be. Jesus said, "So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place then ... let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains," (Matt 24:15-16 RSV); "Get out of the city of Jerusalem, because things will happen there that will tremendously affect the people living in that area. Then is the time to flee the city, for the great tribulation will be upon you." When he said, "When you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place," he added in parentheses these words, "let the reader understand," {Matt 24:15b RSV}. That is, don't read through Daniel superficially. Think it through. Give yourself to thought on this. You have to understand what he is talking about before you will be able to recognize the desolating sacrilege, or abomination of desolation, when it comes. This is why the Lord went on to say that the world in its superficial approach to truth will not understand when it cries, "Peace, peace, peace," for there will be no peace; sudden destruction will come upon them and they will be swept away just as the people of Noah's day were swept away when the flood came {cf, Matt 24:36-44}.

Now all of this is a warning to take the book of Daniel seriously and to endeavor to understand the structure of this book as we delve into it. This book divides very simply into two sections, as I have already suggested. The first six chapters are a history of the prophet Daniel himself and his friends in the land of Babylon – **men of faith in a hostile world**.

Let me tell you that there is no section of Scripture more helpful to someone who is trying to live as a Christian in difficult surroundings, than these first six chapters of Daniel. If you are working in a company surrounded by a godless crowd who are taking the name of God in vain every moment, who agree with the ideas and attitudes of the world and its ways, and who make fun of the things of God, showing little interest in what God says to mankind, then I suggest that you read carefully the book of Daniel.

The first six chapters are for you if you are a teenager going to school where you are surrounded constantly by those who seem to have no interest in what God is like, or in the things of God. Daniel and his friends were themselves teenagers when they were first taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar and carried off to the land of Babylon. As they began their career of faith, they did so with a total lack of understanding of life and with all the insecurity of a teenager in a hostile environment. The book records in these first six chapters the pressure they underwent as they stood for their faith in the midst of these difficult surroundings.

In Chapter 1 the young men are confronted with the necessity of changing their diet. Ordinarily, there would be nothing particularly significant in that. Many of us could stand that, perhaps frequently. But these young men already have been told by God what they are not to eat, and the very things that they were told not to eat are the things that are required eating for them as prisoners in the palace of the king of Babylon.

What are they to do? This king is the most powerful tyrant who shall ever have lived on earth. The Bible itself records that there was no king that had ever lived before Nebuchadnezzar or would ever live after him who was equal to him in authority. There were no restraints whatsoever upon what he desired to do. His word was absolute law. He could take any man's life at any time. Later on in his reign, he took the lives of the sons of the king of Judah as their father watched and then had the

father's eyes put out. Another man was burned to death over a slow fire. This king was an expert in torture. So these young teenagers facing this test know that they have to either comply with the king's demands or forfeit their lives.

What can they do? They feel all the pressure and they hear all the familiar arguments that any person hears today to try to get them to give up acting on the basis of faith. They surely hear the argument, in whatever form it took in those days, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." "Everybody else is doing this; what difference does it make what you eat? So what if you have a ham sandwich with these Babylonians? What's the difference?" After all, they are prisoners in a country far away from home. Their own country has been laid waste. Who will know, or care, what they do? They feel that pressure. But these young men stand fast and God honors them. God gives them the grace to stand despite that pressure, and as a result they are exalted and given positions of authority and responsibility in that kingdom. This story of repeated pressure goes right on through this book.

In Chapter 2 you see part of the reason for this kind of testing for these particular young men. It comes out more clearly here, in the story of the great dream vision of King Nebuchadnezzar. He dreams one night of a great image of a man with a strange body. He had a head of gold, shoulders of silver, mid-section of brass, legs of iron, and feet of a clay and iron mixture. But he forgets his dream. He calls in the wise men and asks them to tell him not only the interpretation, but the dream as well. (I've often wondered if this wasn't the beginning of that popular song, *You tell me your dream and I'll tell you mine.*) The astrologers and the soothsayers and the sorcerers of Babylon are totally unable to come up with anything. Obviously, if the king can't tell them the dream, then they can't dream up an interpretation. Thus their lives are forfeit.

Daniel is placed in the middle of this situation. Again God's man is pressured and threatened with death if he does not conform.

Again God's man comes through, as he always does when he is willing to stand and obey God despite the pressures. God overrules in the affairs of men. Life is never determined by mere superficial pressures. The outcome that seems logically inevitable as you face a situation is not necessarily the outcome that will happen if you are trusting in the invisible God who rules the affairs of men. And

that is the great lesson of this book all the way through. You find it beautifully expressed by Daniel in his prayer to God in Chapter 2:

**"Blessed by the name of God for ever and ever,
to whom belongs wisdom and might.
He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings;
he gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to those who have understanding;
he reveals deep and mysterious things;
he knows what is in the darkness,
and the light dwells with him."
{Dan 2:20-22 RSV}**

If you are in touch with a God like that, you don't need to worry what the crowd is doing. For that same God is able to carry you through and to work the situation out no matter how impossible it looks. That is exactly the story of Daniel, repeated five different times through these first six chapters.

And God gives to Daniel and his friends the privilege of obliging the most powerful man on earth to recognize the overall government of God. Do you know that this is exactly the position every believer is placed in today? The world lives with the idea that there is no God, or that if he does exist he has no real power. He doesn't do anything. He doesn't change history. He doesn't affect human lives. He doesn't enter into situations and make any difference. He is a great old man in the sky, off there somewhere, who doesn't really affect anything that happens down here. That is the world's philosophy.

But every believer is put into a position in which,

- if they walk faithfully,
- if they obey what God says despite the pressures that are put upon them,
- they are given the privilege of opening the eyes of men to the fact
 - that God exists,
 - that he is not dead,
 - that he is at work in the affairs of men, and
 - that he is a power to be reckoned with.

In Chapter 3 you have the story of the fiery furnace. The young men are commanded to bow down before the image which Nebuchadnezzar erected, pridefully thinking of the image in his dream. Because he was told that he represented the head of gold, that he was the great king of earth, in pride he lifted himself up and caused an image to be erected on the plain. It was a huge image, as tall as some of our rockets that we shoot into the sky, and the whole crowd is gathered on the plain, with these three young men among them.

All are ordered to bow down and worship the image. In order to encourage them, a great furnace was built at the other end of the plain, and they are told that if they don't bow down, that is where they will end. Now that is a lot of pressure for young people to bear, and they have some additional inducements as well. There is a band – and what a band! The instruments are given to us here and we don't even recognize the names of all of them. When the band plays – the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every other kind of instruments – everybody falls down and worships. All except the three young men.

When they are brought before Nebuchadnezzar, he orders them to fall down. Then they say these wonderful words, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter," (Dan 3:16b RSV). They are not being impertinent. They mean that they do not need to take any time to think over their answer. "We don't need to take any counsel. We know what to say."

"If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not," [Those are words of faith: "But if not – our God is able to, but we don't know the mind of God. His thoughts are greater than our thoughts. His ways are different than ours. It may be that he won't do it. But even if he doesn't,"] **be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods nor worship the golden image which you have set up."** {Dan 3:18b RSV}

Now these are young men who have learned that there are things more important than life. It is better to be dead and obedient to God than alive and disobedient to him. It is far more profitable to the individual concerned to walk with God at the

cost of life itself than to be disobedient to what God has said. God will never be in any man's debt, therefore he greatly honors these young men. As a result, they come out of the furnace without even the smell of fire upon them. You know the record. What an amazing story that is!

Then in Chapter 4 you have the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar. Did you know that this whole chapter is the testimony of the greatest king that ever lived, the greatest tyrant that ever ruled? It is the story of how God broke the pride of his heart, humiliated him, humbled him, allowed him to exercise his pride until it resulted in what always results when men live in pride – madness. He went out and ate grass in the field for seven years. His throne was preserved, but he acted like an animal. This is what always happens to man when he chooses to walk out of fellowship with the living God. He becomes animal-like, beastly, brutish. King Nebuchadnezzar became like an animal.

Then the king tells how his reason was restored to him by the grace of God, and his closing word in this chapter is a great testimony of his faith, of how God humbled him and brought him back:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase. {Dan 4:37 RSV}

Who brought him to this? Humanly speaking, it was Daniel and his friends; four young men were used of God to win the heart of the greatest king of the greatest empire the world has yet seen.

Now look at Chapter 5. Here is the story of the handwriting on the wall, the familiar story of King Belshazzar. Note the luxury and licentiousness and the lust of that kingdom – a degenerating, deteriorating kingdom – yet in the midst of it Daniel, having lived through three empires, is still prime minister. God uses him to interpret this strange figure of the hand that appears and writes upon the wall: the judgment of God upon that licentious king. This bears out the thesis of this book – that God is at work in the affairs of men, and any man who sees beyond the things that are seen to the things that are unseen, and acts accordingly, will find that God is with him, supporting him and strengthening him all along the way, bringing him out to the praise of his glory.

Chapter 6 tells of the lions' den and it is the same story told in still another way. Darius throws Daniel into the lions' den, but God sent his angel to shut the lions' mouths. Daniel is brought out again, delivered by the hand of God.

Chapter 7 begins **the prophetic section**, starting with the vision of the four beasts. It is interesting that these four beasts cover the same period of time as the four divisions of the image that Nebuchadnezzar had seen in Chapter 2. That image had a head of gold, symbolizing the Babylonian kingdom; shoulders of silver, for Media-Persia; the trunk of brass symbolizing the Grecian empire, and then the two legs of iron representing the two divisions of the Roman Empire; and terminating at last in a broken kingdom, characterized by feet of mingled iron and clay. This great prophetic passage outlines history from Daniel's day clear past our own day, to the end of time and the return of Jesus Christ. For as the prophet watches, he sees a stone cut out without a hand strike the image on its feet, utterly demolishing it, and then grow to be a great mountain to fill the earth. Clearly this pictures the kingdom of God and the return of Jesus Christ.

In Chapter 7, then, the four beasts represent the same kingdoms, but from God's point of view. They are nothing but beasts growling and fighting and quarreling with each other. I think Dr. Scofield points out that all the symbols of modern nations are representations of birds or of beasts of prey. Our own nation is symbolized by an eagle, a bird of prey. The British Empire is a lion. Russia is a bear. The prophet sees these nations struggling together culminating in the powerful reign of a single individual over the whole of this Western world.

Then in Chapter 8 you see the movement of Western history. The ram and the he-goat come together, and this is a picture, as we are told later in Chapter 11, of the conquest by Alexander the Great and the rise of the kingdom of the Seleucids in Syria as opposed to the Ptolemies in Egypt. These two families occupied the center of history for centuries after that – the struggle between Syria and Egypt, with little Israel caught in the middle. The battle rages back and forth, and today Israel is the most fought-over country in all of history. More battles have occurred in the land of Israel than in any other spot on the face of the earth, and

it is in that very same area where the last great battle – the battle of Armageddon – is yet to be fought.

In the midst of this, in Chapter 9, is Daniel's wonderful prayer as he pours his heart out to God. The answer to his prayer, in the last section of the chapter, is one of the most remarkable prophecies in all the Bible: the prophecy of the seventy weeks. This is the timetable of prophecy concerning the nation Israel. It gives us the principle that is called "the great parenthesis" – God has interrupted his program for Israel and has inserted between the first coming and the second coming of the Lord Jesus the present age in which we live.

This indeterminate period, which has now spanned more than nineteen hundred years, comes between the sixty-ninth week of years and the seventieth of the prophecy. The seventieth week, a week of seven years, is yet to be fulfilled for Israel. As you read of this you will see that this is what the book of Revelation and other prophetic passages call "the great tribulation," the time of Jacob's trouble. It lies ahead. It has been broken off from the other sixty-nine and is yet to be fulfilled.

Then Chapter 10 presents the things unseen which are behind the things that are seen. This is another great revelation of God's sovereign government in the affairs of men and is the explanation for the events of history. What causes the things that happen today? Well, there are unseen forces at work, and these forces are here clearly revealed to Daniel.

Chapter 11 is one of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible in that it records prophecy that, for the most part, has been fulfilled in detail. It foretells the struggle between the king of Syria and the king of Egypt which took place after Daniel's day. It is prophetically and historically fulfilled. These historic events are described in great detail and cover two or three hundred years of history. You can see that the prophecies here have been worked out exactly in the pattern of history. Among other outstanding individuals, Cleopatra appears in this chapter, prophetically foretold.

When you come to the thirty-sixth verse of the eleventh chapter, a noteworthy break occurs. It is introduced by the previous verse, in which the angel says to Daniel:

"... and some of those who are wise shall fall, to refine and to cleanse them and to make them white, until the time of the end,

for it is yet for the time appointed.” {Dan 11:35 RSV}

Here begins a passage that deals with that seventieth week of Daniel that is yet to be fulfilled – the time of the end, the last days, the ultimate arrangement of earth’s kingdoms just before the return of Jesus Christ. This remarkable passage predicts an invasion of Palestine and a counter – invasion from Egypt in the south, and then the meeting of two great armies in the land of Israel and the ultimate destruction of those armies there on the mountains of Israel. This is also clearly described in the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth chapters of Ezekiel and the second chapter of Joel. And you will find other prophetic references to this.

The beginning of Chapter 12 introduces the greatest event of history yet to be fulfilled: the coming again of Jesus Christ. It is not mentioned as such here, but this is what Daniel hears:

“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people [Israel]. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book.” {Dan 12:1 RSV}

This is followed by a resurrection:

“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” {Dan 12:2 RSV}

And the final judgment of God:

“And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.” {Dan 12:3 RSV}

Then Daniel is given a sign of when this will occur:

“But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.” {Dan 12:4 RSV}

Many Bible scholars understand this to be an indication that as we near that time, transportation and knowledge will rapidly increase just as they have in our own time.

One last thing about this final chapter is important. Daniel asks certain questions of the angel who has revealed this to him, and then he is given to understand two great principles that are at work in human life. You and I often hear people discussing what is happening in the world, with newspaper commentators and others constantly pouring into our ears reports of terrible things. People often say, “What is happening? Is the world getting worse and worse or is it getting better and better?”

On one hand you will hear people describe things in such a way that you are bound to say, “Well, the world is getting worse and worse.” Then someone replies, “No it isn’t. Look at this, and this, and this. I believe the world is getting better. We are progressing.” Now the book of Daniel makes it very clear that we never will understand God’s word and God’s work until we believe both of those principles. For in the tenth verse of Chapter 12 Daniel is told:

“Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined [good will get better]; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand [but evil will get worse]; but those who are wise shall understand.” {Dan 12:10 RSV}

Jesus said that the good seed has been sown, but the enemy has come and sown tares among the wheat. “Let both grow together,” he says, “until the harvest,” (Matt 13:30a RSV). I think this is certainly true in history. Today evil is worse than it has ever been. It is more subtle, more devilish, more satanic, more difficult to detect than it ever has been before in human history. But good is better than it has ever been before. Good is more powerful. Its effect in human society in relationship to the evil around it is far greater than it ever has been before.

These two principles are at work in human society, but neither shall overpower the other. Good is not going to become so triumphant that evil finally disappears, as once was thought at the turn of the century. Nor is evil going to be so powerful that good finally disappears. Both are going to

come into a headlong conflict, and the Bible everywhere records that at that precise moment in history God shall again intervene in human affairs. Of the ultimate clash of these two great principles working in human society, Daniel is told:

“Blessed is he who waits and comes to the thousand three hundred and thirty-five days. But go your way until the end; and you shall rest, and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days.” {Dan 12:12-13 RSV}

Here are prophetic words by Helmut Thielicke, the professor director of Hamburg University in Germany,

We men may do what we will. Nebuchadnezzar may come (and Genghis Khan and Mao Tse-tung) yet none of them can break God's plans, but rather must fulfill them – even against their will. Even though what we hear now is in mournful, minor tones, what is being played is still God's symphony and it will be played out to the end. The individual tones may think that they know what is what. They may want to assert themselves and swing out on their own, yet they have all been composed into a score in which God alone is in command and in which everything, when it is heard from heaven's vantage point, has its place in God's succession of tones that end in

his final chord. The rich of this world are in the process of going but the kingdom of God is in the process of coming. Don't ever think that anybody will ever be able to break away from serving him, though he renounce God ten times over. Even in the extreme perversion of authority, as in the tyranny of a totalitarian state, men are compelled despite themselves to preserve a remnant of God's order. They can never consistently succeed in devilizing and ruining his world. God says, "I who have the power of the whole world of space, should I not be able to encompass your little life, hear your questions and your groans and unravel the tangled skein of your threats?"

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this reminder from the book of Daniel that you are a living God at work in the affairs of men; that we need not fear even though terrors reign on earth and men hide themselves for fear of them. You are in control of all, and he who walks with you will overcome. He who obeys you – not only in the great and glorious moments of victory, but also in the quiet hour when no one sees – is faithful to you, and shall at last triumphantly overcome as Daniel did and stand in his place in the last days. We thank you for this promise. Help us to walk in the strength of it. In Christ's name, Amen.

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HOSEA: The Prophet and the Prostitute

by Ray C. Stedman

Hosea was the first of the “minor” prophets.

Often, we do not recognize the derivation of these Bible names, but this prophet’s name would be “Joseph” in English. And his name is related to the name *Joshua*, which means “salvation.”

Hosea was a young preacher in the nation of Israel, the northern kingdom, and he was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah and Amos. He lived, as we are told in the first verse, during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (kings of Judah, the southern kingdom), and during the reign of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, the king of Israel.

Jeroboam was one of the wicked kings of Israel and the nation was going through a difficult time when Hosea was preaching. People were “living it up,” as we might say, and didn’t have much time for God. They wouldn’t have said that, of course, nobody ever says that when it is true. Instead they may have said something like we do – that it was just a case of not having quite enough time to meet the demands that God made upon them – they were so busy with so many other important things. The spirit was willing but the flesh was ready for the weekend.

So, as always, people didn’t pay much attention to Hosea. He spoke of judgment and of chastisement. He said that God was going to raise up the Assyrian nation to punish this people and that fierce and ruthless army would sweep across the land like a scourge. But the people paid little attention to him, and they said that Hosea’s God must be a pretty vengeful sort to talk like that. Hosea tried to tell them that wasn’t so. He said that God was a God of love and that his doing this was the very activity of love; that God wanted them to see what they were doing to themselves and that the only way he could get them to listen was to make things rough for them. But they didn’t pay any more attention than people do today about

things like that. Instead, they blamed God, and said, “If God is really a God of love, then why does he let things get in such a mess? How could a God of love ever send a ruthless people like the Assyrians down upon our land?”

And so young Hosea found that his audience was diminishing. People were polite to his face, I suppose, but they sneered behind his back. He found that he was being given the nice-and-harmless treatment. That is what people usually do to preachers.

When I was in England once, I met an Anglican clergyman who said that what bothered him most both before and during the time of the Battle of Britain were the signs in the public squares that read, “All persons must register for the draft except women, children, idiots, and clergymen.” He said he didn’t mind so much being included on that list, but he wished they had at least put him ahead of the idiots.

So Hosea is rather discouraged and in the opening chapter of this little book of prophecy we read a personal note about him. He went to God and God told him to do a strange thing. God said, “I want you to get married.” I think Hosea brightened up at that, because he was a bachelor, and God said, “I have a girl picked out for you.” When he mentioned her name, Hosea’s heart must have fluttered, because the name of this girl was Gomer, the most beautiful girl in Israel. Hosea was definitely interested.

But God said to him, “I want you to know the whole story about this girl. I want you to marry her, but she is going to be unfaithful to you; in fact, she will become nothing but a common street prostitute. But I want you to marry her anyway.” Now, undoubtedly Hosea was very puzzled by God’s strange command – just as Abraham was puzzled by God’s command that he take his son out

and kill him, put his own son to death. God does strange things at times, things we don't always understand, things we can't categorize, things that don't fit into what we think we know of him. And this is one of those strange things. He told Hosea, "I want you to marry this girl and she is going to be a harlot, a common street prostitute. But you are going to have three children, two boys and a girl. And when they are born I want to name them for you." Perhaps Hosea then began to understand a little bit of what God was doing. He knew it was customary in Israel to teach by symbols – God often used this method of instructing his people – and that names were very important. God often used the meanings of names to teach Israel certain truths. And now God was planning to use this prophet and his family as an object lesson for his people.

This was happening also with his friend Isaiah down in the southern kingdom. Isaiah, also, had two boys. Their names are jaw-breakers to pronounce, but they mean something. The younger boy's name was Shearjashub, which means "a remnant shall return." That was God's promise to Israel that even though they were taken into captivity, a remnant would come back. The older boy's name was Mahershalalhashbaz. (I don't know how they ever called these children in for lunch in those days!) *Mahershalalhashbaz* means "haste to the prey" or "haste to the spoil," and it was God's prophetic way of telling the nation that they were in deep trouble. But he also comforted them with the words "a remnant shall return."

So Hosea went courting. Sure enough, Gomer was attracted to this shy young man, and at last he summoned up the courage to ask her to marry him. To his great relief, she said "yes," and they were married. At first it was heaven on earth. Hosea loved this girl. You can't read this prophecy without seeing that. They must have been wonderfully happy together, and then they had their first child. It was a boy, as God had said. Hosea's heart was filled to bursting, and he went to God for the name of this boy. "What should we name the lad?" To his surprise, God picked the name Jezreel. Now *Jezreel* means "cast-away" and was a name of shame in Israel.

Do you remember the bloody story of Queen Jezebel and Ahab? Ahab cheated his neighbor out of his property and stole his neighbor's vineyard, and Jezebel was the wicked queen who put him up

to it. At last God's judgment fell upon her. She was looking out her upper story window one day when a general, Jehu, was down in the courtyard, and he ordered the servants to throw Jezebel out the window. They threw her out and she fell on the pavement and was killed, and the dogs ate her up, and the courtyard has been called Jezreel ever since (2 Ki 9:30-37).

Nevertheless, that was the name that God picked for Hosea's oldest boy, his first son. And that was the name Hosea gave to his baby, for he understood that God was thus warning his people: they too would be cast away if they didn't recognize the folly of their actions, if they didn't turn from going after idols and giving way to abominable practices and trying to be like everybody else around them. God was warning them with this baby's name.

In the course of time, another child, a daughter, was born to Hosea. This one was named Loruhamah, which means "not pitied." Imagine naming your little baby girl "not pitied." It meant that God would no longer have pity on his people if they continued their stubborn rebellion. His patience was wearing thin. After some hundreds of years of trying to reach this stubborn people, he was now warning them that they were getting near the end, that a time would come when he would no longer pity them but would hand them over to invading armies.

When this little girl was weaned, Gomer conceived again and bore a third child, another little boy. And this one God named Loammi, "not my people," for God was saying, "you are not my people and I will not be your God." God had said that he would name these children as a sign to his people, but there would come a day of restoration:

**"And I will have pity on Not-Pitied,
and I will say to Not-My-People, 'You are
my people;'
and he shall say, 'Thou art my God.'"
{Hos 2:23 RSV}**

So that even in this time when God was announcing judgment, his grace also was being shown.

Now after this there were no more children in Hosea's household, and Gomer began to fulfill the sad prediction that God had made when he had told Hosea to marry her. What a heartbreak it must

have been to this young preacher as he heard the whispers that began to circulate about his wife and about what happened when he was away on preaching trips. Perhaps even his own children may have unconsciously dropped some remarks about the men who visited when Daddy was away. And soon the children were left uncared for while Gomer wasted all her time running around with these other fellows.

One day Hosea came home and found a note from Gomer: she had decided to find the happiness she felt she deserved, and she was leaving him and the children to follow the man she really loved. You know how those notes go: "Dear John..."

About this time a new tone came into Hosea's preaching. He still warned of the judgment to come and the fact that God was going to send the Assyrians down across the land, but no longer did he announce it with thunder. He spoke to them with tears. And he began to speak of a day when love would at last triumph, when – after the bitter lesson was learned that the way of the transgressor is hard – Israel would yet turn back to the God who loved her. Instead of "Not Pitied," she would be called "Pitied" and instead of "Not My People," she would be named "My People" again.

But poor Gomer passed from man to man, until at last she fell into the hands of a man who was unable to pay for her food and her clothing. Her first lover had given her a mink stole, but this one made her clothe herself from the Goodwill store. News of her miserable state came to the prophet and he sought out the man she was living with. He knew where he would find him, down at the local tavern, and when he met this man, the conversation may have gone something like this: "Are you the man who is living with Gomer, daughter of Disblaim?" The man must have said, "If it's any of your business, I am." Hosea said, "Well, I am Hosea, her husband." A tense moment followed. But the man said, "What do you want? I haven't done anything wrong." Hosea said, "Listen, I'm not interested in causing any trouble. But I know that you are having difficulty making ends meet. I want you to take this money and buy Gomer some clothing and see that she has plenty of food. If you need any more I will give it to you." The man probably must have thought, "There's no fool like an old fool. If this sucker wants to help pay her expenses, that's all right with me." So he took the

money and bought her some groceries and went home.

Now you may say, "That's a foolish thing for a man to do!" But who can explain the madness of love? Love exists apart from reason and has its own reasons. Love does not act according to logic. Love acts according to its own nature. And so Hosea acted on the basis of love. Undoubtedly he watched from a distance to catch a glimpse of the woman he loved as she rushed out the door to take the groceries from this man's arms and to thank him for what he was bringing to her – the gifts that true love had provided, and that villainy offered, and that folly accepted.

Well, how long this went on we don't know for sure, but at last word came that the woman Hosea loved was to be sold in the slave market. Her current husband had tired of her and she was to be sold as a slave. The brokenhearted prophet didn't know what to do. He went weeping to God. And God said, "Hosea, do you love this woman in spite of all that she has done to you?" Hosea nodded through his tears, and God said, "Then go show your love for her in the same way that I love the nation Israel."

So Hosea went to the marketplace and he watched Gomer brought up and placed on the dock and there she was stripped of all her clothing and stood naked before the crowd. The auctioneer pinched her and prodded her and showed how strong she was, and then the bidding began. Somebody bid three pieces of silver and Hosea raised it to five. Somebody else upped it to eight and Hosea bid ten. Somebody went to eleven; he went to twelve. Then Hosea offered fifteen pieces of silver and a bushel of barley. The auctioneer's gavel fell and Hosea had his wife back.

He went to her and put her clothes on her and he led her away by the hand and took her to his home. And then follows what is perhaps the most beautiful verse in all the Bible. As Hosea led her away he said to her:

**"You must dwell as mine for many days;
you shall not play the harlot, or belong to
another man; so will I also be to you."
{Hos 3:3b RSV}**

He pledged his love to her anew. And that was all this poor woman could take. She had gotten down to the very dregs of shame and disgrace, but

the love of this man broke her heart, and from this time on Gomer was faithful to Hosea. She became an honest, industrious, faithful wife, and the rest of the book of Hosea simply goes on to tell the effect of this story on the nation of Israel. God said to them, "How can I give thee up?" He reminded them of his love for them all those years. He reminded them of his goodness, and of how again and again they had turned their backs on him. The final picture of the book is one of beauty and glory, for it looks to the day when Israel shall at last return to God – her true husband – and shall say, "What have I to do with idols? I have seen him and heard him and he has won my heart."

Certain outstanding passages in Hosea are remarkable predictions. One occurs at the close of Chapter 3, when right in line with this story of Hosea's personal life, God says about the people of Israel:

For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. {Hos 3:4 RSV}

That prophecy is being fulfilled today. The children of Israel shall dwell many days without a king – without any open, acknowledged government. Ever since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. at the hands of General Titus of the Roman armies Israel has been without a king or a prince without anyone who has the recognized right to reign over Israel. And they shall live without a sacrifice. When the Jews of the world celebrate the Passover supper they are remembering that supper instituted in Egypt when Israel was delivered from the hand of Pharaoh. And God had told Israel that every time they ate the Passover they were to kill a lamb. But for two thousand years the Jews have never killed a lamb. Why not? Why do they offer a bone, a burned bone for a sacrifice? God had said that they shall live many days without a sacrifice, and since the destruction of the temple there has never been a sacrifice in Israel – nor a pillar, ephod or teraphim. And they shall live without idolatry. They shall live as a religious people but without giving themselves to idols.

Then after these days are ended,

Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and they shall come in

fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days. {Hos 3:5 RSV}

What a wonderful prophecy that is! And another one similar to it is at the close of Chapter 5:

**I will return again to my place,
until they acknowledge their guilt and
seek my face,
and in their distress they seek me, saying,
"Come, let us return to the Lord;
for he has torn, that he may heal us;
he has stricken, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know, let us press on to know the
Lord;
his going forth is sure as the dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth."
{Hos 5:15-6:3 RSV}**

That is the hope of Israel – that their Messiah will yet come to them and water them and revive them and raise them up again.

In the closing chapters after all the sorrow in the heart of God you come at last to the final picture:

**Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
for you have stumbled because of your
iniquity. {Hos 14:1 RSV}**

After all it wasn't God who was to blame. He was simply trying to get them to see the truth. And the only thing that can relieve their agony is to return. That's always the case. God can't bless us or restore us until we come back. And so God says:

**Take with you words
and return to the Lord;
say to him,
"Take away all iniquity;
accept that which is good
and we will render
the fruit of our lips" [That is, praise.]
"Assyria shall not save us,
we will not ride upon horses [no military
power is going to avail]
and we will say no more, 'Our God,'
to the work of our hands [idolatry].
In thee the orphan finds mercy."
{Hos 14:2-3 RSV}**

God's response is:

**I will heal their faithlessness;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them,
I will be as the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom as the lily,
he shall strike root as the poplar;
his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall
be like the olive,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.
They shall return and dwell beneath my
shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden;
they shall blossom as the vine,
their fragrance shall be like the wine of
Lebanon.
O Ephraim, what have [you] to do with
idols'? [A better rendering than "what
have I"]
It is I who answer and look after you.
I am like an evergreen cypress,
from me comes your fruit.
{Hos 14:4-8 RSV}**

And the prophet adds this lesson from his own heartache and yet in the joy of restored love:

**Whoever is wise, let him understand these
things;
whoever is discerning, let him know
them;
for the ways of the LORD are right,
and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them.
{Hos 14:9 RSV}**

Can you see in this beautiful story all the elements of the eternal triangle? There is the loving God, the faithless human heart, and the deceptive attractiveness of the world.

This is your story, and my story, isn't it? So many times we try to satisfy ourselves with the ly-

ing idols of self-importance, or wealth, or a good time. Ours is the blindness that, like Gomer's, cannot distinguish between lust and love.

We try to run from God and drown our miseries in empty pleasures, or drink, or work, or social life, but, as surely as we think we have escaped, as surely as we think we have run far enough, God touches our sleeve with his love saying, "My child, my name and my nature are love and I must act according to what I am. When you tire of all your running, and your wandering, and your heartbreak, I'll be there to draw you to myself again."

That is the story of the Bible isn't it? At Bethlehem God entered the slave market where the whole human race was putting itself up for auction, prostituting itself and its humanity to a cheapened life. But on the cross the Lord Jesus paid the price, the full price for our freedom, and bought us back. This is the story of God's love and God's heart – his loving desire to make of his people the full persons he intended them to be.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this beautiful story from the Old Testament, and pray that it touches our own hearts and softens us. How we see the tenderness of your love, the irresistible nature of a love that waits and hurts and hungers and pursues. Lord, we pray that we may respond, that we may understand that no other answer can satisfy us, no other power can meet our need, no other love can heal. Help us to return to you, Lord, as Israel will one day turn to you, remembering that if we walk in the light as he is in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all unrighteousness and restores us by grace. We pray in his name. Amen.

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JOEL: The Revelation of God's Hand

by Ray C. Stedman

The little book of Joel is only three chapters long, and we should all read it. We ought to give ourselves to the reading of God's Word, as the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy and encouraged him to do. Now, while the prophecy of Hosea reveals the heart of God, the prophecy of Joel reveals the hand of God, the hand that controls destiny, the hand that moves history.

For centuries men have been looking for the principle upon which all the events of history turn, and ever since the dawn of history there have been many guesses about what that controlling principle is. Long ago, the great Greek philosophers came up with the idea that history moves in cycles; and a leading modern historian, Arnold Toynbee, agrees with that. Aristotle also said that history follows this kind of course. He said that first a tyrant rises, a man of iron, who seizes control of a nation or a group of people and rules until his dynasty ends. Then control gradually passes to a ruling family of aristocracy. And gradually their power deteriorates until control passes down to the people, and this is what he calls a democracy. But a democracy also deteriorates and gradually yields to the breakdown of all power, and anarchy ensues. Out of anarchy a tyrant again seizes control, and on goes the cycle of history. And there is a lot of truth in that theory.

Through the centuries other men have contributed guesses about the controlling principle of life. Thomas Jefferson thought it was political, and when he wrote the Declaration of Independence he incorporated that idea in the prologue – that human

governments recognize that certain inalienable rights are granted to men, and that, to preserve these rights, governments are instituted among men. He felt that the forces that shape human history and form the nations of earth are political in nature.

Back in the last century, Karl Marx dipped his pen into the acid of his own embittered spirit and wrote the great work that has dramatically influenced our modern times. His idea was that the controlling force of history was economics, that it is the need to meet the material demands of life that shapes the course of history. He called this force dialectical materialism – the principle of materialism arrived at through debate, through discussion of these issues. And this idea has so seized the minds of men today that all over the earth are millions who feel that economics is the controlling interest of life.

Others have said that the principle is sociological. H. G. Wells, for instance, was one of a great number of thinkers who said that evolution shapes the course of human destiny. It is often taught in schools today that behind all the events of human history recorded in our daily newspapers and by historians there is an evolutionary principle always trending higher and higher, making life better and better.

But the Bible says that all these are wrong. The Bible says that behind the whole course of human history is God. The hinge on which history turns is spiritual – God's Spirit is at work among

men, and you cannot understand human events if you do not first recognize that fact.

One of the most meaningful statements ever written in the Scriptures and one of the most terrifying things that can ever be heard by men was said at the time of the flood when God told Noah, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever," (Gen 6:3 NAS). And whenever that statement is uttered it means that judgment is at hand. For God's Spirit strives with man by patiently restraining evil so that human life can go on. God tries to win men to himself by holding back the destructive forces in human events. But at last God's patience reaches an end and there comes a time – repeated throughout human history – when God says either to an individual or to a nation, "My Spirit shall not always strive with men." And when he removes his Spirit – the controlling force of life – everything collapses. That is when catastrophe occurs and judgment strikes. And that is essentially the message of the book of Joel.

This young man Joel was a prophet to the kingdom of Judah, the southern kingdom. He was probably a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. We don't know much about Joel, but he was one of the most far-sighted men who have ever written, even in the pages of the Word of God. Joel saw clear to the end of human history, far past our own day to the final stages of God's dealing with human events; and he links it all to a great dramatic occurrence in his own day.

The book opens with his call to the people to consider a tremendous thing that has happened in that land. He says:

**Hear this, aged men, give ear,
all inhabitants of the land!**
{Joel 1:2a RSV}

Whenever I read that it always reminds me of my days in the Navy. Whenever the Navy made an important announcement, it always began, "Now hear this!" And that is the way Joel begins:

**Hear this ...
Has such a thing happened in your days,
or in the days of your fathers?
Tell your children of it,
and let your children tell their children,
and their children another generation.**
{Joel 1:2-3 RSV}

There is going to be an event of such transcending importance that people will be talking about it for years and years to come. And what is Joel talking about? Well, he is talking about the great day of the Lord. Back in World War II we talked about the coming of D-Day, and then V-J Day; we were looking forward to the end of the war, calling it the day. Well, God has a day, what he calls "the day of the Lord," and it was given to Joel to describe this great day.

Now the day of the Lord is not just one event in human history. We will find in this prophecy that the day of the Lord is any event in which God moves in judgment, at any time. But judgment is also culminating and building up into cycles to the great and terrible day of the Lord of which Joel speaks in Chapters 2 and 3.

The great and terrible day of the Lord is that period described by the Lord Jesus Christ as a time when there will be tribulation as has never been seen since the creation of the world, nor ever will be {cf, Matt 24:21 KJV}. And it was given to the prophet Joel to see across the intervening centuries of time, and to describe it, and to illustrate it by events taking place in his own day.

Now the event that had occurred in his day was an invasion of locusts. I wonder if you have ever seen an invasion of locusts. I was in Minnesota years and years ago when there was an invasion of grasshoppers – insects very similar to locusts – and I can still remember how the sky was literally darkened by the great cloud of these insects. You could hear them descending into the standing grain of the fields like hail upon the ground, and there was a continual rustling of the noise of their wings as you walked through the fields. Within moments after they lit upon a field, every blade of grass, every bit of vegetation was gone, and the fields were left as though they had never been planted. That is what happened in Israel. A locust horde had descended upon the land and devoured every living thing. The crops were all ruined and a famine had come. And Joel is calling their attention to this event. They hardly needed that under those conditions. Everyone certainly was aware of what was happening – but what they didn't see was where it came from.

Joel says to them, "God is behind this." He describes how "the fields are laid waste, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed" (Joel 1:10a RSV), and then he says:

**Sanctify a fast,
call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
and all the inhabitants of the land
to the house of the Lord your God;
and cry to the Lord.
Alas for the day!
For the day of the Lord is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it
comes. {Joel 1:14-15 RSV}**

God is behind this. This didn't just happen. This isn't just one of those freaks of nature. This happened in obedience to the command of God, working through the natural laws that govern human life, and there is a lesson for us in this. "Don't fail to heed the lesson," this prophet says, "for if you learn the lesson now – this minor-league example of the day of the Lord – you will save yourself the awful heartache that will come at last in the great and terrible day of the Lord." Joel is simply pointing out that God's hand is allowing catastrophes like this to occur to make people aware of the spiritual background to life. Life is not merely a cycle of eating and drinking and getting money to do so. For behind all the commonplace things of life there is the controlling hand of the Spirit of God. Man needs to wake up to the fact that God is talking to him, that God has something to say to him. God wants to bless man but man will not listen. That is the problem. And God shakes him up with something to make him listen.

Has that ever happened to you? Has God ever done anything to you, as you were complacently eating your Wheaties and doing fine, that made you suddenly aware? Perhaps some terrible thing happened to make you realize that things weren't as good as you thought they were; you began to listen, realizing that there was something you needed to hear. This is what God did in the first chapter of Joel.

In Chapter 2 the prophet leaps over a great span of time to the end days, using this invasion of the locusts as a picture of the invasion by a great army into the land of Israel in the last days. Only by examining the whole stream of prophecy together can we detect that Joel is speaking of the future. Anyone taking this book by itself would never notice any difference, except that the prophet is now describing the invasion by an army of men instead of by an army of insects. But he goes on to

describe this, and again he calls it the day of the Lord:

**Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming, it is
near,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness there is spread upon the
mountains
a great and powerful people;
their like has never been from of old,
nor will be again after them
through the years of all generations.
{Joel 2:1b-2 RSV}**

That sounds familiar, doesn't it? Again, that is the language that the Lord Jesus used: "It will be a time of trouble," he says,

**such as has not been from the beginning of
the world until now, no, and never will be.
(Matt 24:21 RSV).**

Then the prophet describes how the land is scorched behind them as this great army advances, and he describes the army itself: "Their appearance is like the appearance of horses," (Joel 2:4 RSV). Now fear grips the hearts of the people as they see this invading host drawn up for battle. Nothing can resist them. Nothing can stop them in their march. The earth quakes before them. The heavens tremble. And then we come to a very significant passage:

**The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining.
{Joel 2:10 RSV}**

Now, anyone who spends time with the prophetic passages of Scripture soon learns to look for interpretational landmarks. Certain prophetic symbols occur again and again throughout various books of prophecy to give you a landmark so that you know where you are. This darkening of the sun and the moon and the stars withdrawing their light, is one of these landmarks. You remember that this is also part of Jesus' great discourse on the Mount of Olives. He refers to this time when the sun shall be darkened and the moon will not give light and turn to blood and the stars will fall from heaven, (Matt 24:29) It appears also in the book of Daniel. It appears in Isaiah. It appears in the book

of Revelation. It appears in several places throughout Scripture and it always marks the same event in human history. It is an interpretational landmark pointing to the last days before what is called "the great and terrible day of the Lord." This section, then, seems to describe the invasion of Israel that is also foretold and described by the prophet Ezekiel in Chapters 38 and 39 – a great army invades the land from the north and, sweeping down across the land, destroys everything there and captures the city of Jerusalem.

But God promises that this northern army will be dealt with in that land. Isaiah says so. Ezekiel says so. Daniel says so. Now Joel, also, adds his voice to the chorus of prophets, and God reveals the purpose behind this great invasion:

**"Yet even now," says the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with
mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your gar-
ments."
Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast
love,
and repents of evil.
Who knows whether he will not turn and
repent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
{Joel 2:12-14a RSV}**

After all, God does not delight in judgment. That isn't what he is after. He never enjoys judging anyone. What he seeks is a heart that will listen to him, heed him, and open the door for the blessings that God wants to pour in. In order to get that person or nation to listen and turn, God will permit all kinds of harsh things to obstruct their wayward path. But all he is after is that repentant heart. "Rend your hearts and not your garments."

When we see God dealing with us like this it is so easy to think, "Well, even if I won't give in inwardly, at least I can outwardly." Most of us are like that, aren't we? We are so like the little boy whose mother told him, "Now sit down!" But he wouldn't sit down. She said again, "Sit down!" And he said, "I won't." So she grabbed him by the shoulders and sat him down in the chair. Then he looked up at her defiantly and said, "I'm sitting down outside, but I'm standing up inside!"

Do you ever do that? Do you rend your garments but not your hearts? God says, "Don't try to fool me with your outside self. I'm not interested in that. Don't bother with hypocritical attitudes and actions. They don't impress me in the least. I want to see the heart rent." That is the thing. God is utterly unimpressed by our hypocrisy. We may fool others. We can even fool ourselves. But we don't fool him. Unless our heart is really rent before him, torn garments mean nothing. The prophet says:

**Then the Lord became jealous for his land,
and had pity on his people.
{Joel 2:18 RSV}**

And at last God says:

**"I will remove the northerner far from you,
and drive him into a parched and desolate
land,
his front into the eastern sea, [i.e., the Dead
Sea]
and his rear into the western sea; [the
Mediterranean]
the stench and foul smell of him will rise,
for he has done great things."
{Joel 2:20 RSV}**

You can compare this with the prophecy in Ezekiel 38 and 39 – the destruction of the invading armies on the mountains of Israel in the wilderness of Judea. It is the very same event.

Something that happens frequently in prophecy now occurs. After leaping over this great span of years to the end days, the prophet returns to the event of the present hour – the locust plague in the land. He tells the people that just as God in that great future day will deliver his people and drive away the northern armies, so today, in this present catastrophe, he will restore the land from its barren condition and its desolation.

**"Fear not, O land;
be glad and rejoice,
for the Lord has done great things!
Fear not, you beasts of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are
green;" {Joel 2:21-22a RSV}**

And in beautiful language he describes the restoration of the land:

**“The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.”**
{Joel 2:24 RSV}

And God promises,

**“I will restore to you the years
which the swarming locust has eaten,”**
{Joel 2:25a RSV}

I will never forget the agony in the eyes of a young man who a number of years ago looked at me and said, “You know, I’ve become a Christian and it’s wonderful. But when I think back to what I’ve missed and the years of my life that I’ve wasted, my heart gets sick remembering it. If I’d only had the sense to come to the Lord before I did all those terrible things.” And I had the joy of being able to say to him, “Son, God says, ‘I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten.’” That is God’s promise. He will make up for the barrenness of our lives when we turn back to him.

**“I will restore to you the years
which the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent among you.
“You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your
God,”** {Joel 2:25-26a RSV}

And so it happened in Israel.

But now, as is often the case with these prophets, Joel suddenly leaps ahead again and he writes the great passage that the Apostle Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost. That was a dramatic day. Suddenly a rushing, mighty wind visited the Christians as they gathered in the courts of the temple, and tongues of fire burst out over every head, and they began to speak in tongues. Gathered around them was a great multitude of people, who watched these Christians and heard them praising God in various languages. These people, who had come from all parts of the earth, said to themselves, “What is this? Here are these simple Galilean fishermen talking to us in our own tongues and praising God. What does it all mean? Why, these men must be drunk! I never saw anyone act like this before,” {cf, Acts 2:7-13}. At that moment Peter stood up; led of the Spirit of God, he said to them, “Men and brethren, these are not drunk as you supposed, seeing it is but the third hour (i.e.,

9 a.m.) of the day. It is too early to get drunk. But this is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel.” (cf, Acts 2:14-16). Then he quoted this passage:

**“And it shall come to pass afterward [that is, after God has restored the land of Israel and given back the years that the locusts have eaten.],
that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days,
I will pour our my spirit.”**
“And I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And It shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered;” {Joel 2:28-32a RSV}

And here Peter ended his quotation.

Now what is all this about? Well, here is the prophet Joel. He has already seen beyond to the time of the invasion of Israel. And now he sees something different, a mystery still somewhat undefined to his vision. He says that following Israel’s restoration there is going to be an indeterminate period when God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh, when no distinctions will be made between classes or ranks of people, when even servants, menservants, and maidservants shall speak as the voice of God. They shall speak the word of God, as God pours out his Spirit upon all kinds of men everywhere.

Now we don’t have to remain in doubt, do we, as to what he was talking about? We know what that day is. It is the day of the Spirit in which we live, the day which began on Pentecost when God first poured out his Spirit; and that Spirit is being poured out throughout this whole age. Peter also quotes Joel concerning the sign of the end of that age, “The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord shall come.” That is the end of the age. We have the sign of the beginning and the sign of the end. No man knows how long this age will last, but during this time God is pouring out his Spirit

without distinction among men. The age of the Spirit is the age in which we are living.

In Chapter 3 the prophet returns to the end times and beyond. Other prophets as well had spoken on this matter. All that he sees of the age of the Spirit is the great mark of the Spirit's presence: but beyond that he sees that God will restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem:

"I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat [of judgment] and I will enter into judgment with them there," {Joel 3:2a RSV}

Jesus said, "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him" {Matt 25:31a RSV} ... "Before him will be gathered all the nations," (Matt 25:32). And then the Son of man shall judge them and shall say to the righteous, as a man divides the sheep from the goats, "Come and enter into the inheritance of my Father," and to the unrighteous, "Depart from me" {cf, Matt 25:33-41}. This is the valley of judgment. In preparation for this God instructs the nations of the world with amazing words, startling words:

**Proclaim this among the nations:
Prepare war,
stir up the mighty men.
Let all the men of war draw near,
let them come up.
Beat your plowshares into swords,
and your pruning hooks into spears;
{Joel 3:9-10a RSV}**

Did you know that the Bible says this? Many times you have heard quoted, "Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks." This is found in the third chapter of Micah; but in Joel quite the opposite is said. And Joel's prophecy comes first; the fulfillment of Joel's prediction comes first. That is why nations are at war. This is what God is saying to the nations today. And they will remain at war in one way or another until God says, "Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks." Just as Jesus said "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars" {Matt 24:6a RSV}; ... "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom," (Matt 24:7a RSV). And so it shall be until the end. This is what Joel says.

Then we come to another verse that is often quoted:

**Multitudes, multitudes
in the valley of decision!
For the day of the Lord is near
in the valley of decision.
The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining
[again, that familiar landmark]. {Joel 3:14-15 RSV}**

This is the great and terrible day of the Lord that is to come. What does this mean "Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision"? I have heard many evangelistic messages on this passage that present a picture of many thousands waiting in the moment of decision, hanging between the choice of heaven and hell. Perhaps it is justifiable to interpret it that way, but that isn't what this verse means. It isn't man's decision that is talked about here – it is God's. God will enter the valley of decision and the multitudes of the nations will be gathered before him. All the world will be there on this judgment day:

**And the Lord roars from Zion,
and utters his voice from Jerusalem,
and the heavens and the earth shake.
But the Lord is a refuge to his people,
a stronghold to the people of Israel.
{Joel 3:16 RSV}**

Now that is the day of the Lord – the final day of judgment of the living nations of earth at the return of Jesus Christ – and the effect will be as the prophet describes it:

**"So you shall know that I am the Lord your
God,
who dwell in Zion, my holy mountain.
And Jerusalem shall be holy ..."
{Joel 3:17a RSV}**

After all, that is what God is always seeking. Because that is what he desires for you, God deals with you in judgment. When things begin to go wrong with you, it is God's way of saying to you, "Look, you are not your own boss. You are not your own. You are bought with a price. I am God." He is waiting for you to realize that he is God – not you. You don't have the right to run your own life. You don't have the right to do with

your life whatever you please. He alone has that right.

**“And Jerusalem shall be holy
and strangers shall never again pass
through it.” {Joel 3:17b RSV}**

The final scene is a beautiful one:

**“And in that day the mountains shall drip
sweet wine,
and the hills shall flow with milk,
and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow
with water;
and a fountain shall come forth from the
house of the Lord
and water the valley of Shittim.”
{Joel 3:18 RSV}**

Water is always a picture of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water’“ (John 7:38 RSV) – rivers of blessing to satisfy man’s thirsty soul.

You see, the future is in God’s hands. It isn’t in men’s hands. If it were, we would make a mess of it. It isn’t in the Devil’s hands. If it were, we would be on our way to destruction – everyone, without fail. The blind principle of historical determinism isn’t guiding the future. If it were, there would be no meaning to life. The future is in the hands of one who is preparing something that eye has never seen and ear has never heard. Neither has it ever entered into the heart of man, the won-

derful things that God is preparing for those who love him. I believe that.

Every moment that God deals with us in judgment, he is capturing our attention, waking us up. Through these difficult things, God in grace is simply saying to us, “Look and listen. Stop and wait. Pay attention now, so that you will be ready for the great things yet to come.” There is truth from time to time in some of the words of the poets, you know. I always love these words by Robert Browning, but the words of Scripture give them a new meaning:

Grow old along with me.
The best is yet to be,
The last of life
for which the first was made.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for giving us this picture of life and for invisibly guiding the affairs of men, the destinies both of nations and individuals. Grant to us, young and old alike, the wisdom to listen to you and to turn back from going our own way. Help us to yield our hands and hearts and lives to the one who loves us, who has given himself for us, and who is preparing us for a future so unbelievably wonderful that it takes our breath away. We thank you in Christ’s name, Amen.

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AMOS: God doesn't Play Favorites

by Ray C. Stedman

The message of Amos, one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament, is somewhat different from that of the rest of the prophets, and has been singled out as unique. The message of this book is basically to declare the impartiality of God. God plays no favorites. He makes no allowances for one person that he will not make for others as well. There is no such thing as being God's fair-haired boy. He does not give any more to one than he does to another, in accordance with the promises that he makes. Any who are willing to fulfill the conditions of the promises will find his blessing poured out upon them, regardless of who they are; and any who presume upon these conditions will find him sitting in judgment upon them and his Word condemning them no matter who they are. This is the message of Amos.

It is hard for us to believe that, isn't it? We are so conditioned to thinking that God reacts the way man does, and that if you get into his favor you can presume upon his goodness. Or we think that perhaps we can get by and not face the same kind of judgment that someone else will, or that we can win special positions, special privileges from God that no one else can have. Both extremes of this attitude are reflected in various groups and individuals from time to time.

The book of Amos, however, is a clear statement that God is not like this at all. Therefore, the message of this book can have the impact of a sudden fist in the face. If you really think that you are in a privileged position, especially with God, this book comes with brutal, shocking, breath-taking force. The tendency in human hearts is either to regard ourselves as favored individuals or the exact reverse – to say that we are such poor creatures and such miserable failures that God would never

look at us, that other people have all the right to God's favor. I think this tendency is universal among us. We are always saying to ourselves, "Why should this happen to me?" when tragedy strikes, or when someone else is honored, we say, "Why shouldn't it happen to me?"

I can't help but think of the story that a friend shared with me recently. It happened in New York City, during the time of the subway rush in the evening of a hot summer day. People were jamming into the subway cars as they were moving out of the station and each car was loaded to capacity. One man happened to be just the last man to push and jam his way inside of a car, and he stood facing the door. The doors closed and the car moved off. He stood there, packed against this door, pressed up against it with the awful push of humanity in the car. As it went down the tracks, waving and swaying, he began to feel a little sick. The further he went, the sicker he got, and just at the critical moment, the car came into a station and the door opened and he got sick all over the man standing on the platform right opposite him. But without anybody moving, the door suddenly closed and the car moved out of the station. The man on the platform stood there looking at himself, and then he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Why me?"

Now, when the prophet Amos came to the northern kingdom of Israel this was exactly the reaction he got. The people of that region looked upon him as though he had just vomited on them. They were disgusted with him. Their attitude was exactly that: Why us? Why not go someplace else? You can see this reflected in the biographical sketches that are given to us in this book.

The book opens with these words:

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds [or herdsmen] of Tekoa which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. {Amos 1:1 RSV}

That definitely dates this book and the prophet Amos as a contemporary of the prophet Hosea and also of Isaiah in the southern kingdom. He was one of the earliest of the prophetic writers. And the thing that marks this book is that he was not a trained prophet. He was a layman. Some suggest that since he called himself a herdsman, a cattleman – or, as it is translated here, “a shepherd” – he was the first of a long line of cowboy preachers. I don't know if that marked him with disfavor in the eyes of the people, but at any rate his message was not acceptable to them.

In Chapter 7 Amos adds another personal note. Here is the reaction to his message as he came to this northern kingdom:

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’”
{Amos 7:10-11 RSV}

That was the burden of the prophet's message. God was going to exile Israel. God was going to judge the nation and the king.

And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there.” {Amos 7:12 RSV}

Amaziah says, “Don't come to us. God back to your home town. Go back to the country you came from and prophesy down there.”

“but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.” {Amos 7:13 RSV}

And sturdy, rugged Amos, with his country background and his bluntness said (Verse 14a):

“I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; ...”
{Amos 7:14b RSV}

That means, “I have not been to the school of the prophets.” He didn't mean that his father was not a prophet. He means that he had not been to the accepted school of the prophets.

“... but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees [a farmer], and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” {Amos 7:14b-15 RSV}

Now you can see something of the opposition to the message of this man as he came declaring the burden of the Lord in the land of Israel in the northern kingdom. They found his message very hard to accept.

Amos went about delivering God's message in a very interesting way. If you had a map of Israel and could locate the countries that are mentioned here, and if you put Israel right in the center of the map, you would find that Amos is going around the boundaries of Israel in various directions, delivering a message concerning all the neighboring nations.

- He begins first in Chapter 1 with Damascus. That is way up in the northeast section above Israel. He delivers to Damascus a message showing Israel how God has judged Damascus, especially for the people's cruelty.
- Then he moves way down on the west coast to the ancient land of Philistia, or what is called here the land of Gaza. And once again he reminds Israel that God has judged this land. Why? Because the people have participated in an active slave trade.
- Then he moves back up the coast to the land of Tyre, on the northwest side of Israel, and here he points out how God had judged this country because the people had broken their agreements.
- Then he moves on down to the far south of Israel to the land of Edom, the ancient country of Esau, and here he points out how God's judgment had fallen upon this nation because of the

people's unforgiving spirit and their implacable hatred of Israel.

- Then he moves back up the east side of Israel to the land of Ammon. (By the way, Ammon is now the country of Jordan and its capital is the capital of ancient Ammon.) Here he points out that God had judged this section of the country because of its cupidity, its greed, its hunger for land of others.
- Then south to Moab, still on the side of Israel, God had judged Moab, he says, because of its hatred against Israel.
- And then he comes to the southern kingdom, Judah itself, and in a brief reference points out that because Judah has despised God's Law, the judgment of God had fallen on it.
- At last he arrives right at the ten-kingdom northern nation of Israel, and here he announces that God is going to judge them for corruption and for injustice in their hearts.

As you read this account, you can see that the people of Israel were quite untroubled as long as Amos was talking about the other nations. They took this very complacently, more or less with the attitude, "Well, they got what was coming to them." But when the prophet moved home to zero in on Israel, the people got angry and said, "Why don't you go away and preach someplace else?" This is almost inevitably the result when preachers are faithful to the message of God. But the rest of the book focuses on this northern kingdom of Israel.

Beginning with Chapter 3 you have the prophet's words that God addressed to this nation. He begins by pointing out to them that they were a people who had a special, privileged position before God:

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: {Amos 3:1 RSV}

They are waiting now for Amos' message. And he says,

**"You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;"
{Amos 3:2a RSV}**

That is what they wanted to hear. This was the sign that they were the privileged people of God, the chosen people. They were the ones of whom God himself had said that he had known of all the families of the earth. You can see them swelling with pride and arrogance as the prophet says this. Ah, but then comes the fist in the face, the hammer blow:

**" therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities." {Amos 3:2b RSV}**

Now see their faces fall. You see, that which was the mark of their pride was the very reason God says they were peculiarly subject to judgment. Light creates responsibility. Privilege exposes to the keenest of judgment. And as these people had been called into such a relationship, they were also, therefore, subject to the severest and sternest forms of judgment.

Now, this is what Peter means in the New Testament when he says, "the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God," (1 Pet 4:17 RSV). It always begins there. God always starts with his people, and then he moves out to those round about them. The prophet's word is that because we are people of God, this does not mean that God's word does not sit in judgment on the wrong in our lives. On the contrary, it is all the more apt to be borne home to us.

Then Amos points out how close this special relationship with God is in Chapter 3:

**"Do two walk together,
unless they have made an appointment?"
{Amos 3:3 RSV}**

Or, as it is usually rendered, "Can two walk together unless they be agreed?" {KJV}. Here is God's walk with his people. And then his talk with them:

**"Surely the Lord God does nothing,
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets."
{Amos 3:7 RSV}**

These were the things that marked their peculiar relationship and privilege before God. They

walked with God. They talked with God. But for this reason, the prophet says, God is going to send judgment.

Then he announces what it is. Do you remember the story of the two golden calves that were erected by King Jeroboam in the cities of Bethel and Dan? (1 Ki 12:28). Israel was sent to worship there and the people called those calves Jehovah. And they worshipped and bowed down before those golden images. Now those two calves represented two basic ideas in Israel, for which God was perennially in judgment against the people. Furthermore, they are ideas which are prevalent among people today.

- Those golden calves, in that they were made of gold, represented the hunger of this people for material gain, the love of wealth, materialism – the god of gold.
- And because they were calves, or young bullocks, they were representative of the pagan gods of sex, the fertility gods of the nations round about them who worshipped the bull as a sign of fertility or sexual potency.

So the worship of these twin calves made of gold was essentially symbolic of the people's worship of materialism and sex. That sounds awfully modern, doesn't it?

And the prophet's word to this people was that because of this kind of worship, the nation of Assyria was being raised up by God to come sweeping down from the north to carry Israel away into captivity.

Now, in the patience of God it was almost two hundred years before that took place. Yet God announced it this early so that the people might have space to repent. And he declared that this was certain to come unless they turned to him. Even in this account the prophet shows how God had patiently tried to awaken them.

In Chapter 4 we read of five different times when God had sent something to wake them up, to make them think, to jar them, to arrest them, and stop them in their downward course. He says:

**“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places [i.e. famine],**

yet you did not return to me,”
{Amos 4:6 RSV}

**“And I also withheld the rain from you ...
I would send rain upon one city,
and send no rain upon another city,**
{Amos 4:7a RSV}

God was deliberately spacing the rain so that there would be an awareness that this was the divine hand.

“... yet you did not return to me,
{Amos 4:8b RSV}

**“I smote you with blight and mildew;
I laid waste your gardens ...
yet you did not return to me.”**
{Amos 4:9a RSV}
{Amos 4:9c RSV}

**“I sent among you a pestilence after the
manner of Egypt;
I slew your young men with the sword;
I carried away your horses; ...
yet you did not return to me,”**
{Amos 4:10a RSV}
{Amos 4:10c RSV}

**“I overthrew some of you,
as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah ... [that is, by volcanic action,
burning and so on] yet you did not return to me.”**
{Amos 4:11a RSV}
{Amos 4:11c RSV}

Again and again God says this. Here is an indication that God often sends things into our lives to shake us up, to awaken us. I have seen this happen so many times. Visiting someone in the hospital who has gone through some accident, I have often found that even though nothing directly indicated that this was perhaps a judgment of God, it was taken by the individual, and rightly so, as a warning or shaking up, as if God were saying, “Look now. Stop and think about where you are going and what is happening to you.” For God, in great patience, is constantly trying to make us see things the way they really are.

And then as the prophet moves on he puts his finger on the very thing that is wrong:

**Therefore because you trample upon the
poor
and take from him exactions of wheat,**

**you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I knew how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins –
you who afflict the righteous, who take a
bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.
Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent
in such a time;
{Amos 5:11-13a RSV}**

Now this is the reason this book is so loved by the liberal; Amos is called the prophet of social justice, the man who demanded that man treat their fellow-man rightly. Liberals love this book because of these thundering pronouncements against the social evils of Amos' day – and rightly so. God is always disturbed by social injustices. But what the liberals seem to miss in this book is Amos' appeal to these people. He doesn't just say to them, "Now stop doing these things." He does say that, but that isn't all he says. It is how to stop doing these things that is the important message, and you will find it plainly given twice in Chapter 5:

**For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel:
"Seek me and live." {Amos 5:4 RSV}**

"Don't go to Bethel. Don't go to those golden calves. Seek me and live."

**Seek the Lord and live,
lest he break out like fire in the house of
Joseph. {Amos 5:6a RSV}**

What is the answer to the wandering heart? The answer isn't just to clean up your life. It is to come back to God. It is to repent and to think again. Turn. Come back to the Lord of your salvation. Call upon him. Ask him to set you back on your feet and straighten out your life. That is the answer. That is always God's appeal. Come back into a relationship with one who loves and in patience tries to awaken us and bring us back to himself.

Now, the nation evidently went on resisting the appeal of the prophet, so he addresses two particular messages to these people, aimed at the two ex-

treme views among the people of Israel. They are almost contradictory views. First he says:

**Woe to those who desire the day of the
Lord! {Amos 5:18a RSV}**

And to the other group, he says:

**"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,"
{Amos 6:1a RSV}**

Now here are two quite distinct views among the people. There were those whom we might call the pious hypocrites who first came under the judgment of God. "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!" What does this mean? Well, you see, there were some people who were going about saying, "Oh, isn't this a terrible day. Oh, God is so hard. Things are so terrible." They were wringing their hands, appearing to be mourning, and going through all kinds of rituals and religious ceremonies and saying, "Oh, there is no hope for anything. Oh, if God would only come at last! Oh, would that the day of the Lord would come. Would that we could go home to be in heaven." Did you ever hear that? And the prophet thunders: "Woe to you that desire the day of the Lord."

Amos says, "Do you know what that day will be like? Do you have any idea what you are saying? Why," he says, "it is darkness, not light. It is as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or he went into the house and leaned a hand against the wall and a snake bit him. You talk about the day of the Lord. Why, you don't know what you are talking about! Woe to you." And God says,

**"... I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your [religious
activities] solemn assemblies, {Amos
5:21 RSV}
your burnt offerings, ...{Amos 5:22 RSV}
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
... the melody of your harps ...
{Amos 5:23 RSV}
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an everflowing
stream." {Amos 5:24 RSV}**

Do we ever get away from this? God desires truth in the inward parts, in the center of life – not outward conformity. God sees through that sham and pretense without the slightest difficulty and it doesn't impress him when we go through religious

activity: "Thou desirest truth in the inward being;" (Psa 51:6 RSV).

Well, then there was another group that said, "We are not concerned about these things. Let's eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. Let's have as good a time as we can and make the most of life; let's enjoy it to the full while we can." And the prophet says, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion," {Amos 6:1a RSV}.

Amos asks, "How can you be so restful when the nation is so restless? How can you content yourselves with riches and wealth and the good things of life when people are lying in distress outside in the streets and judgment is taken away from your courts?" So there comes this powerful message:

**"Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory,
and stretch themselves upon their
couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the midst of the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
[in the midst of the threatening judgment
of God.]" {Amos 6:4-5a RSV}**

These are the two extreme groups. As Amos goes on, he shows in a series of visions that were given to him that the nation is rapidly ripening for judgment. At last there comes the final scene, almost always pictured by the prophets – a scene of beauty, peace, and glory. It reveals what God wants and, therefore, why God is angry at hypocrisy. Listen to these words:

**"In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins,
and rebuild it as in the days of old."
{Amos 9:11 RSV}**

Do you remember where that is quoted in the New Testament? In the first council at Jerusalem, in Acts 15, when they were wondering whether God would save the Gentiles without the Law of Moses, James stood up and quoted this verse from Amos: "The prophets," he said, "have declared that God is going to send his grace out to the Gentiles," and he quoted this verse (see, Acts 15:15-18). God's word was that he would raise up the tabernacle or the booth of David which had fallen, and repair its

breaches. That is a picture of the coming of Christ, representing the house of David. And in the raising up of the Lord Jesus, the word was to go out to all the peoples. God would bless the world through him,

**"that they may possess the remnant of
Edom
and all the nations [all the Gentiles] who
are called by my name,"
says the Lord who does this.
{Amos 9:12 RSV}**

Then comes this beautiful scene:

**"Behold, the days are coming," says the
Lord,
"when the plowman shall overtake the
reaper
and the treader of grapes him who sows
the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Is-
rael,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities
and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their
wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their
fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land which I have given them,"
says the Lord your God.
{Amos 9:13-15 RSV}**

That is a picture, of course, of the millennial days when Israel shall at last be restored to the land, never to be removed again.

Now then, why is God so angry with this people?

- If cruelty makes him angry, it is because his heart is so set upon kindness toward man.
- If oppression stirs his wrath, it is because he wants men to live in love and peace.
- If pain inflicted upon others brings judgment from God, it is because his heart is set upon happiness and the well-being of humanity.

The message of this book is that God is relentless when he begins to deal with man. He will not make peace. He will not compromise:

- When he begins to deal with a nation, he insists on absolute values.
- When he begins to deal with an individual, he deals with absolute values.
 - Just the fact that we are Christians does not mean that we escape the condemnation of the judgment of the Word of God in those areas where we are attempting to compromise.
 - Just because we have been Christians for 40 years doesn't change the relentlessness of the Word of God as it searches and probes our hearts and lives. God doesn't change.

The word of this prophet is that we are dealing with a God of righteousness and of unbending, inflexible zeal who will not compromise in any way, and yet, our God is a God of patience and of love. The marvelous undertone of this book, as through all the prophets, is that of the outpouring of the love of God's heart moving toward the well-being and the happiness of humanity, breaking out every now and then into beautiful forms of expression.

Undergirding the whole book is the promise at last to bring Israel – and likewise all the people of God – into the day when man shall live in peace and joy, with blessings to fill the hearts of men. What a message of the impartiality of God's grace this is!

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for this look at yourself. We thank you that you are a God who does not change; you are absolutely without shadow or turning. When we deal with you Lord, we deal with one who is faithful to us. What joy this gives us as we find in our own hearts a hunger to be made pure, to be made right before you, to stop at nothing so that we might be what you want us to be. And yet, Lord, how this strikes terror also into our hearts in those moments when we are tempted to compromise, to water down the truth, to deceive ourselves, to think that perhaps we can get by just this once and you won't notice. Lord, teach us that your eye is ever upon us, not merely to search us out as a policeman, not merely to haunt us and to hound us, but to bless us and to remove us from that which is harmful to us and hurts us, and to heal us and restore us in grace. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

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OBADIAH: Death to Edom!

by Ray C. Stedman

Obadiah, the shortest book in the Old Testament, is the pronouncement of doom against an ancient and long-forgotten nation, the land of Edom. But there is more to this book than that. The Scriptures have that beautiful faculty of appearing to be one thing on the surface, but, on a deeper level, yielding rich and mighty treasures. That is certainly true of this amazing book of Obadiah.

We know very little about Obadiah except that he was one of the minor prophets. There is a reference to a prophet Obadiah in the days of Elijah and Elisha and there is some thought that perhaps he is the same man. The name Obadiah was a very common name among the Hebrews, though, and it is very likely this is not the same prophet, for in this book Obadiah mentions the day when Jerusalem was destroyed, captured by the alien armies, and that occurs long after the time of Elijah and Elisha. So most Bible commentators believe the author of this book was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, the last of the prophets before Israel went into captivity.

The name *Obadiah* means “the servant of Jehovah;” he fulfills the position of a servant. He comes and does his work and fades into the background; he delivers his message and he is gone. And that is about all we know about the man behind this book.

The book of Obadiah tells the story of two nations, the nation of Israel and the nation of Edom, the country to the south of Israel that is now usually referred to as the Negev or Negeb. Through this ancient land of Edom the Israelites marched as they came into the land of Israel out of the captivity and slavery of Egypt. As they came into the land they had difficulty with the Edomites; they were enemies of Israel from its very beginning.

But behind the story of these two nations, this book tells the story of two men. Every nation in the Bible is a lengthened shadow of its founder, and the two men behind the nations Israel and Edom were twin brothers. Do you know who they are? Jacob and Esau. Jacob was the father of Israel, and Esau, his twin brother, became the father of the Edomites. In the story of these nations you also have the extended story of these two men, Jacob and Esau. God, in a sense, has put Jacob and Esau into an enlarger and blown them up to national size. As the prophet discusses this you can see that the story of these two men continues; Israel is still Jacob and Edom is still Esau.

Jacob and Esau were in perpetual antagonism. We read in the book of Genesis that even before they were born, they struggled together in their mother’s womb. That antagonism marked the lives of these two men, and, consequently, the lives of their descendants, the two nations of Israel and Edom.

And as you recall from Genesis, Jacob was mother’s darling and Esau was daddy’s little man, and there was one unending conflict between the two of them which did not end with the lives of these men. The nations carried on this same conflict, and all the way from Genesis through Malachi there is the threat of struggle and unbroken antagonism between them. In the book of Malachi (remember, Genesis records the beginning of these nations), the last book of the Old Testament, God says, “I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau,” (Mal 1:2b-3a RSV).

Why does the story of these two men come to a focus here in this little prophecy of Obadiah? What is so important about these two men and these two nations? Well, that is what the book of Obadiah makes very clear to us. In the New Testament we discover that there is a perpetual an-

tagonism within the nature of the Christian. In Galatians 5:17 we are told that the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; they are opposed to one another.

God is a great illustrator. He is always using pictures for us so that we can understand truth more easily, more graphically. We are children in this respect. We like to have a picture. We would rather see something than hear it, so God has many pictures. He has taken these two men and the subsequent nations that came from them and used them through the Bible as a consistent picture of the conflict between the flesh and the spirit – Jacob and Esau, Israel and Edom.

(This, by the way, is a wonderful key to Bible study. Have you learned to recognize what we might call *interpretational constants* that run throughout the Scriptures? There are certain names and figures, or metaphors and similes that, once used to symbolize a thing, maintain that characteristic and that reference all the way through the Bible, wherever they are used. You know how this is true of certain items, certain material things, like oil:

- Wherever oil is used symbolically in Scriptures it is a picture of the Holy Spirit.
- Wine is always a picture of joy in the Scriptures.
- Leaven is always a picture of evil.
- These two men, Jacob and Esau, and the nations Israel and Edom, always appear as a picture of a struggle between the flesh and the spirit that is going on in our own lives as believers.

Esau lusts against Jacob, and Jacob against Esau; the two great principles are irreconcilably opposed to one another.)

Obadiah turns the spotlight first on Esau, who is the man of the flesh, and Edom, the proud nation that came from the flesh, and he answers the question “Why does God hate Esau?” The trouble with Esau, the prophet says, is this (Verse 3):

**The pride of your heart has deceived you,
you who live in the clefts of the rock,
whose dwelling is high,**

**who say in your heart,
“Who will bring me down to the
ground?” {Ob 1:3 RSV}**

The trouble with Esau is pride. Pride is the root of all human evil, and pride is the basic characteristic of what the Bible calls the flesh that lusts against, wars against, the Spirit. The flesh is a principle that stands athwart God’s purposes in human life and continually defies what God is trying to accomplish. Each of us has this struggle within us if we are Christians, and its basic characteristic is revealed here as pride. That is the number one identifying mark of the flesh.

Proverbs 6:16 says: “There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to him.” And what is #1 on the list? A proud look. And everything else that follows is a variation of pride. Those that are swift to run after mischief, he that spreads lies and slander and discord among brothers – all these things are manifestations of that single basic evil, pride. This is the satanic nature which was implanted in the human race; all who are born of Adam have this congenital twist of pride, the independent ego that evaluates everything only in terms of its importance, or its unimportance, to self. The universe centers around self, the rival god. That is pride. That is Esau; that is Edom. It can appear in our lives in ten thousand ways, but you will find some common expressions of it here in this book of Obadiah.

One way it may be expressed is in self-sufficiency (Verses 3-4):

**... who say in your heart,
“Who will bring me down to the
ground?”
Though you soar aloft like the eagle,
though your nest is set among the stars,
thence I will bring you down,” says the
Lord. {Ob 1:3b-4 RSV}**

Here is the man who says, “Nobody can touch me. Who is going to upset me? My plans are all laid out. I am able to carry through what I set out to do.” This attitude of self-sufficient ability is a mark of pride. And the Lord says that “though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, yet I am able to bring you down.”

The reference in this book to “you who live in the clefts of the rock” is a very literal reference to the nation of Edom. If you have had the privilege

of visiting the Holy Land, you may have gone down into the Negev area and visited the city of Petra, the rose-red city of the dead. This amazing city is approached through a tremendous fissure that runs for a mile or more right through the rock, a narrow file only a few yards wide that brings you at last into an open place where temples have been carved out of the living rock – giant temples with doorways in them some 25-30 feet high. That was the capital of Edom. That was the ancient city, whose people felt that because of these natural defenses they were impregnable. They lifted up their hearts in pride and, as the Lord speaking through the prophet says, the pride of their heart is deceived; they thought that nothing could overthrow them, but God said it would be done. Just a few years after our Lord's day, the Romans came in and destroyed the cities of Edom and took this impregnable fortress. It has been in ruins ever since.

This kind of self-sufficiency is clearly evident in the man who says, "I don't need God. I can run my own life without God, in my own wisdom, my own strength, my own abilities, my own talents – that is enough, that is all I need to make a success in life." But self-sufficiency is also seen in the Christian who says, "Well, I need God, yes, in times of danger and fear and pressure, but I am quite able, thank you, to make my own decisions about the girl I am going to marry, or the career I am going to follow, or the friends that I have, or the car that I buy or anything else like that." That is the same spirit of self sufficiency, isn't it?

The thing that characterized the Lord Jesus Christ and marked him as continually opposed to this spirit of self-sufficiency was his utter dependence on the Father. We Christians have to learn that if there is any area of our life where we think that we've got what it takes to do without God, it is in that same area that we are manifesting the flesh, the pride of Edom. When you step into your office on Monday morning and you have been a fine Christian on Sunday and all through the weekend, but on Monday morning you say, "Now I am in charge. I know what to do here. I don't need the Bible. I don't need God. I don't need my religion to help me here. I know exactly how to run this business," you are manifesting this same spirit of Edom, this spirit of self-sufficiency. In many areas of their lives Christians live as though God were dead, they believe in God, but live as though he

were dead, they live without any sense of dependency upon his wisdom and his strength.

Another form of pride is found in this little book too (Verse 10):

**For the violence done to your brother Jacob,
shame shall cover you,
and you shall be cut off for ever.
{Ob 1:10 RSV}**

Violence is a form of pride; the man who strikes his wife, a child who has been beaten, a baby whose bones have been broken, and who has been damaged internally. What is behind this violence of the human heart? An unbroken ego, a spoiled and cowardly spirit. Pride is centered only on self and it strikes out against anything that dares to challenge its supreme reign in life. I have been in a Christian home and seen a woman with black eyes and bruises on her legs and arms because her Christian husband, who was a Sunday School teacher, had beaten her. Where does this violence come from? It is from Edom. It is the pride of the flesh.

Here is another form of pride (Verse 11):

**On the day that you stood aloof,
on the day that strangers carried off his
wealth,
and foreigners entered his gates
and cast lots for Jerusalem,
you were like one of them. {Ob 1:11 RSV}**
[You just stood and watched.]

Indifference is a form of pride. I think this is by far one of the major causes of marital difficulty. In the constant stream of people who have come to see me about problems in their marriage, almost invariably, somewhere along the line, I hear the complaint. "Well, he is simply indifferent to me. He doesn't care about me. He ignores me." Or, "She pays no attention to me. She isn't interested in the things that I am interested in." Isn't it strange that these things can be true in Christian homes? And how quickly it comes in after courtship. During the courtship it is, "What are you thinking about? Tell me what you would like?" But when marriage comes, it is, "Where's dinner? Where is the paper? What's on TV?" And the concern is entirely different. Why? Well, Esau is

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at work – that’s why. The force in human life that God hates is Esau.

There is yet another form of pride that we read about in Obadiah (Verses 12-13):

**But you should not have gloated over the
day of your brother
in the day of his misfortune;
you should not have rejoiced over the peo-
ple of Judah
in the day of their ruin;
you should not have boasted
in the day of distress.
You should not have entered the gate of my
people
in the day of his calamity;
you should not have gloated over his disas-
ter
in the day of his calamity;
you should not have looted his goods
in the day of his calamity.
{Ob 1:12-13 RSV}**

God charges Edom with the sin of gloating as a manifestation of this basic problem of pride. Notice how you hear this so frequently in children who haven’t yet learned to cover up what they feel with a subtle varnish of politeness: “Yay, yah, yah, good for you. You had it coming!” Did you ever say that in your own heart about somebody? “You had it coming.” You were gloating over them. Adults learn to disguise this sometimes, but it comes out once in a while. You hear that the boss is sick, and you say. “Nothing trivial, I hope.” What do you say when someone fails and you hear about it? Do you ever say, “Well, I told you so. I knew that would happen. I expected it all along”? That is the sense of gloating, you see.

I remember reading of the hypochondriac who had written on his tombstone the words: “I told you I was sick.”

Now, what causes this? Why do we like to rub salt on another’s wounds? What is behind this perverse delight we take in another person’s failure or his faults? It is Esau in us. The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. In our pride and unconcern we don’t care what happens to someone else, as long as everything is all right with us.

Another manifestation of pride is exploitation (Verse 14):

**You should not have stood at the parting of
the ways
to cut off his fugitives;
you should not have delivered up his survi-
vors
in the day of distress. {Ob 1:14 RSV}**

When calamity fell, Edom took advantage of it. The Edomites moved in on a fallen people, a captured people, took advantage of the fact that these were fugitives, and used their trouble and their misery to their own advantage. They delivered up the survivors in the day of Israel’s distress. They took unfair advantage. God hates it when we utilize another’s weakness or bad luck to our advantage.

Have you ever heard anyone say, “Well, I had a contractor bid on some work I would like him to do, and the fellow made a mistake and he has underbid this. But I am going to hold him to it. After all, I’ve got the contract. He signed it and I am going to hold him to it”? That is taking advantage of another’s mistake. We find this spirit coming up so easily when something like that happens. We say, “Oh, that is your hard luck. Finders keepers, losers weepers!” We try to move in and take advantage of another’s distress.

“Oh,” you say, “I could never do a thing like that!” Well, how many of you are on the lookout for some old coin, or some antique chair, or some widow selling her husband’s golf clubs who doesn’t know the value of them? What a bargain! Move in on that and take advantage of it!

Well, this is only a partial listing of the ways of Esau, the man God hates, but the worst thing, the tragedy of Esau, is back in Verse 3, where God says, “The pride of your heart has deceived you.” You are this way, but you don’t know it. Blind to your own problems, you go on thinking that everything is fine, but suddenly everything falls to pieces, just as it did here to Edom (Verses 6-7):

**How Esau has been pillaged,
his treasures sought out!
All your allies have deceived you,
they have driven you to the border;
your confederates have prevailed against
you;
your trusted friends have set a trap under
you –
there is no understanding of it.
{Ob 1:6-7 RSV}**

That is the terrible thing about pride. It traps us. It tricks us. It trips us up. We don't recognize it until we are too late. We go stumbling along in our pride and arrogance and vanity and we think we are doing fine. Everyone else can see the trouble we are having, but we go blissfully on, sawing away on the limb, totally unaware that the limb we are sawing on is the limb we are sitting on, until it falls down and we are suddenly exposed.

Remember the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*? The emperor advertised throughout his kingdom for a tailor to make him an especially good suit, and a man came and told him he would make him the finest suit that had ever been made. He brought a piece of cloth and showed it to the emperor, only the trouble was, there was nothing there. He held up his hands as though holding a piece of cloth, and he said to the emperor, "You know, this cloth has a really remarkable quality. Only the pure in heart can see it. If you have an evil in your heart, you can't see this cloth, but if your heart is pure, then you can see it. Now, surely, sir, you can see it?" The emperor couldn't see anything, but he nodded his head and said, "What beautiful cloth! What remarkable cloth. That is exactly what I am looking for." And so the man made him a suit from this cloth and he came and put it on him and the poor emperor stood there naked, fancying he had these clothes on. He called his courtiers in to admire him (of course he told them of the special quality of the cloth) and they too said, "Oh my, what a beautiful suit!" No one would admit that he couldn't see a thing until the emperor, in his pride and his vanity, decided to go out to the public streets of the city so everyone could see him. There goes the poor ignorant fellow, strutting along in his nakedness, and the whole city out there admiring him – all but a little boy who stood up and said, "But the emperor doesn't have anything on!"

Now what can you do about this?

This is where we live, isn't it?

We all have this problem of the flesh within. Well, that is not the end of the story (Verses 15-16):

For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations.

**As you have done, it shall be done to you,
your deeds shall return on your own head.**

**For as you have drunk upon my holy mountain,
all the nations round about shall drink;
they shall drink, and stagger,
and shall be as though they had not been.**
{Ob 1:15-16 RSV}

In other words, God has determined judgment upon Edom, and there is no escaping it. Does that sound like destruction?

Well, it is – for Esau. There is no hope for Esau; there is no way out. The judgment of God is absolutely inescapable for Esau. God is forever set against him. One of the grandsons of Esau was a man named Amalek, who withstood the Israelites on their way into Canaan. In Exodus 17:14-16 it is recorded that God said to Moses, "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven," {Exod 17:14b RSV}. And Moses says, "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation," {Exod 17:16b RSV}. That is what God is saying about the flesh. He will never make peace with it.

But the day of triumph is for Jacob (Verses 17-18):

But in Mount Zion there shall be those that escape [Mount Zion is Jerusalem, or Jacob],
**and it shall be holy;
and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions.**
**The house of Jacob shall be a fire,
and the house of Joseph a flame,
and the house of Esau stubble;
they shall burn them and consume them,
and there shall be no survivor to the house of Esau;
for the Lord has spoken.**
{Ob 1:17-18 RSV}

And finally (Verse 21):

**Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion
to rule Mount Esau;
and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.**
{Ob 1:21 RSV}

This is what you might call the ruthlessness of God. He has his heart set to destroy Esau. After all, that is the whole story of the coming of the Holy Spirit into the human heart; he has come to destroy Esau and all these characteristics of the

OBADIAH: Death to Edom!

flesh. He will destroy them in those who are his and bring Jacob into the full inheritance of all his possessions – and the weapon he uses is the judgment of the cross.

Isn't it interesting that when you get to the New Testament you find these same two principles personified again in two persons who meet in the pages of the Gospels face to face. In the last week of our Lord's sufferings, he stands before Herod. Herod, we are told, is an Idumean, which is another spelling of Edom – he is an Edomite. Jesus before Herod – the representative of Jacob and the representative of Esau face to face. Herod the Edomite, proud, arrogant and rebellious, watches the cruel mockery of the soldiers as they strip the Lord down and dress him in his royal robes. The Gospel writer says that Herod plied him with many questions, but for the son of Esau there is no answer from the son of Jacob. He has nothing to discuss with him. There can be no compromise. God has nothing to say to the flesh, nothing at all except judgment.

And what is the final issue of that account? The prisoner went out to a cross and a grave, and from it he emerged a king; but King Herod went on to disgrace, exile, and, finally, to a grave in a foreign country. Beyond that he is a prisoner, bound by chains of his own making, eternally.

Now which are you? A king, or a prisoner?

Is Esau, or Jacob ruling?

Do you know about this ruthless cross that denies you any right to self-sufficiency, to self-expression, to self-advantage, to self-exploitation, to all these things – denies you indifference, gloating, or self-righteousness?

- Have you learned yet to reign with Christ, not in heaven, but right now?
- Have you learned to possess your possessions – as Jacob is intended to do – so that the kingdom shall be the Lord's, the kingdom of your life?
- Or are you still a prisoner, like Herod,
 - fancying yourself to be free,
 - on a throne in authority,
 - but still bound by unbreakable chains

because you refuse to pass through the death that sets you free?

Prayer:

Our Father, search our hearts in this moment, as we see how vividly this Old Testament illustration sets before us the truth of the New Testament. As we stand face to face with the mirror of your Word, we have seen ourselves. May we not be as those James describes who look in the mirror and see themselves and go their way and straight away forget what manner of men they were. God grant to us the grace to yield to you and to the cross and its judgment upon all the self-life, that we may know the glory of this mighty truth and possess our possessions, so that the kingdom shall be the Lord's. In his name we pray. Amen.

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JONAH: The Reluctant Ambassador

by Ray C. Stedman

Probably the best known yet least understood book in the Bible is the book of Jonah. From the world's point of view, Jonah and the whale have become a part of literature, a part of mythical legendary history. Though the story has become a byword among people, the book is looked upon with ridicule and disbelief, and is laughed out of the Bible as being a kind of fable. It is not taken seriously, it is not taken historically. It is merely a great fish story.

It is also known for its reference to Jonah as a jinx or a bad luck charm. This is based on the time in the story when Jonah was on a boat on the way to Tarshish as he was fleeing from God, and a great storm arose. His companions asked what was causing the storm, and Jonah said, "It is me." So they threw him into the sea in order to get rid of the bad luck that was following the boat. The book is well-known because of that incident, and we sometimes call somebody who is a jinx "a Jonah."

All of this has obscured the true message of this book. Jonah was actually a historical character, and he is mentioned in other places in Scripture. The book of Second Kings refers to him as a historical prophet, a prophet ministering to Israel in the days of Jeroboam. He is referred to by the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who said, "as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," (Matt 12:40 RSV). With this kind of backing, there can be no doubt that the book of Jonah is historically accurate.

The true message of this story is found in the last two chapters of this little book. There you have Jonah – after his encounter with the whale (or fish) – going to Nineveh as God had originally sent him and proclaiming the message that God sent him to proclaim. When you ask yourself, "Why did

Jonah originally refuse to go to Nineveh?" you get very close to the heart of this book's message. Why did Jonah refuse to go? You know how the story opens:

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; {Jonah 1:1-3a RSV}

When you are trying to run away from God, you will be amazed how often you find a ship right there, ready at hand. There is one special thing about this man Jonah I like. He paid his fare to Tarshish. If he was going to be disobedient, at least he wanted to be honest about it!

[And] so he paid the fare, and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. {Jonah 1:3b RSV}

Then came the great storm and the mariners cast him into the sea, and a great fish swallowed him.

The second chapter is his prayer to God to get him out of the belly of the fish. The fish got a terrible stomach-ache and vomited him up on the land. Then in Chapter 3, Verses 1 and 2, we are told:

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." {Jonah 3:1-2 RSV}

There is a note of sternness in God's command, isn't there? God has not changed his mind a bit. He finally has changed the prophet's mind – but he has not relented about what he wants Jonah to say to Nineveh.

What made Jonah so anxious to avoid this commission? Why did he not want to go to Nineveh? Why did he flee from God? Well, some suggest that he had such a primitive idea of God that he regarded him as just a tribal deity, for Israel alone; that he thought God could not really be interested in Nineveh; and that is he could get out of the land, he would get away from God. I think that idea is scotched by Jonah's own reference to God. When the voyagers asked who he was, he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land," (Jonah 1:9 RSV). That does not sound like a tribal deity to me. No, this is not why Jonah avoided going to Nineveh.

The answer is that Jonah knew God too well and that is why he did not go to Nineveh. Does that sound strange? Well, look at the beginning of Chapter 4:

But it [Nineveh's repentance] displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "I pray thee, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil." {Jonah 4:1-2 RSV}

Because Jonah knew that God was that way, he would not go to Nineveh. This is interesting, don't you think? Look again at the last phrase. Jonah says, "I knew you God. I knew that you were the kind that repents from evil if you get a chance." God had said to this prophet, "Now go to Nineveh and announce to them 'forty days and the city shall be overthrown.'"

And that was exactly what Jonah wanted. He wanted to see this city destroyed. This was the great enemy of his people. Perhaps Jonah had actually seen these cruel, ruthless, bloody Ninevites periodically coming down into his land and raiding his people. Perhaps he had even suffered the loss of loved ones at the hands of these merciless people. In the ancient world, the record for the bloodi-

est and most vicious kinds of cruelty belongs, perhaps, to the Ninevites. They found more incredibly ingenious ways to be cruel than any other nation that has ever lived. They were brutal and godless and sinful – and Jonah hated them. The one thing that he wanted more than anything else was to see Nineveh destroyed. Yet when God told him to go announce to Nineveh its destruction, he said, "I know you too well, O God. If anybody, by repenting, gives you half a chance to be merciful, you'll change your mind and won't carry out your sentence upon them." So he fled to Tarshish.

That's amazing, isn't it? What a revelation of the knowledge of God and of the character of the God of the Old Testament! From time to time, those who do not believe the Bible – primarily those who are educated beyond their intelligence – say that the God of the Old Testament was a vengeful, wrathful God, a God of black thunderclouds and bolts of lightning, and that he was always killing people off. Well, do you find that here? That is not the kind of God that Jonah knew. He says, "I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love, and repentest of evil."

So that is what sent him to Tarshish. And even after his trip in the living submarine he was still reluctant. He still did not very much want to deliver this message, but he remembered the fish's belly and he went. He came to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. {Jonah 3:3b RSV}

This city would take an average of three days to cross. A day's journey was reckoned to be about twelve miles, so a three days' journey would be thirty-six miles. That is a pretty good-sized city. It was a group of cities actually – much like Los Angeles – clustered together around the banks of the Tigris River and forming the capital of the Syrian Empire (Assyrian Empire). And Jonah came to declare the message that God gave to him. He began a day's journey through the city, crying:

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" {Jonah 3:4b RSV}

“Forty more days and your city will be laid waste. Forty more days and God is going to destroy this city.”

Ordinarily that kind of a message would not get much of a reception. It would not today and it did not then. The Bible reports other prophets being sent with a message like this to people, who paid no attention to it. But an amazing thing happens in this story:

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. {Jonah 3:5 RSV}

And when the king heard about it,

... he arose from his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he made proclamation [sounds like they had a Christian leadership week going on, doesn't it?] and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, or drink water, but let man or beast [even the animals were involved] be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God; yea, but every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. {Jonah 3:6-8 RSV}

And they did it:

When God saw what they did [not just what they said], how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. {Jonah 3:10 RSV}

This city was spared. Why did they listen to Jonah's message? Well, I think this would always be a mystery to us were it not for clues supplied by the Lord Jesus Christ himself. In the Gospel of Luke in Chapter 11, our Lord refers to this account: “For as Jonah became a sign to the men of Nineveh, so will the Son of man be to this generation,” (Luke 11:30 RSV). He said, “Jonah – the man, the prophet – was himself a sign to the city of Nineveh, and in just the same manner, I, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be a sign to the whole generation.” He referred to Israel, but he meant the whole

race of man beyond that; and as Jonah was a sign to Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be a sign to this generation.

There are Bible scholars who feel that what happened to Jonah was that his features were changed by his experience in the whale's belly. There are some interesting historically-verified incidents of men who have been swallowed by fishes, very much like Jonah was. I would recommend Harry Rimmers' book, *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*, in which he tells of an Englishman, a sailor, who fell overboard, and was swallowed by a fish. A day or two later the fish was seen floating on the surface of the water, and was taken ashore. When it was opened up, the sailors, to their amazement, found their shipmate alive. He survived the experience, but his skin had turned a chalky white and remained so for the rest of his life. Dr. Rimmer talked with him and learned the details of his experience. It was clearly verified. There have been other accounts like this, probably half a dozen altogether. It has happened to others besides Jonah.

The message of this book, of course, is not so much what happened to Jonah, but the results in Nineveh when Jonah rose up to preach. You can imagine what happened in this city if something like this occurred. If Jonah's face and body confirmed the remarkable story that surely this man had just gone through the harrowing experience of being swallowed alive by a fish and later vomited out, and that God had sent him to proclaim this message, you can imagine the effect upon the city. Jonah was living evidence – documentary proof in his own being – that God meant what he said and would do it. The city repented down to the last man, and the judgment of God was stayed.

Now do not trouble yourselves over the fact that it says God “repented.” This describes God's action from only a human point of view. God knew all the time that it would happen this way; but whenever God's message is believed, this always seems to “change” his mind. Actually, though, we know it simply carries forward his purpose. The city was spared, and not until more than a hundred years later did God carry out his judgment on Nineveh and destroy it. But they were spared for now by their repentance at Jonah's preaching.

In the last chapter, then, we have the encounter between Jonah and God. One might think the story would be over with in Chapter 3, the great city in

sackcloth and ashes, repentant before God. But this is not what this story is after. It is trying to get us into the very heart of God. So we read that Jonah was angry with God, and he announced why he had tried to run away. He said, "I know the kind of God you are, and sure enough you did exactly what I expected. When the city repented, you changed your mind, and," he says, "I am angry." And God asks him,

"Do you do well to be angry?" {Jonah 4:4b RSV}

Jonah did not even answer. He sat down on the rimrock above the city and waited to see what God would do. I don't know how much time had gone by, but he must have waited out there a few days. The first day,

And the Lord God appointed a plant, {Jonah 4:6a RSV}

The choice of words here is interesting: God prepared a plant, appointed it. And the plant grew up and covered Jonah's head, evidence of God's gracious provision. But on the second day God prepared a worm.

... God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered." {Jonah 4:7b RSV}

Notice the carefully-designed details here. And then when the sun came up God appointed, or prepared, an east wind that blew the heat of the desert in upon Jonah; and the poor fellow sat there sweating and suffering and suffocating until he fainted and asked that he might die. And God said again to him, "Well, Jonah, are you ready to give me your answer? I asked you a question. 'Do you do well to be angry?'" {cf, Jonah 4:9a}. I am amazed how stubborn this prophet was. He said,

"I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." {Jonah 4:9b RSV}

You know, it is easy to point the finger at Jonah, but haven't you ever said that to God, too? Haven't you ever said to him, "I want what I want. I don't care what you do. Of course I'm angry. I don't like the way you're running things. Take me

away. Take me to heaven." Now notice what God said:

And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. [You feel sorry about a plant, and sorry for yourself.] And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left," {Jonah 4:10-11a RSV}

That is a Hebrew way of describing children; one hundred and twenty thousand little children. He said, "You can take pity on a plant but you can't take pity upon a great city filled with children and people who don't know their way, who don't know their God." And the book ends abruptly. Why? Because that is where it is supposed to take us – to the revelation of the heart of God.

God loved these Ninevites, even though Jonah hated them. And I sometimes think that there is an awful lot of Jonah in us. Sometimes we act as though we would be delighted if tomorrow morning's paper reported that Moscow lay in smoldering, smoking ruins. Wouldn't we? But God loves the Russians and the Chinese and anyone else whom we for a time call our enemies. I am not trying to avoid facing facts – we do have enemies – but God loves them, just as he loved the enemies of Israel and would spare them whenever they repented.

And God has sent us to them to declare this word of Jonah. Do you see how suddenly and subtly the Holy Spirit has insinuated us into this picture? Around us are unsaved people – the "godless," we call them, the lawless and the disobedient. We dismiss them from our lives saying, "Revolted, disgusting, they deserve damnation!" We sing of God's tender grace and his mercy and his compassion, but we avoid saying anything to them.

Now, I am not sitting in judgment on you. I stand with you in the dock concerning this. I am asking your heart, as I ask mine, "Isn't there an awful tendency among us to be like Jonah?" Do we really demonstrate to others the heart of the God who loves a world that is staggering on in blind, willful ignorance and that does not know where it is going?

He has sent us men and women to be a sign to this generation. And what is that sign? It is the sign of Jonah, the sign of resurrection, the sign of people who once were dead who have been made alive in Jesus Christ. Isn't that why the Lord said, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," (Matt 12:40 RSV). Isn't that the heart of our proclamation, that here is a God who can bring life from death, who can resurrect those who are swallowed up in the belly of a whale or fish – lost, hopeless – but redeemed? And the witnesses to this proclamation are the resurrected lives of those of us who, like Jonah, declare this message in our day.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this book and, through it, a look at our own hearts. How like this stubborn prophet we are, intent upon our own goals, our own comforts, and unconcerned about those around us whose hearts cry out for you and touch your heart of tender compassion. Lord, grant that we may feel like you feel, to have pity on the people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. And Lord, we pray that our hearts reflect your heart and show to them your love and compassion in declaring the message of truth, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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MICAH: Who is like God?

by Ray C. Stedman

Micah was a contemporary of the great prophet, Isaiah, and his book is of a similar style. Sometimes, in fact, this book is called “Isaiah in miniature” because it is a much briefer presentation of essentially the same message as the prophecy of Isaiah.

The theme of this little prophecy is found in the meaning of the prophet’s name. I hope you have a Bible that helps you with the meaning of Hebrew names for these names are often very significant. For example, in the book of Genesis the name of the man who gained fame as the world’s oldest man was itself a prophecy. In fact, when Methuselah was born, his father, Enoch, learned something that he never forgot – and it was hidden in the name of Methuselah. Methuselah lived 969 years, and his name means “When he dies, it will come.” The year he died the flood came, so that shows something of the significance of the Hebrew names.

The name *Micah* means “Who is like God?” or “Who is like Jehovah?” Therefore, this is his repeated question. Everywhere this man went, apparently, this is what he said: “Who is like Jehovah?” “Who is like God?” – until people began to call him this. There is some suggestion that this may even have been a nickname that was given to this man. You can imagine people looking around as Micah comes up the street and saying to themselves, “Here comes old Who-is-like-God.” Since this is what Micah is talking about in this book, the theme of this book is God-likeness and the great message of God to the world today is how to be like God. This is also the theme of Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, and I think it is very instructive to put these two messages together so that we can see that the New Testament and the Old Testament teach the same truths in different ways. That is what makes the Old Testament so enlightening to us, and

if you do not understand the New Testament, read the Old Testament.

Do you remember the story about the Greek philosopher, Diogenes? He went around with a lantern looking for an honest man all through the day. Even in broad daylight he carried his lantern around to arouse curiosity. When anybody asked Diogenes, “What are you doing with a lantern in broad daylight?” he would reply, “I am looking for an honest man.” This is like Micah’s search (Chapter 1, Verse 1):

The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. {Micah 1:1 RSV}

The book is divided into three parts. The first three chapters describe the failure of the nation. We get this theme in many of the prophets, but here in this book we have the picture of the lack of godliness. And then comes a wonderful section in chapters four and five that is a vision of the future one, the one who is Godlike. This is a predictive section that looks forward to the coming of Christ, the Messiah. The last three chapters give us the pleading of God to the nation.

In the first chapter there is a magnificent picture of God striding forth in judgment against this nation of Judah, because of their utter failure to be godly even though God provided them with everything it takes to be godly.

That sounds familiar, does it not? Why are we not godly? We have all it takes, in the Holy Spirit, to be godly. Therefore, this book comes right home to us because we are in the same boat.

MICAH: Who is like God?

In the first section you have a beautiful, poetic picture of God moving out (Chapter 1, Verses 3-5):

**For behold, the Lord is coming forth out of
his place,
and will come down and tread upon the
high places of the earth.
And the mountains will melt under him
and the valleys will be cleft,
like wax before the fire,
like waters poured down a steep place.
All this is for the transgression of Jacob
and for the sins of the house of Israel.
{Micah 1:3-5a RSV}**

Then God picks out the capitals of these two lands. What is the transgression of Jacob? Samaria. That is, the capital, the heart of the nation. And what is the sin of the house of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? He says (Verse 6):

**Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in
the open country [a rubbish dump],
a place for planting vineyards;
and I will pour down her stones into the
valley, {Micah 1:6a RSV}**

All this is a picture of the destruction by the armies of Assyria which, within a hundred years, would sweep across the countryside and demolish everything. The prophet says that this is God's judgment.

In Verses 10 through 16 there is something very interesting, although it is hard to see in the English version. These prophets were punsters, and although some people say that a pun is the lowest form of humor, the Bible has many puns in it, but they are hard for us to see if we do not understand Hebrew. If you could read the original Hebrew, you would see that there is pun upon pun here in the names of these cities mentioned by Micah. Verse 10:

**Tell it not in Gath, weep not at all; {Micah
1:10 RSV}**

Gath means "weep" and the prophet plays on that name. And in this manner, all the way through, he picks up names of cities and then ties the judgment of God in with them. Here is how it would read:

In Weep Town, weep not; in Dust Town, roll yourself in the dust. [*Bathleaphrah* means "town of dust."] In Beauty Town, beauty will be shamed. [That is the meaning of *Shaphir* – "beauty."] In Zaanah [which means "march"] they'll march not forth. In Neighbor Town they will end up with a useless neighbor. In Bitter Town they will grieve bitterly. {cf, Micah 1:10-12}

Then in Verse 13 you have Lachish, which means horse – Horse Town, the one-horse town. Micah says, "Oh, inhabitants of Horse Town." One play on words after another.

Chapter 2 goes on to picture vividly the utter destruction of the people, including the rulers, the prophets, the women and the children.

Then in Chapter 3 you read the reason for this total judgment of God. Micah has been seeking godliness and he looks where he might expect to find it – among the rulers of the nation, among the representatives of God. But he finds corruption, oppression, bribery, and injustice everywhere. Micah exposes the mess in Jerusalem, and he says that the reason God is visiting judgment upon his people is that those who have been given the authority to act in God's stead have forgotten that they are responsible to God.

This always touches us, does it not? For whenever we are put in a position of authority we are told to remember that we also have an authority over us. It does not make any difference whether you are an authority in the church, as an elder, or in the city, as mayor or councilman, or if you have just been elected the president of your class, or the head of your group. The New Testament reminds us that masters are to remember they have a master in heaven as well, and God holds all authority responsible to him (Eph 6:9). The man who forgets this, therefore, turns to use his power for his own advantage. And that is what had corrupted the nation. The prophet sums it up for us in Chapter 3, Verse 11:

**Its heads [its rulers] give judgment for a
bribe,
its priests teach for hire,
its prophets divine for money;
{Micah 3:11a RSV}**

There are all three classes of rulers for the nation – the spiritual rulers, the civil rulers and the

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moral rulers. Although these are the ones who should have been godly, they are the most ungodly because they failed to recognize that whenever a man is in an office of any kind, he is there to represent God. That is true even for young people in school offices. You represent God in that office. Paul declared, "Those [powers] that exist have been instituted by God," (Rom 13:1 RSV). And that does not just stop with civil government, but it applies to any level. Paul calls them the ministers of God for good, and when rulers – civil, spiritual, or moral – recognize that they are representatives of God, there is always good government. But when they forget, then there is corruption, oppression, bribery, agony and tears.

In Chapter 4, in a passage of wonderfully exalted vision, the prophet lifts up his eyes and looks across the centuries past the coming of Babylon, past the rise of the great eastern empire of Greece, past the Roman Empire and the days of the Caesars, past the Middle Ages with Martin Luther and the Reformation and John Wesley, and even past our own day, to the coming of one who is Godlike. This is one of the most beautiful Messianic passages in the Scriptures (Chapter 4, Verses 1-4):

**It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the
mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills;
and peoples shall flow to it,
and many nations shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the
Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
{Micah 4:1-2 RSV}**

The passage then narrows to a person.

**He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide for strong nations afar
off;
and they shall beat their swords into plow-
shares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;**

**but they shall sit every man under his vine
and under his fig tree,
and none shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has
spoken. {Micah 4:3-4 RSV}**

That is yet to come. The nations will never forget how to make war, never obey this word to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks until the one who knows how to rule in godliness comes.

The rest of Chapter 4 goes on to describe how Israel will be gathered and will ultimately defeat her enemies.

Chapter 5 opens with a new thought. The prophet says to Israel (Verse 1):

**Now you are walled about with a wall;
[That was a picture of the Assyrian
army being gathered around the city]
siege is laid against us; {Micah 5:1a RSV}**

It is also a picture of that day when a greater Assyrian army out of the north shall come against Israel. The reason it comes is given here in this verse:

**with a rod they strike upon the cheek
the ruler of Israel. {Micah 5:1b RSV}**

Now that is a rather quick reference to the first coming of the Lord Jesus when he stood before Pilate and the rulers of the nation and they struck him with a reed, and put a crown of thorns on his head, and a robe of purple on him, and bowed before him and mocked him, (Matt 27:27-30). They struck on the cheek the ruler of Israel.

Now the prophet suddenly sees where this ruler is to come from. This is one of the great predictive passages of the Old Testament (Verse 2):

**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are little to be among the clans of
Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days. {Micah 5:2 RSV}**

Or literally, from eternity, from everlasting.

Remember when the wise men came out of the East looking for the one born king of the Jews? They said to the rulers of Jerusalem, "Where is he

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that is born king of the Jews?" And the chief priests said, "You will find him in Bethlehem," (cf, Matt 2:1-6). How did they know? Well, because 700 years before, Micah had said to them, "Thou Bethlehem Ephrathah (that is, Bethlehem in the land of Ephraim), though you are little among the cities of Judah, yet there shall come forth from you one who is to be the ruler in Israel, whose goings-forth (or origins) are from of old, from everlasting."

And then, in Verse 3, there is a parenthesis:

Therefore he shall give them up [the nation of Israel] until the time. {Micah 5:3a RSV}

And that is why Israel has been wandering in defeat without a king, without a temple, and without a sacrifice for centuries. One of the wonders of the world is that this nation of Israel maintains its identity despite its dispersion among the nations. "He shall give them up until the time."

**when she who is in travail has brought forth;
then the rest of his brethren shall return to the people of Israel. {Micah 5:3b RSV}**

And then looking again at the one he saw coming out of Bethlehem Ephrathah (Verse 4):

**And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth. {Micah 5:4 RSV}**

Seven hundred years down the corridors of time Micah clearly perceived the one who would rise out of obscurity and fulfill these predictions. His goings-forth are from everlasting; he is the God-man, the only godly man that ever walked on earth, the Godlike one.

Now in Chapters 6 and 7, in a passage of power and beauty, Jehovah turns to plead with his people and to show them the way of God-likeness. We hear a lot about dialogue today that we need to talk with those to whom we are opposed. Well God had a controversy with his people and he talked it

over with them in this passage. The prophet says (Chapter 6, Verses 1-2):

**Hear what the Lord says:
Arise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.
Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;
for the Lord has a controversy with his people,
and he will contend with Israel. {Micah 6:1-2 RSV}**

That sets the stage. Now God speaks, and this is what he says (Verses 3-5):

**"O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!" {Micah 6:3 RSV}**

"What have I done to you? Why do you reject me so? Why do you turn me aside? In what have I wearied you now? Tell me."

**"For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of bondage;
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.
O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised,
and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord." {Micah 6:4-5 RSV}**

What do you think the people are going to say to that? Well here is their answer (Verses 6-7):

**"With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" {Micah 6:6-7a RSV}**

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“What do you want God? What can I bring you?
Do you want sacrifice? Is that what you want?”

**“Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” {Micah 6:7b RSV}**

What do you want of me God? (Isn't that what people say so many times?) What are you asking of me anyway?

Now listen to God's gracious answer, one of the most beautiful verses in all the Bible (Verse 8):

**He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
{Micah 6:8 RSV}**

That is the answer, isn't it? That is the way to God-likeness: to walk humbly with your God. After all he is the only one who can make us God-like. But the Israelites failed to do this, so again there comes the cry of judgment as God at last must wake them up to their folly and their weakness.

The description of judgment is resumed and continues until you come to the last of Chapter 7 where the prophet concludes the message with a most marvelous picture of God. Notice how it starts (Verses 18-20):

**Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger for ever
because he delights in steadfast love.
He will again have compassion upon us,
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
Thou wilt cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.**

[As someone once put it “And then put up a sign that says ‘*no fishing.*’”]

**Thou wilt show faithfulness to Jacob
and steadfast love to Abraham,
as thou hast sworn to our fathers
from the days of old.
{Micah 7:18-20 RSV}**

What is the way to God-likeness? Putting away our wickedness confessing our guilt before God, looking to him to pardon our iniquities and cast all our sins into the depth of the sea. Isn't that just what the New Testament says? “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” (1 Jn 1:9 RSV).

Now how do you walk humbly with God? John answers that we should walk in the light as he is in the light, that is, to walk openly and in honesty. Do not try to hide anything from God. Do not pretend to be something you are not to him. “Walk in the light as he is in the light and the blood of Jesus Christ his son cleanses us from all sin,” (1 Jn 1:7 RSV)

Now Micah's question rings in our ears: Who is like God?

Well, the only one who is like God is the man who walks with the Lord Jesus Christ – who is God himself, the Godlike one.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for this look into your heart of love, even though, in faithfulness, you must judge your people to make them aware of their foolish ways. Yet your heart is ever pleading and beneath all the thunders of judgment, the darkness of destruction, is that heartbeat of love and concern, of readiness to forgive and restore, and to bring us back into fellowship with you. Help us then to remember this question “Who is like God?” We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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NAHUM: The Terrible Wrath Of God

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Nahum is one that is neglected because it is so obscure, and so small that it is seldom read and much less frequently understood. But every portion of Scripture is indispensable; each has its own contribution to make. This is why the Apostle Paul could say, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work," (2 Tim. 3:16-17 RSV). And this little prophecy of Nahum is no exception.

When you read this you may feel that it is a rather dry account of ancient history, but, actually, this prophecy reveals something of God more clearly than any other book of the Bible. It is the job of the prophet to reveal to us the character of God. The prophets unfold for us the divine attributes and each sees God in a different light. As you read through the prophets, therefore, you are seeing one facet after another, flashing like a diamond in the sunlight, of the mighty character and attributes of an eternal God.

Now the attribute which the prophet Nahum was given to reveal was God's anger. There is no doctrine quite as repugnant to people today as that of the anger of God. This is one doctrine which many would like to forget. There are some who picture God as a kindly gentleman with a merry twinkle in his eye who cannot bear the thought of punishing anyone or judging anyone. Nevertheless, it was Nahum's task to unfold the anger of God and in this prophecy the God of Sinai flashes forth in awful fury, a God before whom man must stand silent and trembling. You cannot read this prophecy without sensing something of the solemnity of this tremendous picture of God.

As we begin this book it is important to know why and at whom God is so angry. This prophecy is directed against the city of Nineveh to whom

God sent the prophet Jonah. When Jonah preached in Nineveh, the city repented in sackcloth and ashes. God's anger was withheld from the city and he spared it, because from the king on down to the lowest citizen, they turned to God and repented of their sins.

The book of Nahum comes some one hundred years after the prophecy of Jonah. During this time, Nineveh had repented of its repentance, and had begun to do the same things again that called forth the threat of judgment through the prophet Jonah. The prophet Nahum was sent to minister to the southern kingdom of Judah at the time of the invasion of the Assyrian king Sennacherib. King Sennacherib who came from the capital city of Syria, Nineveh, invaded Israel at the time of the prophet Isaiah, and it was from this great city in the north that the armies of the Syrians frequently came against the land of Judah and of Israel. But God moved to protect his people and met and destroyed these enemies of the king overnight.

Nahum means "consolation, or comfort." And as the Assyrian army was spread out around the city of Jerusalem, the prophet was given a message of consolation. You can imagine how consoling it was – when the armies were right there with their terrible reputation as ruthless warriors, burning and destroying, raping and pillaging, killing the children and sparing no one – to have this prophet stand up in Jerusalem and declare to them that God would destroy Nineveh, the capital city of their enemies.

This is one of those parts of prophecy in Scripture which already has been fulfilled. Much of Scripture remains to be fulfilled, and many of the predictions of the Old Testament prophets look beyond our own day to a time when the Lord will come again. But as we look at this book, we see prophecies that have long since come to pass. This is one of the great proofs that the Book of God is

from God, for there is a description here of exactly how this destruction would occur, given years before it took place. Those who are interested in apologetics might use this in talking with some who challenge the fact that the Word of God is predictive.

We can divide the book of Nahum into four sections, and each of them is a description of the anger of God.

I think the simplest way to describe this first section, this vision of God in his wrath, is to simply use the Anglo-Saxon word “**terrible**.” These are beautiful poetic expressions, but they powerfully picture the wrath of God (Chapter 1, Verses 2-6):

**The Lord is a jealous God and avenging,
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries
and keeps wrath for his enemies.
The Lord is slow to anger and of great
might,
and the Lord will by no means clear the
guilty.**

**His way is in whirlwind and storm,
and the clouds are the dust of his feet.
He rebukes the sea and makes it dry,
he dries up all the rivers;
Bashan and Carmel wither,
the bloom of Lebanon fades.
The mountains quake before him,
the hills melt;
the earth is laid waste before him,
the world and all that dwell therein.**

**Who can stand before his indignation?
Who can endure the heat of his anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire,
and the rocks are broken asunder by him.
{Nahum 1:2-6 RSV}**

What a description that is! The prophet sees God in his anger looking at the hosts of Assyria. There are some men and women who live in a perpetual temper. Their hot tempers boil over at the slightest provocation, but the interesting thing is that people do not usually fear this kind of a person. They pity them or they make jokes about them. There are other people who are more quiet and peaceful by nature. It takes a long time to stir them up. They endure irritations for a long time,

but when their patience is exhausted and at last they are brought to a boil, watch out. They are terrible in anger.

That is the picture that the prophet gives here, of an infinitely patient God. As the prophet says, “He is slow to anger.” He does not move rapidly. He has given this city chance after chance to repent. He has sent prophet after prophet after prophet. They did believe one prophet and repented their evil ways, and God spared the judgment he said he would bring. But they repented from their repentance. That is one of the most terrible things that men can do. Having turned from their evil, they went back to what they had said they would forsake, and this is what evokes the judgment of God at last.

God is angry, and this is no temper tantrum. There is nothing capricious about the anger of God. There is nothing selfish about it. It is a controlled but terrible rage, fearsome to behold. You can get some idea of the awfulness of this divine anger in the fact that all the Hebrew words for wrath or anger are brought together in these six verses. The words are: jealous, vengeance, wrath, anger, indignation, fierceness, fury. All of them describe the anger of God.

Jealousy, that burning zeal for a cause felt so deeply in the heart. This is not the selfish, petty jealousy we exhibit sometimes, but God’s overwhelming concern for what he loves. His vengeance, or retribution; his wrath, that towering anger, the blackness of it, the darkness of it, is described here. The word for *anger* is the word that literally means “heavy breathing,” or “hot breathing.” And the word for *indignation* literally means “foaming at the mouth”! You can see how picturesque these words are. The word *fierceness* in Hebrew literally means “heat,” and the word *fury* means “burning.” And all this to describe a God who is terrible in his wrath, moved at last to the point of pouring out his wrath upon that which has awakened it. God in a white-hot passion, burning with a terrible, blistering rage.

The second section, beginning with Verse 8 of Chapter 1, brings before us another aspect of his anger. Here we learn that the wrath of God, or the anger of God, can be **personal**, for this is all directed against a single individual. In Verse 11 you have reference to Sennacherib, the general of the Assyrian armies.

**Did one not come out from you,
who plotted evil against the Lord,
and counseled villainy?
{Nahum 1:11 RSV}**

God's anger was all directed against this pagan king who deliberately plotted to destroy the people, after God had visited his city with grace and had saved them from his anger. Verse 12 refers to the visit of the angel of death when Sennacherib came down with his armies before Jerusalem. In Isaiah, Chapters 36 and 37, you have the description of how the Assyrian armies came down and spread out before the city of Jerusalem. Then with taunting challenges to King Hezekiah, they told him they were going to take the city and that there was no strength that could stand against them. Isaiah tells us how Hezekiah took these messages and spread them before the Lord and asked God to save the city, even with the armies of Assyria surrounding it. And that night, we are told, the angel of death went through the Assyrian hosts and slew 185,000 soldiers (Isa 37:36). That is referred to in Verses 12-13:

**Thus says the Lord,
"Though they be strong and many,
they will be cut off and pass away.
Though I have afflicted you,
I will afflict you no more.
And now I will break his yoke from off you
and will burst your bonds asunder."
{Nahum 1:12-13 RSV}**

As a result of this, the Assyrian armies went back and Jerusalem was saved. (There is an interesting construction there in the Hebrew. It says, "When they woke up in the morning behold they were all dead men." Of course, the ones who woke up in the morning were the Israelites and not the Assyrians.)

Verse 14 was literally fulfilled in the murder of Sennacherib. When the angel went through the camp the Assyrian general was spared, and he returned to Nineveh. But while he was worshipping his false gods in the temple after returning from this engagement with Israel, he was murdered by his own two sons, who stole the crown for themselves. We read here (Verse 14):

**The Lord has given commandment about
you:
"No more shall your name be perpetu-
ated;
from the house of your gods I will cut off
the graven image and the molten image.
I will make your grave, for you are vile."
{Nahum 1:14 RSV}**

Years before that happened the prophet Nahum was told that God would deal with this man in his own temple, in the house of his gods, and make his grave there. God's anger sought him out and struck him down. In Verse 15 you have the joyful shout that went up from Jerusalem when the news came of Sennacherib's death:

**Behold, on the mountains the feet of him
who brings good tidings,
who proclaims peace!
Keep you feasts, O Judah,
fulfill your vows,
for never again shall the wicked come
against you,
he is utterly cut off. {Nahum 1:15 RSV}**

What a picture this is of the fact that God's wrath can be directed against a person. This is what people are so slow to believe. They say that God is a God of love. How can he possibly punish anybody? This is the argument. When it is mentioned that God's justice demands that he punish us, they say that this cannot be so. God's love is greater than his justice, they say, and therefore, under no circumstances can God's justice cause him to punish. There are many who are suffering under this delusion. But here is a man who was singled out, as the prophet tells us, to bear the brunt of the wrath of God, this man who was responsible for the depredations against Judah.

Now, there is a third section, comprising all of Chapter 2, which reveals still another aspect of God's anger: he is **thorough**. Here God is addressing Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, and he says (Verse 1):

**The shatterer has come up against you.
Man the ramparts;
watch the road;
gird your loins;
collect all your strength.
{Nahum 2:1 RSV}**

How dramatically this is put, as though the watchman is looking out and he sees the armies of the Babylonians coming up to destroy the city of Nineveh. History tells us that the combined armies of Cyaxares and Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar, came up against Nineveh and this army is called the "Shatterer." "The Shatterer has come." Here is the way the account of the battle in the city begins (Verses 3-5):

**The shield of his mighty men is red,
his soldiers are clothed in scarlet.
The chariots flash like flame
when mustered in array;
the chargers prance.
The chariots rage in the streets,
they rush to and fro through the squares;
they gleam like torches,
they dart like lightning.
The officers are summoned,
they stumble as they go,
they hasten to the wall
the mantelet is set up.**

{Nahum 2:3-5 RSV}

This fourth verse sounds like it is describing the freeway: "The chariots rage in the streets, they rush to and fro through the squares; they gleam like torches, they dart like lightning." As a matter of fact, that verse has often been interpreted to be a prediction of automobiles, which is a very good example of the folly of removing a verse from its context. It has nothing to do with automobiles, although it can be made to describe them in "they gleam like torches, they dart like lightning." It is simply a predictive description of the battle that raged in the streets of Nineveh as the Babylonians came up against it.

In Verse 6 you have an amazing, direct prophecy of the manner in which the city of Nineveh would be taken:

**The river gates are opened,
the palace is in dismay; {Nahum 2:6 RSV}**

The Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, recorded an account of how the city of Nineveh fell, and this is what he said:

There was an old prophecy that Nineveh should not be taken till the river become an enemy with the city. And in the third year of

the siege, the river being swollen with continual rains overflowed every part of the city and broke down the wall for twenty furlongs. Then the king [of Nineveh] thinking that the oracle was fulfilled and the river became an enemy of the city, built a large funeral pile in the palace and collected together all his wealth and his concubines and his eunuch, burnt himself and the palace with them all. And the enemy entered at the breach that the waters had made and took the city.

In other words, they came in through the river gates. The Babylonian armies came in through the place where the river had broken out and flooded the city and because of this mistaken idea of the king's, the Babylonians found them all gathered in the palace and there they put them to death. And this is exactly what Nahum had predicted years before.

**The river gates are opened,
the palace is in dismay. {Nahum 2:6 RSV}**

Now that is how thoroughly God's anger works when it begins to move in judgment. Nothing escapes. Remember that old saying, "Although the mills of God grind slow, they grind exceedingly small."

There is a story of the agnostic who made fun of a Christian farmer because he refused to work on his fields on Sunday. The agnostic always went out every Sunday to work in his fields, and at the end of the year he came to his Christian neighbor and taunted him. He said, "Look, you are a Christian and you don't work on Sunday, and you have had a fairly good crop, but look at the way God blessed me. I have worked every Sunday and look at the abundance of grain that I have. Why, this has been one of the richest October harvests that I have ever had." And the Christian farmer turned to him and said, "Yes, but God does not always settle his accounts in October."

When God begins to move, nothing escapes his grasp, nothing. We are in his universe. We are creatures here. There is no way to run away. There is no place to hide. We must deal with a God who says over and over again that if his grace is thwarted, he will rise in judgment at the last.

Now, the third section, in which God addresses the city of Nineveh. We have seen how he portrays

the overthrow of the city, and now he says (Verse 11-12):

**Where is the lions' den,
the cave of the young lions,** [This is a picture of the Assyrian lions, the symbol of the Assyrians, just as the bear is the symbol of Russia and the lion Britain's.]
**where the lion brought his prey,
where his cubs were, with none to disturb?** {Nahum 2:13 RSV}

This is a taunt at the overthrow of the city. If you had visited the site of the city of Nineveh 60 years ago you would have stood in the middle of a wilderness, never knowing that this was a site of a great and ancient city. Archaeologists have begun to unearth this city and we know now where Nineveh is located, but for centuries it was lost, buried under the shifting sands of the desert.

The last chapter reveals how **irresistible** the anger of God is. In Verse 4 we are told one of the reasons for Nineveh's destruction:

**And all for the countless harlotries of the harlot,
graceful and of deadly charms,
who betrays nations with her harlotries,
and peoples with her charms.**
{Nahum 3:4 RSV}

This is a reference to the witchcraft that was practiced in Nineveh. And in response to these practices, God says (Verses 5-7):

**Behold I am against you,
says the Lord of hosts,
and will lift up your skirts over your face;
and I will let nations look on your nakedness
and kingdoms on your shame.
I will throw filth at you
and treat you with contempt,
and make you a gazingstock.
And all who look on you will shrink from you and say,
Wasted is Nineveh; who will bemoan her?
whence shall I seek comforters for her?**
{Nahum 3:5-7 RSV}

And God reminds Nineveh of what had happened earlier to the Egyptian city of Thebes (Verses 8-10):

**Are you better than Thebes
that sat by the Nile,
with water around her,
her rampart a sea,
and water her wall?
Ethiopia was her strength,
Egypt too, and that without limit;
Put and the Libyans were her helpers.**
{Nahum 3:8-10 RSV}

Thebes also looked impregnable,

**Yet she was carried away,
she went into captivity;
her little ones were dashed in pieces
at the head of every street;
for her honored men lots were cast,
and all her great men were bound in chains.** {Nahum 3:10 RSV}

God controls history and when he decides to move against a nation, a city, or an individual, there is no escape. He is absolutely irresistible. In ironic language he urges the city to fortify itself (Verses 14,15):

**Draw water for the siege,
strengthen your forts;
go into the clay,
tread the mortar,
take hold of the brick mold!** [Do anything you like, anything you can think of. But]
**There will the fire devour you,
the sword will cut you off.
It will devour you like the locust.**
{Nahum 3:14-15 RSV}

Here we see pictured the anger of God – this terrible, personal, thorough, irresistible anger. Individuals today are in danger of this anger. All through the Scripture you see it. Flee from the wrath to come. Avoid the anger of God whose patience is outraged, whose grace is turned aside. The twin sins that will always call forth the wrath of God are pride and impenitence. When a nation or a person walks in pride and counts himself sufficient, saying he is able to handle his own affairs and run his own life, that nation, that person is doomed. When God shows mercy but that man or

that nation remains impenitent, then comes the blazing wrath of God.

What, then, is the message of Nahum to our own hearts?

Well, there is an interesting application here that is both national and individual. On the national level it is a message of comfort to us today. Just as Nahum's word brought comfort to a nation that was threatened by this godless, cruel foe, we have a somewhat similar facing us. For the interesting thing is that in the Bible the Assyrians were not only the people who were actual enemies of Israel, but they were also a type of a people yet to come who would threaten the peace of the earth and would play an important part on the stage of world history in the last days. The Assyrians in prophecy are a picture of the Soviet Union and the Communist nations, the peoples of the north. If you want an interesting study, I suggest you compare Ezekiel, Chapters 38 and 39, with this prophecy of Nahum. You notice in Verse 13 of Chapter 2 of Nahum God says,

Behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, {Nahum 2:13 RSV}

And Verse 5 of Chapter 3,

Behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts. {Nahum 3:5 RSV}

And when Ezekiel opens his great prophecy against the king of the north, the Gog of the Land of Magog as he calls him, he opens with these very words:

Behold, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech; {Ezek 38:3 RSV}

This is the word of comfort to us that predicts God's judgment and destruction of the peoples of the north on the mountains of Israel.

Now, there is an individual application as well. To those who think that God is only a God of love and never of wrath, let them learn from Nahum that a God who is never angry is a God who cannot love. Did you ever think of that? God's wrath comes from his love. It is because God loves that he is angry; because of love that wrath must blaze forth.

You can prove that to yourself: What moves you to anger? Isn't it almost always when some-

thing or someone you love is threatened or injured? It may be yourself. We all love ourselves. What makes us angry? Somebody injures us and because we love ourselves, we get mad at them. Or someone injures our child and our wrath blazes forth. And if you cannot get angry when you hear or see injury and injustice, it is proof that you are not capable of love, for the one who cannot be angry is the one who cannot love. If you can read stories of atrocities and oppression and the awful traffic in body-destroying and soul-destroying drugs and narcotics among young people and never be moved to burning anger, then I tell you there is something wrong with you. You are incapable of love. If God cannot smite, if he cannot destroy in vengeance, then he has no capacity for love.

It is certainly true that God loves the sinner but hates his sin, as we sometimes say. But that is only part of the story. The Bible tells us that if a man loves his sin and holds on to it at all costs, refusing the grace of God, then he becomes identified with his sin. And eventually, the wrath of God against his sin is also directed against the sinner.

I remember reading of a man who was convicted of stealing, but he argued before the judge that the sentence was unjust; he said it was not he who stole, it was his arm, and so it was unfair for the judge to sentence him to the penitentiary, he could only sentence his arm. Actually, he thought the judge should let him off because his arm had done the stealing and not him. The judge resolved the issue by sentencing the arm to thirty years in jail saying if the man wanted to accompany it, that was up to him.

We become identified with that to which we cling and this is what the Bible pictures. It is time to reassert that God has this capacity for anger, time again to warn men to flee from the wrath to come. Men have been saying that if you would only talk about a God of love, you could fill the churches; if only you would appeal to men about a God of love, they would turn from their wickedness and be drawn to him. But the facts prove exactly the opposite. For the last thirty years or more the message of the wrath of God has been almost totally absent in Christian pulpits. People have talked about a God of love. But that has been interpreted in the minds of men as a God of permissiveness; one who will let you do anything and get away with it. As a result, the churches are emptier than ever before and instead of turning toward God,

men have defied God, refusing to believe in God and turning away from him.

You cannot just preach the God of wrath without the God of love, but the wrath of God grows out of his love, is a manifestation of his love. As Charles Spurgeon said, "He who does not believe that God will punish sin, will not believe that he will pardon it through the blood of his Son." But what is the way to escape the anger of God? Well, Nahum tells you that too, back in Chapter 1, Verse 7:

**The Lord is good,
a stronghold in the day of trouble;
he knows those who take refuge in him.
{Nahum 1:7 RSV}**

No man who turns to God will ever experience his wrath. This complaint that God is a God of wrath seems to picture him as being vengeful without reason, as being determined upon the destruction of men, but it is never so. God only destroys, only exercises his wrath when men have rejected his love. There is a way of escape and there has been all along. We need not face the wrath of God. No one needs to. God's whole purpose has been to call men's attention to that way so that they might take it. And that way is given here: "He knows those who take refuge in him."

I remember years ago when my children were small, and one of my daughters and I had a disagreement one day and I spanked her hard. I was angry and she was crying and I did not know what

to do after I spanked her as she still seemed to be unrepentant. But all of a sudden she ran and threw her arms about my neck. Now what was I to do? Continue to beat her? Oh, no! I could not have lifted a finger against her because she had taken refuge with me.

God knows those who take refuge in him and for those his heart of love is always open. They will never know his wrath. That is what the Scriptures say. As the Lord Jesus put it, "he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life," (John 5:24 RSV).

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you that you know them that trust in you. God grant to us the wisdom and the simple good sense to believe you and to give up an attempt to try to evade your love and your grace; to feel that somehow we can get away with it, that somehow we will escape, that somehow we will be an exception. Lord, make us to understand that the very persistence and unchangeability that guarantees we will never escape is the same persistence that prompts your grace and reminds us that he who turns to you shall never come into judgment but has passed from death into life. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

HABAKKUK: History is in God's Hands

by Ray C. Stedman

The name *Habakkuk* means “embracer,” not in the romantic sense, but in a comforting sense and this is a great book of comfort. Comfort in probably the most distressing problem that human beings have to face: the great question of why God allows certain things to happen. I do not know any more up-to-date and relevant question than that one. As you read through this prophecy of Habakkuk you will discover that the problem he wrestled with and eventually learned the answer to – thus becoming a comforter and embracer of his people in their distress – is exactly the problem that you and I wrestle with today. For the prophet lived in a time very similar to our day – a time when everything was going wrong. He lived when there was great national corruption and distress, when the nation and land was filled with violence, with hatred, and with outbreaks of evil. His distress is reflected in the opening phrases of the book (Chapter 1, Verses 1-4):

The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,

and thou wilt not hear?

Or cry to thee “Violence!”

and thou wilt not save?

Why dost thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;

strife and contention arise.

So the law is slacked

and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous,

so justice goes forth perverted.

{Hab 1:1-4 RSV}

Doesn't that sound like today? Why, Habakkuk says, does he have to cry “Violence!” and hear no answer? Here is the great problem of unanswered prayer. Here is a man who is disturbed about his nation. He sees everything going wrong. The people are living in wickedness; there is unrest, violence, injustice and oppression throughout the land. Those who have the responsibility to correct this do nothing about it. When the whole matter is brought before the courts, the courts themselves are corrupt. So Habakkuk is greatly troubled.

He is a man of God and he knows that the thing to do with a problem is to take it to God – and he has been doing that. He has been praying about his problem. But he does not get any answer. So his perplexed heart in bewilderment cries out, “Lord, how long do I have to keep this up, crying out to you like this? You do nothing about it. I have been watching for a change, watching for an outbreak of revival, watching for something to happen, yet nothing happens. How long must I continue?”

Have you ever felt that way? Look around at our nation and you can see everything breaking up, the shaking of long-standing foundations, people turning away from the faith and questioning things they never questioned before. People are expressing doubts, even outright unbelief, in circles where doubts have never been expressed before. Have you been praying for loved ones, wanting to see God change them and reach their lives, and nothing happens? This is the problem of unanswered prayer. It is a great problem and it perplexes the prophet.

But now God answers Habakkuk. The amazing thing about this prophecy is that it is not addressed to the people at all. Rather, this is a dialogue between a man and God. That is why it is so up-to-date. Every one of us is named Habakkuk

and each of us faces this problem from time to time. God answers (Verse 5):

**Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.
{Hab 1:5 RSV}**

In other words, God says, "I have been answering your prayer, Habakkuk. You accuse me of silence, but I have not been silent. You just do not know how to recognize my answer. I have been answering but the answer is so different from what you expect that you will not even recognize it or believe it when I tell you. But let me tell you what it is." Then God goes on (Verse 6 ff):

**For lo, I am rousing the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the
earth,
to seize habitations not their own.
Dread and terrible are they;
their justice and dignity proceed from
themselves.
Their horses are swifter than leopards,
more fierce than the evening wolves;
their horsemen press proudly on.
Yea, their horsemen come from afar;
they fly like an eagle swift to devour.
They all come for violence;
terror of them goes before them.
They gather captives like sand.
At kings they scoff,
and of rulers they make sport.
They laugh at every fortress,
for they heap up earth and take it.
Then they sweep by like the wind and go
on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!
{Hab 1:6-11 RSV}**

Does that sound like anyone you know? You could substitute the Communists, or in the last generation you could have replaced Chaldeans with Nazis. Here is God's answer to the prophet's problem: God says that he is preparing to raise up this nation of the Chaldeans. Now at the time Habakkuk wrote, the Chaldeans were not an important people. (Another name for Chaldeans is the Babylonians.) These names are used interchangeably in the Old Testament but at the time the prophet wrote, the great nation that frightened all

the other nations and ruled as the great tyrant of the world of that day was the Assyrian nation. Their capital was Nineveh, referred to in previous prophecies.

But here is a little nation that is beginning to rise up in world history and God says to the prophet, "I am behind this. These people are a very strange people. They are bitter, hostile, ruthless and cold-blooded. They are going to be as powerful as any nation on earth has ever been and they will sweep through lands conquering everything, and it will look as though nothing can stop them. These people will not have any god at the center of their life. They believe that their own might is their god, and they trust in their own strength. I am behind the rise of this people, and this is the answer to your prayer."

Now that is a little astounding, isn't it? Evidently Habakkuk did not know what to make of this. There is a moment of silence here and then he begins to reflect. If he thought he had a problem to start with, he really has one now. Now he is battling in the major leagues when it comes to problems, for how will God solve the original one by creating such a major problem as this?

This is what bothers many people as they look at what is happening in the world. The thing that has threatened the faith of many has been the problem of history. Why does God allow things to happen the way they do? Why does he permit such terrible events to occur in human history? I recently saw the results of a survey of the questions that non-Christian students were asking on campuses around our country. Number one on the list was: "How can a just or loving God allow men to suffer? Why would God create us and then allow disease and starvation and all those other terrible things?"

Now there are many who ask that question today and many whose faith is actually faltering because of this. They are saying, "How can this be? What kind of a universe do we live in?" Of course, others are quick to supply an answer. They say, "Well, the answer is that there is no God and it is no use thinking there is one. We are living in a machine-like universe, with ponderously clanking gears, and nobody really knows what makes it operate. Chance put it all together. You only fool yourself when you imagine a father image out of the desire of your heart, and you call it God."

The reason they say this is because of the apparent inactivity of God. That is one of the mysterious things about God, isn't it? The poet, William Cowper, said, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." And the ways of God are full of mystery to us. We have to recognize that there are times when we just cannot understand how God is moving. It does not seem to make sense, and the instruments he chooses are sometimes so out of the ordinary. God is so unorthodox. He is always doing things the wrong way, and picking up the wrong people and operating in the most surprising fashion. One of the things that you learn about God after you live with him for a while is that he is always doing the unexpected. It is not because he delights to puzzle us, but because the variety of his workings are so infinite that our feeble human minds cannot grasp them.

Now that was the problem that afflicted Habakkuk. He was puzzled by this strange silence and then when he heard how God was moving, he could not understand that either. But now he does a very wise thing and the next section of this book is a most important passage because it tells us how to handle this kind of a problem. What do you do when you are confronted with this sort of a threat to your faith? When you see what looks like inaction on God's part and then maybe you see that he is acting, but in a way that seems utterly unbelievable, what do you do? One of the great needs in our Christian life is to understand the method of approaching problems like this. And the method can be outlined very simply. There are four very simple steps and as we go on you will see how the prophet follows them through:

- First of all, stop and think. Do not react emotionally to the problem. Do not let panic grip you, or some terrible fear come over you. Stop and think. All right, think about what?
- Second, restate to yourself the basic things you know about God. Do not try to solve the problem immediately. Back away from it and begin with God. Go back to what you know about God and his character as it has been revealed to you in revelation and by experience.
- Then, take what you know about the character of God and bring it to bear on the problem. That is the third step.

- And, finally, if you have not come to an answer, leave the rest with faith in God and ask him to show it to you.

That is the way. Notice how the prophet does this. First, he starts thinking about God (Verse 12):

**Art thou not from everlasting,
O LORD my God, my Holy One?
We shall not die. {Hab 1:12 RSV}**

Habakkuk has reminded himself of some great things in that statement, "Art thou not from everlasting?" The first thing that he thinks about is that the God he knows is an everlasting God. God sits above history He is greater than any span of human events. He created history. He is from the beginning and he is at the end. He preceded the beginning; he lasts beyond the end. He is the God of eternity. That is the first thing the prophet reminds himself of. When these Chaldeans come, they will trust in their own might as their God. "Oh, yes," Habakkuk says, "but my God is not like that. My God is not one of these localized tribal deities. He is the God who covers history, who himself governs these events, the everlasting God."

Second, the prophet reminds himself that God is the self-existent one because he uses a very special name for God. He says,

**Art thou not from everlasting,
O LORD my God? {Hab 1:12a RSV}**

When the word "Lord" is all in capital letters as it is here, it is a translation of the Hebrew word for Jehovah. *Jehovah* means "I am that I am." The great name that God revealed to Moses when he was in Egypt. At that time he said to him, "Go down to Egypt and tell Pharaoh that 'I am that I am' sent you," (cf, Exod 3:14). Do you know why Habakkuk reminded himself of this? Because there were people in his day going around saying that God was dead. There always are. There is absolutely nothing new in this. Let us get rid of this egotistical idea that we are the first generation that has had any problems. They have happened to all the people before us. There is nothing new. While people went around saying that God was dead, Habakkuk went right back to what he had learned about God. God is self-existent and cannot die. It

is impossible for a self-existent person to die: "I am that I am."

Third, Habakkuk reminds himself of the holiness of God: "My Holy One." Now, what does holiness mean? I dare say most of us use this word without any idea of what it means. Does it mean that he is some sort of a fearsome being and that we had better be careful not to get too close to him because he is holy? No, *holiness* is "wholeness," "completeness," it is being "a whole person." It means essentially that God is consistent with himself. He is always what he is. He is never anything different, never a phony. He never pretends or puts on. That is holiness.

You can find this reflected all through the Scriptures – the unchangeability of God. The writer of Hebrews says, "Thou, Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of thy hands ... they will be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years will never end," (Heb 1:10, 1:12b RSV). Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever, {Heb 13:8 KJV}. With him there is no shadow of turning {cf, Jas 1:17}, no changeability at all.

After the prophet reminds himself of this, he immediately adds these words, "We shall not die." What does he mean? He is thinking of the fact that God has made a covenant with Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would raise up a nation that would forever be his people and that he would never allow them to be eliminated from the earth. The prophet is reminding himself of that, in the face of this fearsome threat. The Chaldeans are going to come rolling across this land. He will see his own beloved Jerusalem ravished and captured and his people led away into captivity. But there is the reminder that God is not going to let the worst happen. They will not die. They will not be eliminated. God's faithfulness remains. He is unchangeable.

So the prophet comes now to a conclusion that settles at least the first part of his problem. He says (Verse 12):

**O LORD, thou has ordained them as a judgment;
and thou, O Rock, hast established them for chastisement. {Hab 1:12b RSV}**

"Now I understand why you are raising up the Chaldeans; it is your way of waking my people up

to their folly, to their awful stupidity in turning away from you. They think they can live without you, and yet how many times have you sent prophets to them, pleading, begging and reminding them of your word? You have poured out blessing after blessing upon them, and still they go on in their senseless folly, taking it all for granted, thinking they can go on living without you. Now I see what you are doing. You are raising up a people to shock them into reality, to awaken and chastise them. I understand this now."

Is there any question that God does this in history? Doubtless this is why the Nazis were allowed to come so suddenly to power, to ravish Europe and then be suddenly struck down again. It was to awaken the Western world to its greediness, its covetousness, its wickedness, and to its departure from the things of truth and of God. God is saying something through this. He is shaking the nations. This is God's pattern throughout history.

Then the prophet says, "I see that, but now I have another problem." He goes on (Verse 13):

**Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil
and canst not look on wrong,
why dost thou look on faithless men,
and art silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he?
{Hab 1:13 RSV}**

And Habakkuk goes on to describe the wickedness of the Chaldeans. "Now," he says, "I can see how you are raising up this nation to punish these people, but I don't understand this. Despite the wickedness of my own people, they are not as bad as these Chaldeans. How is it that you are using a wicked, godless, ruthless people like this to punish your own people? This I don't understand."

Have you ever heard that? Have you ever heard anybody say, "It is true that America has problems, and maybe are kind of a wicked people, but we are not as bad as the Communists (or the Nazis, or whoever else might be our enemies at the time). God won't let these people take over here, because after all, they are far worse than we are."

So the prophet says, "I don't understand this." And since he does not know what to do, he follows the fourth step; he just leaves the problem with God. Now that is a very wise thing to do because our human minds do not grasp all the intricacies of

history. There is so much that we do not understand. So at this point many people say, "It must mean there isn't any God" or "God is not like the Bible says he is" or "I can't believe this. If God won't explain to me what he is going to do, I can't believe in him any longer."

But the prophet says, "Well, I don't understand, but then you are mightier than I, and I will just wait for you to reveal it to me." Notice how he begins Chapter 2:

**I will take my stand to watch,
and station myself on the tower,
and look forth to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my
complaint. {Hab 2:1 RSV}**

That is a wise thing to do. First, Habakkuk says that he is going to get away from the problem for awhile. "I am going to leave the matter with God and wait for him to take the next step. I have gone as far as I can. I have reasoned from the character of God. I know that he has eyes purer than to look upon evil. He does not like evil. He has no complicity with it. I know that. And yet he is raising up these evil people. I don't understand, but I will let God explain it to me and I will wait for an answer."

Can you do this? When you bring a problem to God and explain it all to him in prayer, do you get up and start worrying about it again? (How is this going to work out? What do I do next?) That is the thing that defeats us so many times. But the prophet leaves it there. He says, "It is up to you." Verse 2:

**And the LORD answered me
"Write the vision;
make it plain upon tablets,
so he may run who reads it."
{Hab 2:2 RSV}**

In other words, "Habakkuk, I am going to tell you the answer. Now I want you to write it down and I want you to write it so plainly that anyone who reads it will be able to immediately tell the answer abroad, spread it all over the land." Then God adds these significant words (Verse 3):

**"For still the vision awaits its time;
It hastens to the end – it will not die.
If it seem slow, wait for it;**

**it will surely come, it will not delay."{Hab
2:3 RSV}**

God is saying, "Habakkuk, this isn't going to happen right away. There is going to be a lapse of time, but it will come." This is the character of God's revelation. First God says that an event will happen. Then he says, "Don't you worry about what happens in between. Even though it looks like everything is going wrong, what I have said will happen is going to happen, and if it seems to delay, wait for it. It will come."

Then God goes on to state a principle that is quoted three times in the New Testament and forms the basis for the greatest movements that God has ever had among human beings. He says these words (Verse 4):

**"Behold, he whose soul is not upright in
him shall fall,
but the righteous shall live by his faith."
{Hab 2:4 RSV}**

These words are quoted in the New Testament in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. This is the word that lit a fire in the heart of Martin Luther, "The righteous shall live by faith." Not by circumstances, or by observations, or by reasoning, but by faith in what God has said will happen.

In these words the prophet is shown that there are only two possible outlooks on life. There are only two attitudes by which we can face life. Either we face it in faith depending upon God, or we face it in unbelief depending upon our own ability to reason out everything. These are the two fundamental attitudes, and they are the only two. You can only have one or the other. If you look around you will see that every human being on the face of the earth can be put into one of these two categories. Either they are trusting in the wisdom of the human mind to study events and arrange solutions, and they try to analyze the writings of clever men and come to conclusions about human events based on these sources, or they take what God has said and believe that when he has said a thing will happen, it will happen and that all of history converges into, and hinges on, that promise.

Now that is the difference between a man of faith and a man who lives by his reason. One of the saddening things to me is to see how many Christians are being trapped into actually living by reason, and by the cleverness of the human rational

processes, in the name of Christianity. There are many who say that the job of the church is to organize people who are disadvantaged in some way so they can exercise political influence and power, bringing pressure to bear on the leaders of the nation to correct abuses, and that this is the Christian thing to do. Now I am not suggesting that it is wrong to help people in need. This is entirely right, as God leads. But the processes of depending upon pressure blocks and picket lines and so on is not even remotely Christian. That is not what the Word of God says to do at all. In contrast, look at the stories of the men and women in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. How did they change the world of their day? It says that they endured as seeing one who is invisible. They were not expecting man to do anything. They were expecting God to work and God always did work. As he worked, things began to change, and the history of that kind of working is the amazing success story of men and women who stopped the mouths of lions, subdued kingdoms, toppled thrones, won empires and changed the course of history by faith – not by counting on man to work but on God.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, then, there is a very interesting analysis of the Chaldeans and what God plans to do with them. To summarize, God says to the prophet, “Now. Habakkuk, don’t you worry about the Chaldeans; it is true that I have purer eyes than to behold evil and it is also true that I am raising up this people to judge the nation of Israel, but in turn I will judge the Chaldeans. The very thing in which they trust will prove to be their downfall. Their very gods will overthrow them.”

And he pronounces five woes on these people (Verse 6):

“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own {Hab 2:6b RSV}

[Woe to the man who lives by the philosophy, “I will get everything I can and it doesn’t matter how I do it.”]

Verse 9:

**Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house,
to set his nest on high,
to be safe from the reach of harm!**

{Hab 2:9 RSV}

[Woe to the fellow who is devoting all his efforts towards being secure and safe in his

old age. God says that he will find the foundations pulled out from under him and everything he has invested himself in will be swept away.]

Verse 12:

**Woe to him who builds a town with blood,
and founds a city on iniquity!**

{Hab 2:12 RSV}

[Woe to those who trust in violence to achieve what they want.]

Verse 15:

**Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink
of the cup of his wrath, and makes them
drunk,**

to gaze on their shame! {Hab 2:15 RSV}

[Woe to the man who creates fear in those around him in order to rule over them, and to gain from them.]

Verse 19:

**Woe to him who says to a wooden thing,
Awake; {Hab 2:19a RSV}**

[Woe to the man who trusts in a false god, who thinks that the forces around him are able to control him, give him life and fulfill his desires.]

Finally, in Chapter 3 the prophet concludes with a most remarkable prayer. Here he has seen his answer. God is the God of history and he is moving; he has everything under control. The thing we need to remember is that these forces and the problems created by them are not solved by trying to come to grips with only the immediate problem. That is like taking aspirin to cure cancer. It will never work. No, these problems can be solved only by the relationship of man to God. Habakkuk says (Verse 20):

**But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him.
{Hab 2:20 RSV}**

Then he begins this mighty prayer (Chapter 3, Verse 2):

**O LORD, I have heard the report of thee,
and thy work, O LORD, do I fear.**

**In the midst of the years renew it;
In the midst of the years make it known,
in wrath remember mercy.
{Hab 3:2 RSV}**

Habakkuk began this book by saying, "Lord, why don't you do something." Now he says, "Lord, be careful, don't do too much. In wrath remember mercy. I see you are working Lord, but remember in the midst of it that you are still a God of mercy." That is all he has to say; there is no more philosophy, no more theology, no more arguing with God.

This prayer is one of the most remarkably beautiful, poetic passages in all the Scriptures. Read it and see how the prophet is doing nothing more or less than going back and remembering what God has done in the past. That is what convinces Habakkuk that God can be trusted. He rests upon events that have already occurred, events which cannot be questioned or taken away or shaken in any way; the great fact that God has already moved in human history. And this is where faith must rest. We do not live by blind faith. We live with a God who has acted in time and space, who has done something, who has indelibly recorded his will in the progress of human events. The prophet looks back to God's action in Egypt when Israel was in trouble and remembers here how God moved (Verses 3, 4):

**God came from Teman,
and the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
His brightness was like the light,
rays flashed from his hand;
and there he veiled his power.
{Hab 3:3-4 RSV}**

Remember how he hid his power from Pharaoh, and then flashed out in sudden acts of miraculous intervention? The prophet says (Verse 5, 6):

**Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed close behind,
He stood and measured the earth;
he looked and shook the nations;
then the eternal mountains were scattered,
the everlasting hills sank low.
His ways were as of old.
{Hab 3:5-6 RSV}**

He remembers how the people of Israel were afflicted and in the wilderness, and how in the land of Midian they trembled. Then he thinks of the crossing of the Red Sea and how God made a way through the waters, and he is reminded of how the Jordan River was rolled back when they came into the land (Verse 10):

**the deep gave forth its voice,
it lifted its hands on high.
{Hab 3:10b RSV}**

Habakkuk recalls how at the request of Joshua (Verse 11):

The sun and moon stood still in their habitation {Hab 3:11a RSV}

This is the kind of God we have. The God who actually moves in human history to accomplish events that no man can duplicate. As the prophet thinks of all this, his mind goes out to the greatness of God and this is the way he concludes (Verse 16):

**I hear, and my body trembles,
my lips quiver at the sound;
rottenness enters into my bones,
my steps totter beneath me.
I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us.
{Hab 3:16 RSV}**

He sees the problem and he knows it is coming. The fearsomeness of it grips him, and he feels the pressure. But that is not all. He adds (Verses 17-19):

**Though the fig tree do not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.
God, the LORD, is my strength;
he makes my feet like hinds' feet,
he makes me tread upon my high places.
{Hab 3:17-19 RSV}**

Have you discovered that? That though the problem remains and the pressure is still there, there can be a strengthening of the inner man that

ZEPHANIAH: The Day of the Lord's Wrath

by Ray C. Stedman

It was Zephaniah's lot to speak on the most unpleasant subject in the Bible – the judgment of God. This is not the only place where this theme occurs, of course, but it is the most concentrated treatment of the judgment of God as the whole book is devoted to this one theme.

There are many people who would like to rule this subject of judgment out of the Bible entirely. There are those who tell us that the God of the New Testament, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the kind of a God who can never move in judgment. His heart is so tender, his love is so gracious, his patience is so infinite that there never will be a time when God will move in vengeance.

It is remarkable, though, that in the New Testament the Lord Jesus spoke very frequently about the judgment of God. In the fourth chapter of Luke we are told that the Lord came back to his home town after preaching in Judea for many months. He had done many miracles and the word of his miracles had preceded him, so all the folks in Nazareth were very anxious to see him. He had not behaved like this when he was a boy growing up, and they were keen to see if he was going to do some mighty work when he came home. Luke tells us that Jesus went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and he was given the book of the prophecy of Isaiah to read. Opening the scroll he found the place (which happens to be the sixty-first chapter of our version of Isaiah) where it read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor," (Luke 4:18 RSV). That passage predicts the ministry of the Messiah. Then he stopped right in the middle of a sentence, right at a comma, and his last

word was that he had come to "proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord," (Luke 4:19 RSV). But Isaiah goes on to say, "and the day of vengeance of our God," (Isa 61:2a RSV). Now, the Lord did not read that because it was not the time to proclaim the day of vengeance of God. But the day of vengeance is coming, and it was the Lord himself who described the day of the Lord (recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke), and it is this day particularly that Zephaniah is talking about.

Zephaniah means "hidden of the Lord" and the prophet is speaking as if he were a representative of the remnant of faith – those relatively few people who will remain true to God and be faithful to his word through the time of trouble that is to come upon the earth. They will be hidden, as it were, by God himself among the nations of the earth and God will watch over them to keep them in faith during this time. And it is about these people that the book of Zephaniah is written, and, especially, of that coming day, the day of the Lord, which is vividly described by the prophet.

In Chapter 1, Zephaniah gives us **the character of God's vengeance**. It is not a pleasant passage. It begins after the prophet identifies himself as a great-great-grandson of one of the kings of Judah (Verses 2-6):

**"I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth," says the Lord.
"I will sweep away man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea.
I will overthrow the wicked;
I will cut off mankind**

**from the face of the earth,” says the Lord.
“I will stretch out my hand against Judah,
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusa-
lem;
and I will cut off from this place the rem-
nant of Baal [the false god of the peo-
ples around Israel]
and the name of the idolatrous priests;
those who bow down on the roofs
to the host of heavens; [the star worship-
ers]
those who bow down and swear to the Lord
and yet swear by Milcom; [one of the other
gods the surrounding nations]
those who have turned back from following
the Lord,
who do not seek the Lord or inquire of
him.” {Zeph 1:2-6 RSV}**

And Zephaniah says (Verse 7):

**Be silent before the Lord God!
For the day of the Lord is at hand;
{Zeph 1:7 RSV}**

There is a great deal of difference between *the day of the Lord* and *the Lord's day*. Sunday is “the Lord's day,” the day of resurrection, but *the day of the Lord* is something different and we should never confuse these terms. (It is like the difference between a horse chestnut and a chestnut horse.) *The Lord's day* was the day when our Lord arose from the dead and that is why we celebrate it on Sunday. But *the day of the Lord* is the day of the manifestation of God's hand directly in human affairs.

Notice the personal pronoun all through that passage: “I will sweep away everything.” I will sweep away man and beast.” “I will cut off mankind.” God is working through events in history, working through nations and armies and calamities of various sorts. His hand is hidden in the glove of history, but all the writers of Scripture agree that a day is coming when God will intervene directly in the affairs of men again.

A reference to this time, in the words of Jesus himself, is found in Matthew, where our Lord speaks of a time of great tribulation:

**“Then they will deliver you up to
tribulation, and put you to death; and you
will be hated by all nations for my name's
sake.” {Matt 24:9 RSV}**

And the Lord goes on to describe this time. But still, this is not the day of the Lord that Zephaniah is talking about, because this is a time when the nations will still be moving against one another in warfare. Then Jesus says (Matt 24:21-22):

**“For then there will be great tribulation,
such as has not been from the beginning of
the world until now, no, and never will be.
And if those days had not been shortened,
no human being would be saved;” {Matt
24:21-22a RSV}**

This is right in line with Zephaniah's prophecy. God says he will sweep everything off the face of the earth, “but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened,” {Matt 24:22b RSV}. Then Jesus says (Matt 24:24):

**“For false Christs and false prophets will
arise and show great signs and wonders, so
as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”
{Matt 24:24 RSV}**

And he says plainly (Verse 25):

**“Lo, I have told you beforehand.” {Matt
24:25 RSV}**

In other words, do not get excited about this. Then we come to the description of *the day of the Lord* (Matt 24:29-31):

**“Immediately after the tribulation of
those days the sun will be darkened, and
the moon will not give its light, and the
stars will fall from heaven, and the powers
of the heavens will be shaken; then will ap-
pear the sign of the Son of man in heaven,
and then all the tribes of the earth will
mourn, and they will see the Son of man
coming on the clouds of heaven with power
and great glory: and he will send out his
angels with a loud trumpet call, and they
will gather his elect from the four winds,
from one end of heaven to the other.” {Matt
24:29-31 RSV}**

The Apostle Paul speaks somewhat similarly and he uses the very term “the day of the Lord.” In First Thessalonians you will find one of several references that Paul makes to this great event. In Chapter 5, Verses 1-6, he says:

But as to the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. [Why not? Well, because they already had it in the Old Testament.] For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. {1 Th 5:1-6 RSV}

There are many other passages that also refer to *the day of the Lord* and they all agree that

- in the time when men are proclaiming peace, but preparing for war;
- in a time when they are holding to a form of godliness but denying the powers thereof;
- in a time when they are declaring that the problems of life are being solved, but when, actually, they are in greater danger than they have ever been before,

then the day of the Lord will come.

Now let us return to Zephaniah and see what he has to say about this (Chapter 1, Verses 7-9):

**Be silent before the Lord God!
For the day of the Lord is at hand;
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.
And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice –
"I will punish the officials and the king's
sons
and all who array themselves in foreign
attire ...
every one who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's house
with violence and fraud."
{Zeph 1:7-9 RSV}**

Now, what is this feast, and who are these guests that are invited to the day of the Lord?

Well, this is the great supper of God that is also described in Revelation 19, Verses 17-20, where John says:

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast ... {Rev 19:17-20a RSV}

This is the great supper of God. It is the birds and the vultures that are invited, to feast upon the bodies of men. There is another description of this in Ezekiel 39. The guests are the buzzards, the vultures, and the eagles called to feed upon the dead, the millions that are slain in this terrible day when God again moves directly in human affairs.

"Well, now," you say, "How can this be? How can the God of love – the God of the New Testament – do a thing like this? How can God, who loves mercy and is slow to anger, ever come to this place?" And there are many who tell us that we should eliminate these passages from the Bible. They say we should read our Bibles in much the same way that we read literature.

For instance, we read in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* of a character named Long John Silver. We read that he is a cruel, rapacious, untrustworthy individual. Now if, after reading that, somebody tells us that Long John Silver is really a great guy, that he is kind to his mother, and is a nice fellow once you get to know him, we do not believe this because we know Long John Silver and we know that he is not that kind of a man. Therefore, if anybody tells us that, we will not believe him. Someone with this attitude might go on to say, "I have come to know God as the God of love and the God of grace. Therefore, when I read in the Bible something that says he is a God of vengeance, and that he is going to destroy people, I just don't believe it. I just wipe that out. I say that

someone else has insinuated that, because that is not the kind of God I know.”

It is this kind of reasoning that suggests we should go through our Bibles and tear out every part that does not agree with our concepts of God. But what we have left, of course, is nothing more than what we like, what we think God ought to be like.

You can see how such an argument defeats itself. The very book that tells us that God is a God of love also says he is a God of vengeance. And any one who thinks carefully about himself and about love will understand why a God of love has to be a God of vengeance. For if we love someone, we hate everything that injures that person. We are against whatever threatens or destroys what we love. And the very love that moves the heart of God to pour himself out over the centuries in an unceasing effort to awaken man to his need and to hear the call of grace, is the same love that at last prompts him to eliminate those who refuse all the province of his grace, and identify themselves with that which is opposed to his will and to his work among men. Then he has nothing left to do but to destroy them. And that is why the prophet speaks so plainly about this.

Continuing in Zephaniah now, we read (Chapter 1, Verses 14-18):

**The great day of the Lord is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,
the mighty man cries aloud there.
A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.**
{Zeph 1:14-16 RSV}

And God says in stark frankness,

**I will bring distress on men,
so that they shall walk like the blind,
because they have sinned against the
Lord;
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.
Neither their silver nor their gold
shall be able to deliver them**

on the day of the wrath of the Lord.
{Zeph 1:17-18a RSV}

Now it is not easy for God to speak this way. He himself says that he takes no delight in the death of men. He says that he does not delight in judgment. Judgment, the prophet says, is his strange work. His heart delights in mercy. But eventually,

- if his will is to be done,
- if earth at last is to break out into the glorious freedom of the promises of the prophets concerning man,
- if the dreams that lie hidden away in the hearts of men of a warless world,
 - a time of prosperity,
 - a time when joy floods the earth,
 - when men live together in glorious harmony,
 - when even the animals lose their enmity toward one another, and
 - peace shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea –
- if that is ever to come,

then God must deal with the entrenched evil of men.

This is why the coming of the day of vengeance of our God is absolutely certain. The prophets warn of this and the word speaks very clearly, all through the New Testament as well, that when God's grace is turned aside, God's judgment awaits.

In Chapter 2 we trace **the extent of God's vengeance.** Certain nations are named (Verses 8, 9):

**“I have heard the taunts of Moab
and the revilings of the Ammonites,**
{Zeph 2:8a RSV}

**“Moab shall become like Sodom,
and the Ammonites like Gomorrah,**
{Zeph 2:9b RSV}

The Ethiopians are mentioned in Verse 12 and the Assyrians in Verse 13. The interesting thing is that although all these nations are long since lost in the dust of history, the promise of this day of the Lord is in the future. How can this be? Why are these nations mentioned here when they have long been buried in antiquity? How can they yet be destroyed in a day to come? The answer is, of course, that these nations are used symbolically throughout the Scriptures as well as literally. They were literally destroyed in the course of history, but they are used symbolically with reference to the full and final meaning of the day of the Lord:

- Moab, for instance, is always a picture of the flesh of man – his dependence upon his own resources.
- The Ammonites picture the same thing.
- Ethiopia is a picture of the stubbornness, or the intransigence of man. “Can the Ethiopian change his color?” the Scriptures say.
- And Assyria is man in his arrogance and his pride.

Now God says he is against all these things, and as he moves at last in judgment on the human race, these are to be eliminated.

In Chapter 3 you will notice **how extensive God's wrath is** (Verses 1, 2):

**Woe to her that is rebellious and defiled,
the oppressing city!
She listens to no voice,
she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the Lord,
she does not draw near to her God.
{Zeph 3:1-2 RSV}**

This could be said of almost all the cities of the earth. As you read on you see that this is a world-wide matter (Verse 8):

**“Therefore wait for me,” says the Lord,
“for the day when I arise as a witness.
For my decision is to gather nations,
to assemble kingdoms,**

**to pour out upon them my indignation,
all the heat of my anger;
for in the fire of my jealous wrath
all the earth shall be consumed.”
{Zeph 3:8 RSV}**

What for? What is God after? Is he just interested in getting even, wreaking his vengeance at last upon the stubbornness and willfulness of men? Is he visiting the earth with this terrible hurricane of destruction in order to leave it nothing but a smoking ruin, barren and desolate, without inhabitants? No, that is what men would do if there were another world war. We would leave the earth desolate, but God will never leave it that way.

After you read the description of all the darkness, gloom, and slaughter – after the desolation and the destruction, what is the next word? Verse 14:

**Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
{Zeph 3:14 RSV}**

Why? You see, this is the new order that is to follow. This is why God is dealing with men, so that he might bring out songs instead of sorrow, service instead of selfishness, security instead of slavery. This will be the consequence of God's judgment. And we are told that the Lord God is in the midst of the people, not for judgment, as he is in Chapter 3, Verse 5:

**The Lord within her is righteous,
he does no wrong; {Zeph 3:5a RSV}**

But here in Verse 17:

**The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
{Zeph 3:17-18a RSV}**

Furthermore, the Lord says (Verses 18-20):

**“I will remove disaster from you,
{Zeph 3:18b RSV}
... deal with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame**

**and gather the outcast, {Zeph 3:19b RSV}
... change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
 {Zeph 3:19c RSV}
At that time I will bring you home,
 {Zeph 3:20a RSV}**

What a picture this is!

Specifically, of course, it has to do with the remnant of Israel, but it is a picture of God's loving care during any time of despair or darkness. It is my personal belief that this is something that the church does not see. The church is caught away before these events occur but, in the time that follows, God calls back the remnant of Israel to himself and they will at last break out into the song of the redeemed. Now the singing here is led by the Lord himself in a marvelous, glorious melody of joy. It reminds me of that beautiful passage in the Song of Songs:

**For lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come.
 {Song 2:11-12a RSV}**

That is what follows the time of judgment. But no one but the redeemed can join in that song.

Elizabeth Browning, in her poem, *The Seraphim*, describes the angels watching the work of the Son of God on earth, and, at last, seeing with stupefied amazement the incarnation and ultimately the cross, one angel looks at this host of ransomed souls and he says to the other, "Hereafter shall the blood bought captives raise their passion song of blood." And the other one replies, "And we extend our holy, vacant hands toward the throne and cry,

'We have no music.'" You see, only the redeemed can sing like this. After the darkness, after the slaughter, after the terrible destruction comes the time of the singing. That is what God is after in your life. That is possible on the level of the Spirit right now when God deals death's stroke against the flesh within us and brings us through that painful experience of saying "No" to the ego and the self-life. There follows the time of the singing, the time that he is after, the reason he takes us through the pain and the darkness. What you see to be true of the individual life will also be true on the whole wide canvas of history as God brings human history to an end.

That is what Zephaniah tells us about. Although it is a painful scene, one that begins in darkness and gloom, it ends in joy and gladness and singing.

Prayer:

Our Father, we know that these words are true, and how they make us tremble, how they make us solemn and quiet before you. What a God – a God who sees everything, who deals in righteousness, a God who loves but who cannot be turned aside, who will not water down his precepts, who will not cater to our weakness though he supplies us with fullness of strength. Lord, help us to walk softly before you and to love you with all our heart and mind and strength. We pray that in our own lives we may come to the day of singing when our hearts are filled with gladness as we anticipate this coming day when the earth shall break forth into beauty and glory. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

HAGGAI: Some Words to Discouraged Carpenters

by Ray C. Stedman

When you read this book you will notice that the theme of the prophecy of Haggai is “get busy and build the Lord’s house.” Now, although you may be crowded in your church, and have need of more space, the church building is not the house of God. In Haggai’s day it was a picture or shadow of the true house of God. These shadows (as we learned in the New Testament) pointed toward the true house of God which is the believer, and, collectively, all believers – forming the great house of God which is the church, the place where God dwells. That is what God is interested in building.

In Haggai’s day the Lord’s house was the temple, and you may remember that they had some difficulty building the temple after the Babylonian captivity. (This prophecy should be read in connection with the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah which appear much earlier in the Old Testament.) As many of the prophets had prophesied, the Babylonian nation was raised up and came sweeping down across the land of Israel. They captured Jerusalem, the king was taken captive, his eyes were put out, and he was also carried as a captive to Babylon and there, just as the prophecy of Jeremiah had foretold, the people stayed in bondage exactly 70 years. This, by the way, is one of those remarkable prophecies which have already been fulfilled, so you can see how God speaks through the prophets what no man could speak on his own.

After the 70 years were fulfilled, Daniel, who prophesied in Babylon, tells us that God began to move to bring the people back to the land. They came first under Zerubbabel, who is mentioned in the opening verse of this prophecy of Haggai. Zerubbabel, who was descended from kings, was the captain of the remnant that came back from Babylon. When they came to Jerusalem, they

found the city in ruins. The walls were broken down and the temple was utterly destroyed.

They began work first of all on the temple. Although they were still under the domain and rule of the Babylonians, they had permission from the king of Babylon to begin work on this temple. They started working, and they managed to lay the foundations and perhaps just one row of stones – a much smaller temple than the original one that Solomon had built. Then the work began to lag, and after a while it ceased altogether and for 15 years nothing was done on the temple. It is at this point that Haggai the prophet rises up to speak.

Haggai delivers four messages to these people – all within the space of about a year and a half, all concerning the building of the temple. But their deeper message, as I have already suggested, applies to us, the temple or the great house of God that he has been building for 20 centuries now. So we will read this prophecy not only as a message of the prophet to the people of his day about building the temple, but also as a message to the people of God everywhere concerning their responsibility in building the great house of God, the temple that the Holy Spirit has been building out of human hearts.

In this prophecy there are four messages dated by the calendar. Each one reveals an excuse given by the people for not working on the temple – both their excuse and the real reason behind that excuse.

The first message includes all of Chapter 1. We read (Verses 1 and 2):

In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah [governor under the King of Babylon] and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, “Thus

says the Lord of hosts: This people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.” {Hag 1:1-2 RSV}

The prophecy was addressed to the civil governor and to the religious heads, Joshua and Zerubabel, and in this verse the prophet repeats the excuse that the people gave for leaving the temple abandoned for 15 years. They were saying “Why, the time has not yet come. There has been a mistake in figuring the 70 years that Jeremiah prophesied. There’s no use doing anything now because God is not ready yet.” But read the answer God gives to their excuse (Verses 3-5):

Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts Consider how you have fared.” {Hag 1:3-5 RSV}

In other words, God says, “Is the problem really that you think it’s not yet time for me to work? Well, it’s amazing that you think it is time for me to work in helping you to build your house. How about mine?” And he rather ironically suggests that the real reason the work of God has lagged is that they are all wrapped up in their own affairs. They have put God’s work second and their own needs first.

They had forgotten something. The fact that they were there in the land at all proves that God’s time had come. They would not have been back there if those 70 years had not been fulfilled. The real reason, therefore, was that they were not willing to put God first. Their own comforts, and their own convenience and their own desires came first.

Now God says that he wants them to see what the results are. Three times he says, “Consider ... consider ... consider.” Notice in Verses 5 and 6:

“Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages earns wages to put them into a bag with holes.” {Hag 1:5-6 RSV}

They had inflation in those days too! He is saying that all this labor and work that they put out did not give them what they expected. “You are

trying to get prosperous,” God says “but prosperity eludes you. You are trying to satisfy yourself, but you never find fulfillment. There is always something missing.” Verses 7-11:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory, says the Lord.” {Hag 1:7-8 RSV}

Why?

“You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves each with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought upon the land and the hills, upon the grain, the new wine, the oil, upon what the ground brings forth, upon men and cattle, and upon all their labors.” {Hag 1:9-11 RSV}

God says, “I am behind this.” Why did he do this? Why did he short-circuit all their efforts to achieve prosperity? Was it because he was trying to punish them? No, God never punishes in that sense. He was trying to wake them up. He was trying to show them that there was an infallible rule that runs all through Scripture and all through life, that men are constantly trying to reverse, that says, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well,” (Matt 6:33 RSV). The way to have what you need in terms of physical food and material shelter and the necessities of life is to give your major concern and interests not to these, but to advancing God’s work. That is what you are here for. You have a Father in heaven who knows your needs along this line, and he is perfectly able to supply them, and he will as long as your interest is first of all in his work.

That is right up to date, is it not? That is calling us back to this great principle that the New Testament is reminding us of that we are not our own, but we were bought with a price {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20a}. We belong to him. We are here to advance his cause, his interests. We are here to build the house of God. That is why God has left us here in this world, so that we might be his in-

struments in this work of erecting a great temple of human beings which will be and is a habitation of God, the dwelling place of God.

Is that first in our interests? Is that what we live for? Or is it that we might get a new color TV set or a better automobile or a more beautiful home or better drapes or a softer rug? Not that all those things are denied to Christians. Let us understand that. God, in his grace and goodness sometimes gives wealth to Christians and they are to use it, as Paul reminds us in his letter to Timothy, in being generous, giving richly and freely.

But God has called us primarily to put the building of the house of God first – not the brick and mortar building, but the church of God. There are people all around us that the Holy Spirit intends to add to the house of God if we are his instruments and channels of his working. And the great question that Haggai confronts us with is: how can we find time to advance our interests so eagerly, so carefully, so thoughtfully – spending so much time thinking about advancing our own material gain and then excuse ourselves from the work of building the house of God by saying, “It isn’t time yet”?

Do you remember that story of William Carry, the father of modern missions, who in 18th century England got concerned about India, far across the sea, and prayed that God would somehow reach those poor, benighted heathen who had never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. He tried to stir up interest in the churches of England, but he met everywhere with adamant resistance to his idea. In one meeting, Carry made an impassioned plea to be sent out as a missionary. Even though he was a simple cobbler and uneducated, he was willing to go. One of the elders of the meeting pointed his finger at Carry and said, “Young man, sit down. When God wants to evangelize the heathen, he’ll do it without your help!” This was the kind of stubborn resistance that Carry met with, but he was a man who could not be defeated. He was used of God to begin the great modern missionary movement that has not stopped yet, because he was one who was concerned about God’s work. There is an excitement that comes into our lives when we really, genuinely put the affairs of God first, and do not even bother to think about the provision of our own needs. This is why God says, “Now is the accepted time, today is the day,” {cf, 2 Cor 6:1-2}.

So we read that they started this work (Verses 12-15):

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared before the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord’s message [and what a message], “I am with you, says the Lord” [you can count on that]. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the ... governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month. {Hag 1:12-15 RSV}

How long did the work last? Three weeks. And then it ground to a halt again. Notice the calendar (Chapter 2, Verses 1-3):

In the second year of Darius the king [that is, the same year] in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, [21 days later] the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, “Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?” {Hag 2:1-3 RSV}

Now God was repeating what the people were saying. They had gotten started and the temple had begun to go up. There was a bustle of excitement until an old man came down to watch the work. He had been a child when they were carried captive into Babylon and had seen the temple of Solomon in all its great glory, and as old men sometimes do, he was living in the past. And he said, “Do you call this a temple? This heap of ruins here? I saw Solomon’s temple, and what you are building here is nothing compared to that. All the gold and silver that was in that temple – it was amazing! And you don’t even have any gold or silver. How are you going to decorate this temple?” The people got discouraged and they said, “You know, he’s right. We don’t have any gold or silver. We don’t have

anything to make this temple beautiful. What's the use? Why work?" So they quit.

But the Lord said (Verse 4):

"... take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord;" {Hag 2:4b RSV}

On what basis, Lord?

"Work, for I am with you," {Hag 2:4c RSV}

That is always God's answer. "Work, for I am with you. Don't worry about the fact that things don't look as good as they ought to." Verses 5 and 6:

"according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit abides among you; fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations," {Hag 2:5-7a RSV}

When God says he will shake the heavens and the people and the earth, he is not speaking literally, but figuratively. He means that he is going to rearrange the whole historical picture (Verses 7 and 8):

"... so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine." {Hag 2:7b-8a RSV}

"You don't need to worry about that. I've got all we need of that. And if I wanted this house decorated with gold and silver, I could stack it up in piles here on your back step. But that isn't the kind of glory I have in mind. I am going to fill this house, so that (Verse 9):

"The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts." {Hag 2:9 RSV}

God is like that. He says, "Look, you are discouraged because you think what you are doing

won't amount to anything. But don't stop the work because of that. I have a different plan in mind. This house, little as it is, unpretentious as it is, without gold or silver, is actually going to have greater glory than the glory of the previous temple."

Now those words were fulfilled. Do you know how? Into that house one day came one who found it filled with money changers, and overthrowing the tables, he drove them out and said, "You make it [my Father's house] a den of robbers," (Matt 21:13b RSV). And he cleansed it and made it a place of prayer. And he filled it with the glory of his teaching, standing in the midst of it and saying things such as people had never heard before. And he utterly changed the whole life of that nation and every nation in the world by what he said. And from out of that house, changed and altered a little by Herod, but the same house, there went forth a glory that has never ceased, a different kind of glory.

Do not stop the work because it does not compare with something that was there in the past. This is one of the problems of God's people. We are always looking back to the past. We say, "Oh, for the days of D. L. Moody. Oh, for the days of the church where we came from. Oh, what we did then." And we are wistful and long to have it just that way.

But the great lesson that God wants to impress upon us is that God always does a new and different work. The thing that is coming in the future is always better for our present situation than the past. We do not need to hang on to these things of tradition. God is saying, "Keep on working, I am with you. And when I am in your midst you don't need to worry about how it is going to turn out. It may be different but it will always be better."

Well, that took effect for awhile, and then what? Well, they quit again. In Verses 10-12 we read:

On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month [that is, two months later] in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Ask the priests to decide this question, 'If one carries holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and touches with his skirt bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy?'" {Hag 2:10-12a RSV}

This was in accordance with the Law of Moses. If you get into a situation, Moses said, where you do not know what to do, go ask the priest to declare the appropriate principle and then make an application from that. It is the same thing we are told to do. When you get into a situation that you do not know how to handle, go to the word of God and get the principle that covers that situation.

And this was the question they were to ask the priest. "If you have something clean (holy) about you and you touch something else – a bit of bread or wine or oil – does that become holy because you've got holy flesh on you? Does the unclean thing become holy?" And the priests answered correctly, "No." Well, then he put another question (Verse 13):

Then said Haggai, "If one who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" {Hag 2:13a RSV}

The priests answered, "Yes, it does." What is this all about? What is the problem here? Well, as we read on we will see (Verses 14-18):

Then Haggai said, "So is it with this people, and with this nation before me, says the Lord; and so with every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean. Pray now, consider what will come to pass from this day onward. Before a stone was placed upon a stone in the temple of the Lord, how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten; when one came to the winevat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. I smote you and all the products of your toil with blight and mildew and hail; yet you did not return to me, says the Lord. Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider." {Hag 2:14-18 RSV}

What does he mean? If you read between the lines, you can see again what the people were saying. They were saying, "Look, we've been working on the temple for two months. You said that the reason we were having such a hard time materially

and physically was that we weren't working on the temple. We have been working on the temple now for two months, 21 days, and we are still having a hard time. What is the matter? Why work? Nothing is happening. It doesn't work." They were the same kind of people we are. They wanted instant results: "I straightened everything out yesterday. Today everything ought to go great."

One time when a couple came to see me for marital counseling, the man said, "We just can't live together. She is always blowing up and exploding and bawling me out about everything." I examined the situation and found out that the major problem was that here was a man who paid no attention to his wife; he utterly neglected her and she would take it just so long and then she would blow up. So I told him this and he said, "I think you are right." So he went home to do something about it. The next morning he called me up and said, "Well, I took her out to dinner last night and we had a great time. She enjoyed it so much I was sure you were right. But this morning she blew up again. The thing doesn't work." I had to say to him what Haggai said to these people. Do you think the deep pollution of sin that has been going on for years is going to be cured overnight when you start doing the right thing? Do you think that all these habits of wrong thinking that have been deeply ingrained in your mind are suddenly going to be eliminated simply because you begin to operate on the right basis? No, we need time and patience. "Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart," (Gal 6:9 RSV).

Now notice this word of encouragement (Verse 19):

"Is the seed yet in the barn? [You plant your seed and you do not expect instant results, do you? You expect to wait until the harvest. It takes time for the seed to grow.] Do the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree still yield nothing. From this day on I will bless you." {Hag 2:19 RSV}

Do not worry. Keep on. Do not stop work just because you do not see instant results. If you are doing the right thing, keep on doing it and the results will come.

Once again, on the very same day, they needed a little encouragement and so another message came, the last one (Verses 20-24):

The word of the Lord came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month, "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his fellow. On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring [the sign of authority]; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts." {Hag 2:20-24 RSV}

Now here was a special word of encouragement to the leader while the people were yet under the authority of Babylon, although they were back in the land and building the temple again, they were still beset by many problems. Everywhere they looked there was the sign of the authority of the foreign power. They saw chariots everywhere and soldiers marching through the streets and all the signs of bondage, and their hearts grew fearful and they said, "When will it ever be: Are we ever going to be free?" God says, "Don't worry. I have a program going that will reverse the whole order of things. I will destroy the power of this kingdom. I will bring their chariots to naught. I will break you loose from the bondage of this people and I am going to take Zerubbabel, the man who stands as the leader of the people and make him a signet ring." Now Zerubbabel was of the royal line, the line of David, and, though these words were not literally fulfilled in Zerubbabel, they were spoken of his descendent who was Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, God fulfilled all these words. He took the son of

David and made him a signet ring by which all the nations shall ultimately be ruled.

Now in what way is all this a word to us?

It is a word of encouragement in a day of darkness, a word of rising up and acting now:

- Build now. Do not wait. The work of God needs to be done now.
- Not next year.
- Not ten years from now.
- Now!
- Are your homes open?
- Are your lives ready?

A great harvest field is before us here and around the world. Opportunities abound as they never have before. Is this first in your prayers? Is it first in your interests that this great harvest may be reaped? Are your homes open to the students that throng our campuses that they might come to Christ? And to your neighbors so that they can come in and find a friendly heart and a ready smile and a ready ear to listen?

How much are we ready to build the house of the Lord?

This is always the key, is it not?

This is the work of the Spirit.

When all that man has done around us crumbles into nothing and all the vast civilizations and great secrets of nature are forgotten, the one thing that will last is the work of the Lord, the house of God that he is building now.

Are we investing in eternal things? That is Haggai's word.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that we may listen with keen ears to these words and hear them anew in our own lives, making application to our own hearts as the Spirit of God prompts us in this moment. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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ZECHARIAH: You Return To Me, ... I'll Return To You!

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Zechariah has been called the Apocalypse of the Old Testament. Like the book of Revelation, Zechariah is a book of prophecy. Its theme is to set forth the program of God, which is also the theme of the book of Revelation. The difference is that in Zechariah Israel is in the foreground and the Gentile nations in the background, while in the book of Revelation the Gentile nations are in the foreground and the continuous thread that ties them together is the nation of Israel.

The first verse of Zechariah reveals in a very interesting way this focus on the nation Israel:

In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, the prophet, {Zech 1:1a RSV}

We usually read through these opening verses without thinking of them as having much significance, but remember that Hebrew names mean something. The most outstanding example, perhaps, of the significance of Hebrew names is Methuselah, the name of the oldest man who ever lived. His name means "when he dies it will come" – and when he died, the flood came, just as that name prophesied.

Here, we have three names that are very significant. Zechariah means "God remembers" and Berechiah, his father's name, means "God blesses" and his grandfather's name Iddo, means "At the appointed time." That is the theme of the book of Zechariah. It is a book of encouragement to the people of Israel.

Zechariah was a contemporary with Haggai, one of the prophets who ministered to the remnant who had returned from captivity in Babylon. Although they were back in Jerusalem rebuilding the temple and the city, they were still vassals of

Babylon, still subject to the Gentile nations around them, without much hope for the future. It was a discouraging, depressing time, and a spirit of dark pessimism gripped these people. And Zechariah comes to them in the midst of their depression, with this announcement that is even wrapped up in his name and ancestry: Jehovah blesses, Jehovah remembers at the appointed time. What an encouragement those names must have been.

At the beginning of the first chapter there is a brief outline of the book. This is often true of the Bible, and if you look for these little outlines, you can often find a brief summary of the message of the book in the opening sections. Here it is broken up in a dramatic way by the name of God, the Jehovah of hosts. It is one of the unusual names of God. Jehovah of hosts, that is, the God of the masses – the God of all the armies, whether they be angel armies, human armies, demonic armies, makes no difference. The stars are also called the hosts. This is the God who is sovereign over all the masses, whoever they may be. And this name is repeated three times (Verses 2-3):

"The LORD [Jehovah] was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus says the LORD [Jehovah] of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts." {Zech 1:2-3 RSV}

Three times that name is repeated. What is said before each of those repetitions marks the divisions of this book. It falls into three brief sections. The first one is included in,

"The LORD was very angry with your fathers." {Zech 1:2 RSV}

That marks the first division, comprising just the first six verses which describe God's displeasure with his people. Then we have,

“Return to me.” {Zech 1:3b RSV}

And that marks the second division, covering from Chapter 1, Verse 7, clear over to Chapter 6, Verse 15, speaking of God's deliverance of his people. Then, Chapters 7 through 14 make up the third division which is an exposition of these words:

**“and I will return to you, says the LORD.”
{Zech 1:3d RSV}**

That is always God's way. If you find yourself straying away from his presence and, as a result, your life grows cold, your faith grows dim, you grow discouraged, you are defeated, you find yourself exposed to all types of temptations and prey to every evil thought, what must you do? “Return to me, says the LORD, and I will return to you.” If you want God back in your life, with all the glory of his presence, then come back to him. That is always the formula.

As I have indicated, the first six verses are just a brief resume of God's quarrel with his people, the fact that they have displeased him, as we have seen all through the Old Testament. There is no need to dwell upon this. God is always displeased when his people turn from him, whether we are looking at God's people of Israel or God's people of the church.

Then, beginning with Verse 7, **a most remarkable vision** was given to the prophet. A vision that is divided up into a series of eight, which were all given to Zechariah on the same night, and these also fall into major divisions. These three divisions are like three acts in a great drama that was revealed to the prophet. You might think of them as God's *First Nighter Program*, because they all came on one night to the prophet. As we read them, we can imagine we have been invited to attend this drama that God is unfolding to the prophet. God is the author, Zechariah is the producer, and we are the audience.

The vision covers all the time from Zechariah's day through the present, clear on to the coming of the Lord.

1. The first act is made up of two visions:

- One is a vision of a watcher looking out over the people in the valley. The watcher is riding upon a horse and with him are gathered other riders upon horses. And the angel of the LORD interprets the vision to the prophet. The meaning of this is simply that Israel was that people down in the valley, symbolized here for us by the lowly myrtle shrub, and they could see that they were in a shadowed place. It was a time of despair and difficult days. But what they could not see – what the prophet was revealing to them – was this unseen one who was watching the whole procedure and saw what was going on and had with him the great resources to meet their need in the hour of despair.
- Now the second vision in the first act speaks of four smiths, or workmen – actually, carpenters. It was a vision of four horns and four smiths. This is also interpreted to the prophet. He sees that like the riders in the vision before, these are divine agents, angels perhaps, who are sent out to terrify the nations. So we see that this is a picture of the desperate need of Israel to return to God. Israel was discouraged at the display of the powers and forces in opposition against them. But what they did not see was the resources. They were unconscious of the divine agents that were there to move on their behalf and that is what God revealed to them.

2. So the curtain falls at the end of Act One, and, in the second chapter, it rises on Act Two, which is one single vision:

It is a vision of a man with a measuring line in his hand who went out to measure the city of Jerusalem and as he did this, the interpreting angel said to the prophet (Verses 4-5):

**“... ‘Jerusalem shall be inhabited as
villages without walls, because of the**

multitude of men and cattle in it. For I will be to her a wall of fire round about, says the LORD, and I will be the glory within her.” {Zech 2:4b-5 RSV}

This is followed by a beautiful description of the days of blessing that are to come upon Israel, all to be literally fulfilled as Israel would be brought some day back into the place of blessing in the land of Israel.

This is the picture of God's promise to those who return. It is always one of blessing. Come back, and blessing flows from that act of return, for God is the center of blessing. Blessing can come from no other source.

If your life is empty, you need God. If you are a Christian and your life is empty, you need to return to God. It is out of the resources of God that blessings come. The man with a measuring line is simply a very descriptive symbol of the unlimited, measureless blessing that God is ready to pour out into the life of one who comes back into a relationship with him.

3. Act Three now opens with five more visions. Here is the way to return to God, acted out for you in these five visions.

- In the first scene, Joshua the high priest is revealed, standing before God. Opposed to Joshua is Satan, the adversary. Now the people could see the adversary. They knew that Satan was against them. But what they could not see was the advocate, the one who stood on their behalf and who ministered for them. Then we see, in this wonderfully moving vision, how Joshua is cleansed; his filthy garments are taken off and he is clad in new, clean garments and the statement is made that God would do this simply because he chose to do so. “I have chosen Jerusalem,” he says, just as he says of us. Why does he bless us? Because he has chosen to do so.

Then in the latter part of this Chapter 3 is a wonderful vision that looks forward to the work of Christ upon the cross (Verse 8):

“Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men of good omen: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. For behold, upon the stone which I have set before Joshua, upon a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.” {Zech 3:8-9 RSV}

This is a marvelous prophecy of the coming of the one who would be Jehovah's servant, the Branch. One who would have the marks of the crucifixion and who would be the instrument by which the guilt of the land was removed in a single day. And in that day blessing would flow out as God's manifestation of his right to cleanse the sinner without charging him, accusing him, or condemning him. Cleansing is the first step in the way back.

- Then in Scene Two we see what follows the cleansing of God – the power of the Holy Spirit – in the vision of the lampstand and the olive tree. It pictures the Spirit-filled life. Oil always refers to the Holy Spirit, and here were olive trees continually dripping oil out of their branches into a lampstand, and it was burning brightly. What wonderful symbolism of the fact that the Lord within us is constantly supplying that inner strengthening that makes it possible for us to burn brightly as light in the midst of a dark generation.
- Scene Three opens on a flying scroll, a gigantic scroll with Scriptures written on both sides, and with curses against the thieves and the blasphemers among the people. It pictures the judgment of Israel, the going forth of the Law in the midst of corruption. Now they could see the corruption but they could not see the Law. So this is God's encouragement in the hour of darkness when all they could see was corruption, and everything going to pieces. What they could not see was God's agency

working to bring a curse upon that lawlessness to bring it to an end.

- Then, in Scene Four, Zechariah sees a woman in an ephah. An ephah is like a big bushel basket, and while the prophet and the angel watched, wings were given to this basket and it flew away to the land of Babylon. What does this strange thing mean? If you had a vision like that you would wonder what you had been eating the night before! But the prophet knows that a meaningful vision has been given to him. As he meditates upon it, he can understand it because it contains terms that are used elsewhere in the Scripture. Whenever a woman appears symbolically in Scripture, there is always reference to something wrong in the realm of religion. (I did not invent that, the Scriptures did.) Here, then, is the picture of the judgment of the false faith, the false church, very much as we find in the book of Revelation where a woman who is the false church is called Babylon the great. Zechariah sees the same thing; God's judgment upon hypocritical religion, false faith.
- Then in the final scene, the prophet sees the four chariots which rode out upon the earth, very much like the vision in Revelation of the four horsemen who ride and bring judgment upon the world. The curtain rings down, then, on this great drama of redemption of the future. It is God's great symbolic play of the way back to him – first by cleansing, then by the filling of the Holy Spirit, then the putting away of evil in its various forms and finally the judgment of the entire earth as God brings the evil of men to the seat of judgment.

Chapter 7 marks a **new division** in the book and in this chapter we find God speaking in a different way. Instead of using visions, he speaks to the prophet in a direct address. The heart of this section is the prophet's announcement in Chapter 8, Verse 3:

“Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem,

and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts, the holy mountain.” {Zech 8:3 RSV}

Here is a picture of God dwelling in the midst of his people. One day this is going to be fulfilled on the earth. In the land of Israel, what has been predicted is taking place, one startling event after another. The return of Jerusalem to Jewish control has prepared the way for the rebuilding of the temple on its old site. Scripture has long predicted that this would be one of the opening signs that God was about to move again to restore Israel at last to its place among the nations.

So we can read this section with great interest because it pictures something that is historically coming to pass, but we can read it with even greater interest because of what is spiritually symbolized in our own lives – God in the midst of us. What will the result be? God dwelling in us, renewing the inner man, a fountain of blessing pouring out in our lives, making us fruitful and effective and a blessing to all with whom we come in contact. That is the picture of these last scenes.

Chapters 7 and 8 link together in a plea of God to the people to be honest and open before him. It is again a rehearsal of their failures in his sight and then a reminder that while he is unfailing in his mercy and grace, he is unchanging in his standards. He always supplies what is necessary but he never lowers the standards. The people react as people often do, in these three ways:

- First (Chapter 7, Verse 11):

But they refused to hearken, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears that they might not hear. {Zech 7:11 RSV}

That is always the first step. They pretend not to hear.

- And then (Verse 12):

They made their hearts like adamant lest they should hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. {Zech 7:12a RSV}

They deliberately disobeyed.

- And then, finally, they began to play the hypocrite. The chapter opens with a question of the people, "Shall we keep on with these feasts that we began in Babylon?" And God's word to them is, "Why are you doing it? Are you celebrating these feasts because you mean to worship, or simply for a religious show?"

These are some of the very ways that we avoid the will of God today.

I remember years ago, one of my daughters was told by her mother to put on a green dress. It was interesting to watch her. She pretended at first not to hear. Then after her mother repeated the request several times, she openly rebelled and just said, "No. I don't want to wear that dress." And then, when it looked as though she would have to wear it, she came up to her mother and said, "Mother, I want to wear the green dress, but it is just too dirty," which was not true at all. In other words, she followed exactly the program that is outlined here. She pretended not to hear, she directly disobeyed, and then she played the hypocrite, and pretended that it was right and proper that she should disobey in this way.

How accurately this catches up the inherent deceitful tendencies of the human heart!

But now God goes on to point out that the result will be a blindness to truth; that ultimately, they will lose the ability to see and hear. This is set forth for us in Chapters 9 and 10 – the picture of the blindness of the people, and right in the midst of this, you have the first of several amazingly accurate glimpses of the coming of the Messiah (Chapter 9, Verse 9):

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt the foal of an ass.**
{Zech 9:9 RSV}

And you recall how those words were literally fulfilled in the New Testament when our Lord sent his disciples to find a colt and an ass and he mounted the ass and rode in triumph in the streets of Jerusalem with the people going before and shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt

21:9a RSV). Exactly and unconsciously fulfilling this prophecy of Zechariah, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious," and you will know him because he is riding on an ass accompanied with a colt. And yet, they did not know him and they did not recognize him when he came even in such a remarkable way. And as he drew near to Jerusalem, he wept as he looked out over the impenitent city and he said these remarkable words, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hid from your eyes," (Luke 19:42 RSV).

That is what happens when God moves in your life and you do not listen; you lose the ability to hear, and these things are hid from your eyes. And the judgment of blindness came upon these people.

In Chapter 11, after many rebuffs, the Messiah, again speaking through the prophet, says these amazing words (Verse 12):

Then I said to them, "If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver. {Zech 11:12 RSV}

How much did Judas contract for in betraying our Lord? Thirty shekels of silver. According to the Law if a slave was gored by an ox, the man who owned the ox could settle the whole matter by paying his neighbor thirty shekels of silver. Here the Messiah says to these people, "All right now, look if you want me, say so, but if you do not, give me my wages. What do you think I am worth to you?" And they weighed out for his price thirty shekels of silver.

Then comes the second result of an unrepentant heart and life (Chapter 11, Verses 15-17):

Then the LORD said to me, "Take once more the implement of a worthless shepherd. For lo, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the sound, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs.

**Woe to my worthless shepherd,
who deserts the flock!**

**May the sword smite his arm
and his right eye!**

**Let his arm be wholly withered,
his right eye utterly blinded!"**

{Zech 11:15-17 RSV}

In other words, if you refuse the true shepherd, God will allow you to have a false shepherd.

Again, it was the Lord Jesus who said to the Pharisees, the blinded Pharisees of his day, "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive," (John 5:43 RSV). This is that character whom Paul tells us about in Thessalonians called the man of lawlessness who comes to Israel as their deliverer and is received as the Messiah, but turns out to be the anti-Messiah, what we know as the anti-Christ, the false shepherd who comes when they reject and refuse the truth (cf, 2 Th 2:3 ff).

I have often wondered at the number of people who fall into anti-Christian cults that abound today. Why is it? Time after time I have found that they have done so because they have rejected some opportunity to hear the truth, and the result is that they fall into the clutches of what sounds like truth but is a lie. As Paul says, "God sends upon them a strong delusion to make them believe what is false ... who did not believe the truth." (2 Th 2:11-12 RSV).

Then we come to the last section, Chapters 12 through 14, where we have this beautiful picture of God finding a way to come back into the lives of his people. It opens with these words (Chapter 12, Verses 2-3):

"Lo, I am about to make Jerusalem a cup of reeling to all the peoples round about; it will be against Judah also in the siege against Jerusalem. On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples; all who lift it shall grievously hurt themselves. And all the nations of the earth will come together against it." {Zech 12:2-3 RSV}

According to the Scriptures, the darkest days for Jerusalem lie yet ahead. It shall become a burden to the nations, a grievous stone of stumbling, the prophetic Scriptures say. The peoples of the nations shall be gathered together about the city and Zechariah tells us that God will not allow himself to be ignored. He vows that he will break through into human consciousness and it will come about this way (Verses 9, 10):

"And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born." {Zech12:9-10 RSV}

Isn't that amazing? Israel in its blindness refusing its Messiah, refusing to recognize the one that God sent, never realizing that the one whom they pierced is coming again. And when he comes, he will speak these words (Chapter 13, Verse 6):

"And if one asks him, 'What are these wounds on your back?' [or, as other versions say, "in your hands"] he will say, 'The wounds I received in the house of my friends.'" {Zech 13:6 RSV}

This ties in with the vivid, descriptive sequence in Chapter 14 (Verses 1-4):

Behold, a day of the LORD is coming, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in the midst of you. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women ravished; half of the city shall go into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives ... {Zech 14:1-4a RSV}

You remember that was the place that Jesus stood on this earth. He went out with his disciples on the Mount of Olives and as they watched him, he was taken up out of their sight into the heavens, and an angel standing there said to them, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11b RSV).

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward. And the valley of my

mountains shall be stopped up, for the valley of the mountains shall touch the sides of it; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. {Zech 14:4-5a RSV}

Geologists have long known that one of the greatest faults in the earth's surface runs right through the Mount of Olives. The mountain shall be split in half, and then what? Well, when Israel has seen its Messiah and mourned for the one whom it pierced and has recognized with great mourning that it had turned its back upon the one sent of God, then we read (Chapter 14, Verses 8-9):

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter.

And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one. {Zech 14:8-9 RSV}

This is picturing the glory of the earth in the days when God shall reign through his Son as king.

The book closes then with these beautiful words (Verses 20-21):

And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the LORD." And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar; and every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of

them and boil the flesh of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day. {Zech 14:20-21 RSV}

Every commonplace thing is made to be holy unto the Lord.

Do you know that that is what God is promising to you? Every moment of your life, every commonplace thing is touched with the glory of his presence when he is in the center of your life. It will be visibly true on the earth someday. It can be spiritually true right now.

Prayer:

Our Holy Father, we thank you for the beauty of this vision and for the truth of it. We know that you are forever reminding us that your word is true. How foolish it is that we should ever turn from it or cast it aside or be indifferent to it or act as though it were of little importance. Lord teach us to examine ourselves and to walk in earnestness and honesty before you and to realize that all this is designed so that we may come into the understanding and the experience of a time of glory within such as we have never know before. Make these words to be the experience of each of us as we learn to walk before you our living God, and to know what it means to have the glory of the Lord within. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

MALACHI: Think Upon His Name

by Ray C. Stedman

Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, is separated from the book of Matthew by a silent period of more than 400 years, and yet, these two books tie together in a remarkable way. Historically, there was a long, long time when no voice spoke for God, no prophet came to Israel. There were no Scriptures being written. There was no encouragement from God. The heavens were silent. Still, history was going on, and remarkable things were taking place in Israel and among the Jews. New institutions were being formed that appear in the opening of the New Testament, but none of this is recorded for us in the sacred history. Malachi is the last of the Minor Prophets and the last prophetic voice to speak to Israel.

The last three books of the Old Testament – Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi – were all written after the return of the Israelites from their captivity in Babylon. The people did not come back from Babylon in one great big happy throng. There was a straggling return in two or three groups, the first one beginning in about 535 B.C. At that time, a handful of Jews fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah that the captivity would last for 70 years and they came back to the desolated, stricken city of Jerusalem. There they began to lay the foundations of the temple and it was Haggai's ministry fifteen years later to stir them up to continue that work and carry it through. The temple was completed during Zechariah's ministry and Ezra the priest then led another group back from Babylon.

The people had changed their entire way of life by that time. While they were in Israel, before the captivity, they had been sheep keepers for the most

part. But in Babylon they learned to be shopkeepers, and they have been merchants and shopkeepers ever since. So Ezra led this group back and again they had difficulties which are recorded in the historical book of Ezra.

Finally, the last return was accomplished under Nehemiah who in 445 B.C. led a group back to begin the laying of the walls of Jerusalem. The fascinating book of Nehemiah records the exciting experience of building the walls once again. Shortly after Nehemiah finished this task, Malachi appears, and it is interesting to compare the book of Nehemiah with the book of Malachi. Nehemiah is the conclusion of the historical section of the Old Testament which begins with Genesis. That is all history. Following Nehemiah are the poetic books, and then the prophetic books; in Malachi we come into the same period as is covered by Nehemiah.

This prophecy of Malachi was given by a man whose name means "my messenger." It is most suggestive that this last book of our Old Testament centers around the theme of a messenger of God and a prediction of the coming of another messenger. In this, therefore, we have a direct tie between Malachi and the New Testament. Chapter 3, for instance, begins with this prophecy:

"Behold, I send my messenger [in Hebrew that would be "Behold, I send Malachi"] to prepare the way before me, ..."
{Mal 3:1a RSV}

And as you discover in the book of Matthew, that messenger was John the Baptist. He came to prepare the way of the Lord and to announce the

coming of the second messenger from God. That second messenger is here in this prophecy in the next phrase:

“... and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant ...” {Mal 3:1b RSV}

It was the work of the Lord Jesus on the closing night of his ministry to take wine and bread with his disciples and holding the cup up to say, “This is my blood of the [new] covenant,” (Matt 26:28 RSV). The messenger of the covenant is the Lord Jesus himself.

“... in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap, [That is, ‘he burns and he cleanses.’] he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the LORD.” {Mal 3:1c-3 RSV}

Now that was the trouble with the people in Malachi’s day. They had forgotten the great and central message of God and, as we go back to the start of the book, we see that the prophet opens on that note (Chapter 1, Verse 1):

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. “I have loved you,” says the LORD. {Mal 1:1-2a RSV}

And that is always the message of God’s prophets. “I have loved you,” says the LORD. But the amazing thing is that these people answer the prophet with the words, “How hast thou loved us?” This entire book is a series of responses on the part of the people to the challenges of God. Seven times you will find them saying, “How? How does this happen? Prove it.” As we go through them you can see how they reveal the state of this people’s heart. Here is an outgoing God – and God is always this way, pouring out love – but here is a callous people who have become so indifferent and so unresponsive to God that in perfect sincerity they can say, “We don’t see this. What do you mean? Why do you say these things to us?” Throughout the book, this is the theme.

Now God’s answer to their question, “How have you loved us?” is to remind them that he loved them even back in the beginning of the race with Jacob and Esau. He says, “Take a look at the whole race. Esau’s history has been one of continual disturbance and disaster and trouble because,” he says, “I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau. If you want to understand my love, look at one who has not been enjoying my love. Look at Esau and see how different his story is from yours, even though Jacob and Esau were twin brothers.” Verses 2, 3:

“Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” says the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau;” {Mal 1:2c-3a RSV}

That troubles many people, but you find the explanation in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. There we are told that Esau was a despiser of his birthright and therefore was one who placed no value on spiritual matters (cf, Heb 12:16). He treated God with utter indifference. He viewed the things that God regarded as valuable as if they were trivial, and he treated them that way. It is because of Esau’s attitude that God says, “I have loved Jacob but I hated Esau.”

If you had known these two men, you would probably have loved Esau and hated Jacob. Jacob was the schemer, the big time operator, the supplanter, the usurper, the untrustworthy rascal. Esau was the big outdoor man, hearty, open, frank, strong, boasting in his exploits as a hunter and as a man of the out-of-doors. Of the two, he appears much the better man, but God says, “I loved Jacob because in the heart of Jacob is the hunger after the deeper things of life; Jacob wants something more than what is on the surface.” That always draws out the heart of God. And this is characteristic of the nation as well.

God goes on to charge the Israelites with specific problems and each time their response is, “What do you mean?” (Verse 6):

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name.” {Mal 1:6a RSV}

That is God's charge. You despise my name. They said, "How have we despised your name? We don't see this. What do you mean?" And the Lord answers (Verse 7):

**"By offering polluted food upon my altar."
{Mal 1:7a RSV}**

"Your attitude and your actions toward me are shoddy. You are content to give me just the trash, the defiled things." But they pursue it further:

'How have we polluted it?' {Mal 1:7c RSV}

And again God makes it very clear. Whenever you ask God how, he will tell you. God says (Verse 8):

"When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that no evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that no evil? Present that to your governor; ..." {Mal 1:8a RSV}

"Will you get by with that?" God says, "You people that are content to be shoddy about your religious experience, try living that way in your business life and see if you get by with it. And yet you say you are honoring my name. You are claiming to worship me and to be my people." The God of reality always cuts right through all the excuses and all the flimflam of hypocrisy right down to the real issue.

You see it again in the charges that he lays against them concerning their attitudes in worship. They were being professional about their worship. They were utterly bored (Verse 13):

"What a weariness this is,' you say, and you sniff at me, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering!" {Mal 1:13a RSV}

Now what is wrong here? Where has all the excitement gone? Well, these are always the symptoms of a people who think God will be content with something less than love. The great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... and your neighbor as yourself," (Matt 22:37, 22:39b RSV). Nothing else will satisfy God. But here is a people who have been surrounded by God's love and the recipients of his

grace for centuries and yet their hearts have become so blinded that they cannot even see how they are offending him and insulting him with what they do. The reason this is so is that their own love for him has died. The death of love is always reflected in a callous attitude and this is what you see here.

As you continue, you see that they were being hypocritical. God lays that charge against them in Chapter 2 and says that their hypocrisy was actually malignant. Their influence was turning others astray (Verse 8):

"But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction, ..." {Mal 2:8a RSV}

"You are telling them things that are wrong because you do not even know that they are wrong." This is the horrible aspect of this kind of living.

Then God charges them with having failed in their moral standards. They had begun to intermarry with the tribes around them and forgot that God had called them to be a special people. Divorce was prevalent throughout the land (Verse 13):

And this again you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards ... or accepts [the offering] with favor. {Mal 2:13a RSV}

And they ask, "Why does he not accept this?" Verses 14, 15:

Because the LORD was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. "For I hate divorce, says the LORD the God of Israel." {Mal 2:14b-16a RSV}

Sounds modern, doesn't it? Malachi had to minister to a nation in which divorce was widespread, and more than that, to a society in which moral confusion and cynicism was rampant. The prophet says (Verse 17):

You have wearied the LORD with your words. {Mal 2:17a RSV}

They are amazed at this charge. They say (Verse 17):

“How have we wearied him?”
{Mal 2:17c RSV}

The answer comes right from the shoulder:

By saying, “Every one who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD,”
{Mal 2:17d RSV}

Just recently I picked up an article that suggested that obscenity, pornography, the free expression of toilet language and filthy words (and so on) is good to have out in the open, that it is wrong to suppress this kind of language or to censure it in our literature. Another article said that parental discipline is an evil thing, that it does harm to children and destroys their incentive, and takes away their ability to develop properly.

All this sort of thing clearly reflects the moral confusion of our own day. And this is always the result when people offer anything less than a fervent love for God, when they think that ritual and religious hocus pocus is going to satisfy the heart of the Eternal. These people were asking (Verse 17):

“Where is the God of justice?”
{Mal 2:17f RSV}

Where is the God of judgment? Why, anybody can get by with anything! What do you mean? There aren't any standards. Everything is relative. There is no God of justice who says what is right and wrong. You see, we think all this is new, but even four hundred years before Christ, it was already old.

Then comes the great prophecy we have already looked at. Malachi lifts his eyes and sees that the heart of these people was so hardened that they could not be awakened even by these charges from God. They were utterly unaware that these things were happening. They had nothing to measure them against. So the prophet, looking across what turned out to be four hundred years, says,

The Lord will take care of this. He will send one to you who will wake you up, one who will tell you the truth. He will be a refiner's fire; he will burn through all the hypocrisy and the outward perfunctoriness of your religion and cut right through to the very heart of it. He will be like fullers' soap to those who are willing. He will cleanse them and set things right. You will be able to recognize him because a messenger will go before him to prepare the way, and then he will suddenly come to his temple. {cf, Mal 3:1-5}

And of course, all of this is beautifully fulfilled in the New Testament.

Then comes another series of charges in which the Lord speaks again about their lives. He says to them (Verse 7):

“Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.” {Mal 3:7b RSV}

And the people say, “How shall we return?” {Mal 3:7c RSV}. “We haven't gone anywhere. What do you mean return? We are serving you in your temple; we are bringing the proper sacrifices and offerings and we are going through the ritual, just as you outlined it. What do you mean, return to you?”

In this response, they indicate the utter blindness of their heart. They did not realize that though the outward form is right, the heart is far from God.

Then God said, “You are robbing me,” {Mal 3:8b RSV}. They said, “How are we robbing you?” {cf, Mal 3:8c}. God's answer was, “In your tithes and offerings,” {Mal 3:8d RSV}; “The whole nation of you is robbing me. You are using the money that I had blessed you with for your own purposes. Bring the tithes into the storehouse that there may be food in my house,” {cf, Mat 3:9-10}.

Now that verse is often wrenched from this Old Testament Scripture and used to establish a legalistic pattern of bringing in all the offerings into the church as the storehouse. Well, that is a distortion. This verse is addressed to Israel, within the limits of the system under which Israel lived in the Old Testament, and yet the principle is exactly true of the church. We should never take all that God has blessed us with and use it for our own advancement.

And God says, “When you do that, you are robbing me. You are robbing me of my right to use you to advance my cause.” That is what man is here for. It is quite possible for all of us as Christians to be quite perfunctory about fulfilling our religious obligations within the church and yet to live our lives out fulfilling nothing but our own self-centered goals. We may even achieve them and rise to the very top, but someday we will have to stand before the one who says, “All your life you have robbed me of my right to be myself in you.” That is why the appeal of the New Testament is to present your bodies as a living sacrifice unto God; that is what we are here for. That is what we are called for, and anything less is robbing him of his inheritance in the saints.

He goes on to charge them with still other offenses (Verses 13, 14):

“Your words have been stout against me, says the LORD. Yet you say, ‘How have we spoken against thee?’” {Mal 3:13 RSV}

The answer comes:

**“You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God.’”
{Mal 3:14a RSV}**

“What is the use of serving God? He does not do anything for me. I do not get anything out of this. What is the good of keeping his charge or of walking in mourning before the LORD of hosts?” {cf, Mal 3:14b}.

This sounds familiar, doesn't it? “Why, I have been trying to serve God; I have been a Christian now for ten years and I haven't gotten anything out of it.” This betrays the philosophy that God exists for man, not man for God, which is really blasphemy. Now that is one side of the picture.

But beginning with Verse 16 of Chapter 3 there is a wonderful little spotlight turned on a remnant, a group within, who were pleasing God. Thank God these are always there, and God's searchlight can always find them.

They are described this way (Verses 16-18):

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another; the LORD heeded and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared

the LORD and thought on his name. {Mal 3:16 RSV}

Then this beautiful verse:

“They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.” {Mal 3:17-18 RSV}

Notice the two things that mark those who are faithful in the day of apostasy:

- First, they “spoke with one another.” This does not mean that they just talked to each other. It means that they opened up to each other. They shared with one another. They encouraged each other. They confessed their weak points and prayed for one another. They let others see what they were like. Ah, yes, but that was on the horizontal level, wasn't it?
- But there was also the vertical: they “thought on his name.” That is always the great resource of the people of God. The name of God stands for all that he is, just as your name stands for all that you are. You sign a check and all that you are is laid on the line to the amount of that check because of your name. They thought on his name.

There is not a week that goes by that there is not a flood of propaganda crossing my desk, telling me what is wrong with the church, analyzing its weakness, and presenting some gadget or gimmick that will take all the blood and sweat and tears out of living as a Christian. We are being assaulted today with solutions for the problems of the weakness of the church that are not solutions at all. Here is the answer to the weakness of the church – “to think upon his name,” to reckon on the resources of God. You can take away all the props of the church, its buildings, its visual aids, its committees, its programs and everything else, and if you have a people who have learned to reckon on the name of God, you have not lost a thing. That is what this age needs to hear again.

Someone suggested recently that if we would introduce some of the electronic marvels that are available to businesses today, the job of preaching the gospel could be done electronically, and in just a few short years the whole world could be converted and our job would be done, electronically. I have also heard the suggestion that what we need to do is to take the words of the hymns and put them to popular, or rock music, and that is what the church needs. Now I know that many people would agree with this approach. They say we need to capture the spirit of the age and move with it and get modern – that is the missing element. Oh! No. God is the missing element. We are to think on his name, reckon on his power. The church is never so strong as when in utter weakness it casts itself back upon the resources of God and moves in dependence upon him.

Now the prophet lifts up his eyes again to see the day that is coming, not only the day 400 years later when the Lord Jesus will stand on the earth, but beyond that, across the great reaches of the centuries to the second coming of Christ, when all of God's program will be fulfilled (Chapter 4, Verse 1, 2):

“For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.” {Mal 4:1-2a RSV}

Now that is one cause with two effects. The Son of Righteousness shall rise. And for those who refuse him, there is a burning. But toward those who receive him, there is a healing. It is the same Son. (Verses 2-6):

“You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. {Mal 4:2b-3 RSV}

“Remember the law of my servant Moses, ... {Mal 4:4a RSV}

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.” {Mal 4:5-6 RSV}

You will recall that it was the last verse that was troublesome to the disciples and they said to the Lord, “How is it that the prophecy says that Elijah the prophet must first come?” And the Lord's answer was, “Elijah has already come and you did not recognize him.” He saw the look of astonishment on their faces and he made it clear that it was John the Baptist who came “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17b) and fulfilled his ministry in the initial coming. But he put it in such a way as to leave the clear inference that Elijah the prophet would still come before the second coming, (cf, Matt 17:10-13). Many identify the two witnesses in the eleventh chapter of Revelation as Elijah and Moses. How true this is, I will leave to you to decide. But at least there is the suggestion here that in some remarkable way, God intends to supply a ministry like Elijah's before the second return of the Lord Jesus.

Now notice this last thing:

- It is not without significance that at the end of all the literature of the Old Testament, the last word is “curse.” It is not a definite prediction, however, but a warning. This prophecy begins “Behold, I have loved you,” says the LORD,” and it ends with the warning that if the message of love is not received, the result is a curse.
- Now compare that with the last word of the New Testament. Leaving out the final salutation, it is the name of Jesus, the Lord Jesus. “Come, Lord Jesus!” {Rev 22:20b RSV}.

That is God's answer to the curse, isn't it? – his answer to the curse of the Law. He has “redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us,” {Gal 3:13 KJV}.

MALACHI: Think upon His Name

Thus the full answer of God is grace and love that pours out even more blessing, bringing us into the light and the knowledge of Christ. All the blessing that is wrapped up in that name is to be ours, and that is why the task of a Christian is to learn to think upon his name.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this reminder of the evil of being perfunctory

about faith, of being shoddy and hypocritical and bored with our faith. Lord, help us to know that your heart of love is never content until it obtains a response of love from us; may we love the Lord our God. May we love him in purity; may we love in joy and in sincerity, and remember that your name is our adequate resource in every situation. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.

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the Old and New Testaments
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The 400 Years between the Old and New Testaments

by Ray C. Stedman

At the close of the book of Malachi in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is back again in the land of Palestine after the Babylonian captivity, but they are under the domination of the great world power of that day, Persia and the Medio-Persian empire. In Jerusalem, the temple had been restored, although it was a much smaller building than the one that Solomon had built and decorated in such marvelous glory.

Within the temple the line of Aaronic priests was still worshipping and carrying on the sacred rites as they had been ordered to do by the Law of Moses. There was a direct line of descendancy in the priesthood that could be traced back to Aaron.

But the royal line of David had fallen on evil days. The people knew who the rightful successor to David was, and in the book of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, his name is given to us. It was Zerubbabel, the royal prince, yet there was no king on the throne of Israel; they were a puppet nation, under the domination of Persia. Nevertheless, although they were beset with weakness and formalism as the prophets have shown us, the people were united. There were no political schisms or factions among them, nor were they divided into groups or parties.

Now when you open the New Testament to the book of Matthew, you discover an entirely different atmosphere – almost a different world. Rome is now the dominant power of the earth. The Roman legions have spread throughout the length and breadth of the civilized world. The center of power has shifted from the East to the West, to Rome. Palestine is still a puppet state – the Jews never did regain their own sovereignty – but now there is a king on the throne. But this king is the descendant of Esau instead of Jacob, and his name is Herod the Great. Furthermore, the high priests who now sit

in the seat of religious authority in the nation are no longer from the line of Aaron. They cannot trace their descendancy back, rather, they are hired priests to whom the office is sold as political patronage.

The temple is still the center of Jewish worship, although the building has been partially destroyed and rebuilt about a half-dozen times since the close of the Old Testament. But now the synagogues that have sprung up in every Jewish city seem to be the center of Jewish life even more than the temple.

At this time the people of Israel were split into three major parties. Two of them, the Pharisees and Sadducees, were much more prominent than the third. The smaller group, the Essenes, could hardly be designated as a party. Not long ago, however, they came into great prominence in our time and took on new significance because they had stowed away some documents in caves overlooking the Dead Sea – documents which were brought to light again by the accidental discovery of an Arab shepherd boy and are known as *the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Now, what happened in these four hundred so-called “silent” years after the last of the inspired prophets spoke and the first of the New Testament writers began to write? You remember there is a word in Paul’s letter to the Galatians that says, “when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,” (Gal 4:4 RSV). In other words, the time of our Lord’s birth was God’s appointed hour, the moment for which God had been long preparing. Some of the exciting preparations took place during that time of “silence,” however, and you will understand your New Testament much better if you understand something of the historic events during the time between the Testaments.

After Malachi had ceased his prophesying and the canon of the Old Testament closed – that is, the number of the books in the Old Testament was fulfilled and the inspired prophets ceased to speak – God allowed a period of time for the teachings of the Old Testament to penetrate throughout the world.

During this time, he rearranged the scenes of history, much as a stage crew will rearrange the stage sets after the curtain has fallen, and when the curtain rises again there is an entirely new setting.

In about 435 B.C., when the prophet Malachi ceased his writing, the center of world power began to shift from the East to the West. Up to this time, Babylon had been the major world power, but this was soon succeeded by the Medio-Persian empire, as you remember from ancient history. This shift had been predicted by the prophet Daniel, who said that there would rise up a bear who was higher on one side than the other, signifying the division between Media and Persia, with the Persians the predominant ones (Dan 7:5).

At the height of the Persian power there arose in the country of Macedonia (which we now know as Greece), north of the Black Sea, a man by the name of Philip of Macedon, who became a leader in his own country. He united the islands of Greece and became their ruler. His son was destined to become one of the great world leaders of all time, Alexander the Great. In 330 B.C. a tremendous battle between the Persians and the Greeks entirely altered the course of history. In that battle, Alexander, as a young man only twenty years old, led the armies of Greece in victory over the Persians and completely demolished the power of Persia. The center of world power then shifted farther west into Greece, and the Grecian empire was born.

A year after that historic battle, Alexander the Great led his armies down into the Syrian world toward Egypt. On the way, he planned to lay siege to the city of Jerusalem. As the victorious armies of the Greeks approached the city, word was brought to the Jews in Jerusalem that the armies were on their way. The high priest at that time, who was a godly old man by the name of Jaddua (who, by the way, is mentioned in the Bible in the book of Nehemiah) took the sacred writings of Daniel the prophet and, accompanied by a host of other priests dressed in white garments, went forth and met Alexander some distance outside the city.

All this is from the report of Josephus, the Jewish historian, who tells us that Alexander left his army and hurried to meet this body of priests. When he met them, he told the high priest that he had had a vision the night before in which God had shown him an old man, robed in a white garment, who would show him something of great significance to himself, according to the account, the high priest then opened the prophecies of Daniel and read them to Alexander.

In the prophecies Alexander was able to see the predictions that he would become that notable goat with the horn in his forehead, who would come from the West and smash the power of Medio-Persia and conquer the world. He was so overwhelmed by the accuracy of this prophecy and, of course, by the fact that it spoke about him, that he promised that he would save Jerusalem from siege, and sent the high priest back with honors. How true that account is, is very difficult at this distance in time to say; that, at any event, is the story.

Alexander died in 323 B.C. when he was only about thirty-three years old. He had drunk himself to death in the prime of his life, grieved because he had no more worlds to conquer. After his death, his empire was torn with dissension, because he had left no heir. His son had been murdered earlier, so there was no one to inherit the empire of Alexander.

After some time, however, the four generals that had led Alexander's armies divided his empire between them. Two of them are particularly noteworthy to us. One was Ptolemy, who gained Egypt and the northern African countries; the other was Seleucus, who gained Syria, to the north of Palestine. During this time Palestine was annexed by Egypt, and suffered greatly at the hands of Ptolemy. In fact, for the next one hundred years, Palestine was caught in the meat-grinder of the unending conflicts between Syria on the north and Egypt on the south.

Now if you have read the prophecies of Daniel, you will recall that Daniel was able, by inspiration, to give a very accurate and detailed account of the highlights of these years of conflict between the king of the North (Syria) and the king of the South (Egypt). The eleventh chapter of Daniel gives us a most amazingly accurate account of that which has long since been fulfilled. If you want to see just how accurate the prophecy is, I suggest you compare that chapter of Daniel with the historical rec-

ord of what actually occurred during that time. H. A. Ironside's little book, *The 400 Silent Years*, gathers that up in some detail.

During this time Grecian influence was becoming strong in Palestine. A party arose among the Jews called the Hellenists, who were very eager to bring Grecian culture and thought into the nation and to liberalize some of the Jewish laws. This forced a split into two major parties:

- There were those who were strong Hebrew nationalists, who wanted to preserve everything according to the Mosaic order. They resisted all the foreign influences that were coming in to disrupt the old Jewish ways. This party became known as the Pharisees, which means "to separate." They were the separationists who insisted on preserving traditions. They grew stronger and stronger, becoming more legalistic and rigid in their requirements, until they became the target for some of the most scorching words our Lord ever spoke. They had become religious hypocrites, keeping the outward form of the Law, but completely violating its spirit.
- On the other hand, the Hellenists – the Greek lovers – became more and more influential in the politics of the land. They formed the party that was known in New Testament days as the Sadducees, the liberals. They turned away from the strict interpretation of the Law and became the rationalists of their day, ceasing to believe in the supernatural in any way. We are told in the New Testament that they came again and again to the Lord with questions about the supernatural, like "What will happen to a woman who has been married to seven different men? In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" (Matt 22:23-33). They did not believe in a resurrection, but in these questions they were trying to put Jesus on the spot.

Now there was also a young rebel Jewish priest who married a Samaritan, went down to Samaria, and in rebellion against the Jewish laws, built a temple on Mount Gerizim that became a rival of the temple in Jerusalem. This caused intense, fanatical rivalry between the Jews and the Samaritans, and this rivalry is also reflected in the New Testament.

Also during this time, in Egypt, under the reign of one of the Ptolemies, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated for the first time into another language, in about 284 B.C. A group of 70 scholars was called together by the Egyptian king to make a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Book by book they translated the Old Testament into Greek. When they had finished, it was given the name of the *Septuagint*, which means "70," because of the number of translators. This became the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible. From it many of the quotations in the New Testament are derived. That is why New Testament quotations of Old Testament verses are sometimes in different words – because they come from the Greek translation. The Septuagint is still in existence today, and is widely used in various parts of the world. It is still a very important document.

A little later on, about 203 B.C., a king named Antiochus the Great came into power in Syria, to the north of Palestine. He captured Jerusalem from the Egyptians and began the reign of Syrian power over Palestine. He had two sons, one of whom succeeded him and reigned only a few years. When he died, his brother took the throne. This man, named Antiochus Epiphanes, became one of the most vicious and violent persecutors of the Jews ever known. In fact, he is often called the "Antichrist of the Old Testament," since he fulfills some of the predictions of Daniel concerning the coming of one who would be "a contemptible person" and "a vile king." His name (which he modestly bestowed upon himself) means "Antiochus the Illustrious." Nevertheless, some of his own courtiers evidently agreed more with the prophecies of Daniel, and they changed two letters in his title, from *Epiphanes* to *Epipames*, which means "the mad man."

His first act was to depose the high priest in Jerusalem, thus ending the long line of succession, beginning with Aaron and his sons through the many centuries of Jewish life. Onias the Third was the last of the hereditary line of priests. Antiochus Epiphanes sold the priesthood to Jason, who was not of the priestly line. Jason, in turn, was tricked by his younger brother Menelaus, who purchased the priesthood and then sold the golden vessels of the temple in order to make up the tribute money. Epiphanes overthrew the God-authorized line of priests. Then, and under his reign, the city of Jerusalem and all the religious rites of the Jews began

to deteriorate as they came fully under the power of the Syrian king.

In 171 B.C. Antiochus invaded Egypt and once again Palestine was caught in the nutcracker of rivalry. Palestine is the most fought-over country in the world, and Jerusalem is the most captured city in all history. It has been pillaged, ravished, burned and destroyed more than 27 times in its history.

While Antiochus was in Egypt, it was reported that he had been killed in battle, and Jerusalem rejoiced. The people organized a revolt and overthrew Menelaus, the pseudo-priest. When report reached Antiochus (who was very much alive in Egypt) that Jerusalem was delighted at the report of his death, he organized his armies and swept like a fury back across the land, falling upon Jerusalem with terrible vengeance.

He overturned the city, regained his power, and, guided by the treacherous Menelaus, intruded into the very Holy of Holies in the temple itself. Some 40,000 people were slain in three days of fighting during this terrible time. When he forced his way into the Holy of Holies, he destroyed the scrolls of the Law and, to the absolute horror of the Jews, took a sow and offered it upon the sacred altar. Then with a broth made from the flesh of this unclean animal, he sprinkled everything in the temple, thus completely defiling and violating the sanctuary. It is impossible for us to grasp how horrifying this was to the Jews. They were simply appalled that anything like this could ever happen to their sacred temple.

It was that act of defiling the temple which is referred to by the Lord Jesus as the “desolating sacrilege” which Daniel had predicted (Matt 24:15), and which also became a sign of the coming desolation of the temple when Antichrist himself will enter the temple, call himself God, and thus defile the temple in that time. As we know from the New Testament, that still lies in the future.

Daniel the prophet had said the sanctuary would be polluted for 2300 days (Dan 8:14). In exact accordance with that prophecy, it was exactly 2300 days – six and a half years – before the temple was cleansed. It was cleansed under the leadership of a man now famous in Jewish history, Judas Maccabaeus. He was one of the priestly line who, with his father and four brothers, rose up in revolt against the Syrian king. They captured the atten-

tion of the Israelites, summoned them to follow them into battle, and in a series of pitched battles in which they were always an overwhelming minority, overthrew the power of the Syrian kings, captured Jerusalem, and cleansed the temple. The day they cleansed the temple was named the Day of Dedication, and it occurred on the 25th day of December. On that date Jews still celebrate the Feast of Dedication each year.

The Maccabees, who were of the Asmonean family, began a line of high priests known as the Asmonean Dynasty. Their sons, for about the next three or four generations, ruled as priests in Jerusalem, all the time having to defend themselves against the constant assaults of the Syrian army who tried to recapture the city and the temple. During the days of the Maccabees there was a temporary overthrow of foreign domination, which is why the Jews look back to this time and regard it with such tremendous veneration.

During this time, one of the Asmonean priests made a league with the rising power in the West, Rome. He signed a treaty with the Senate of Rome, providing for help in the event of Syrian attack. Though the treaty was made in all earnestness and sincerity, it was this pact which introduced Rome into the picture and history of Israel.

As the battles between the two opposing forces waged hotter and hotter, Rome was watchful. Finally, the Governor of Idumea, a man named Antipater and a descendant of Esau, made a pact with two other neighboring kings and attacked Jerusalem to try to overthrow the authority of the Asmonean high priest. This battle raged so fiercely that finally Pompey, the Roman general, who happened to have an army in Damascus at the time, was besought by both parties to come and intervene. One side had a little more money than the other, and persuaded by that logical argument, Pompey came down from Damascus, entered the city of Jerusalem – again with terrible slaughter – overthrew the city and captured it for Rome. That was in 63 B.C. From that time on, Palestine was under the authority and power of Rome.

Now Pompey and the Roman Senate appointed Antipater as the Procurator of Judea, and he in turn made his two sons kings of Galilee and Judea. The son who became king of Judea is known to us as Herod the Great:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?' (Matt 2:1-2a RSV)

Meanwhile, the pagan empires around had been deteriorating and disintegrating. Their religions had fallen upon evil days. The people were sick of the polytheism and emptiness of their pagan faiths. The Jews had gone through times of pressure and had failed in their efforts to re-establish themselves, and had given up all hope. There was a growing air of expectancy that the only hope they had left was the coming at last of the promised Messiah.

In the East, the oriental empires had come to the place where the wisdom and knowledge of the past had disintegrated and they too were looking for something. When the moment came when the star arose over Bethlehem, the wise men of the East who were looking for an answer to their problems saw it immediately and came out to seek the One it pointed to. Thus, "when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, {cf, Gal 4:4}.

It is amazing how God utilizes history to work out his purposes. Though we are living in the days that might be termed "the silence of God," when for almost 2,000 years there has been no inspired voice from God, we must look back – even as they did during those 400 silent years – upon the inspired record and realize that God has already said all that needs to be said, through the Old and New Testaments. God's purposes have not ended, for sure. He is working them out as fully now as he did in those days. Just as the world had come to a place of hopelessness then, and the One who would fulfill

all their hopes came into their midst, so the world again is facing a time when despair is spreading widely across the earth. Hopelessness is rampant everywhere and in this time God is moving to bring to fulfillment all the prophetic words concerning the coming of his Son again into the world to establish his kingdom.

- How long?
- How close?
- Who knows?

But what God has done in history, he will do again as we approach the end of "the silence of God."

Prayer:

Our Father, we are constantly encouraged as we see the fact that our faith is grounded upon historic things; that it touches history on every side. It is integrally related to life. We pray that our own faith may grow strong and be powerful as we see the despair around us, the shaking of foundations, the changing of that which has long been taken to be permanent, the overthrowing of empires and the rising of others. Lord, we are thankful that we may look to you and realize that you are the One who does not change. The One whose word is eternal. As the Lord Jesus himself said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall never pass away." We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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The Message of Matthew: BEHOLD YOUR KING!

by Ray C. Stedman

Beginning in the New Testament we move from the realm of shadow, type, and prophecy, into the full sunshine of the presentation of the Son of God. The Old Testament speaks of him on every page, but speaks in shadows, in types, in symbols, and in prophecies – all looking forward to the coming of Someone. You cannot read the Old Testament without being aware of that constant promise running through every page – Someone is coming! Someone is coming!

Now, when we open the Gospels, that Someone steps forth in the fullness of his glory. As John says, “We have beheld his glory ... as of the only Son from the Father,” (John 1:14 RSV). I love the Gospels. They are to me one of the most perennially fascinating sections of the Bible. There you see Christ as he is. Remember that what he was is what he *is*; and what he *is* is what you have, if you are a Christian. All the fullness of his character and being and life is available to us, and we only learn what those resources are as we see him as he was and is. That is why the Gospel records are so important to us.

People often wonder why we have four Gospels. There is a very good reason for this. It is interesting to note that each of these Gospels is a development of an exclamatory statement that is found in the Old Testament. Four different times – and only four times – in the Old Testament there was an exclamatory statement made concerning the Messiah, introduced always by the word *behold*: In one of the prophets we read, “Behold thy king, O Israel!” In another place we read, “Behold the man!” In a third place we read, “Behold my servant!” In still a fourth place we read, “Behold thy

God!” These four statements are amplified and developed in the four Gospels:

- Matthew, the Gospel of the King;
- Mark, the Gospel of the Servant;
- Luke, the Gospel of the Son of man; and
- John, the Gospel of God, the presentation of the Son of God.

These four Gospels give us four aspects of our Lord’s character and person. They are not, strictly speaking, biographies. They are really sketches about the Person of Christ – eyewitness accounts by those who knew him personally, or those immediately associated with them. Therefore, they have the ring of authenticity, and they carry to our hearts that first and marvelous impression that our Lord made upon his own disciples, and then upon the multitudes that followed him. No more amazing character has ever walked among men. As you read the Gospel accounts, I hope something of this fascination breaks upon your own heart as you see him stepping forth from these pages, revealed to you by the Spirit, when you see him as he is.

The first book of the New Testament is Matthew, and this is the place where most people start reading the Bible. I think more people begin reading in the New Testament than the Old, therefore, that would make Matthew the most widely read book in all the world. In fact, Renan, the French skeptic, said of this book, “This is the most important book of all Christendom.” He also said, “The most important book that has ever been written is the Gospel of Matthew.” But it has its critics, too.

There are those who claim that this book contains nothing but the early legends of the church

which grew up around Jesus, that these accounts are not historical, and that this book was not actually written until the fourth century A.D. Therefore, they say, we are uncertain as to how much is really true. Other critics make the claim that this is only one of many gospels that were circulated.

Now, it is true that there are other gospels besides the four in the New Testament. There is the Gospel of Barnabas, for instance, and the Gospel of Peter, and yet other gospels. They can be found in a book called *The New Testament Apocrypha* if you would like to read them. The critics say that it is mere chance that these four Gospels survived. There is a legend that began with a German theologian named Pappas in about the 16th century who said that the Gospels were selected at the Council of Nice in 325 A.D. by gathering together all the many gospels that were circulating at that time, throwing them all under a table, and then reaching in and pulling out four which happened to be Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The foolishness of such a claim is evident to anyone who reads the Gospels with thoughtfulness. They are stamped with the fingerprints of God. The very pattern of these books reflects the divine imprint, and you cannot read them or compare them with the Old Testament without seeing that they come from an inspired source. Furthermore, you have merely to compare them with the Apocryphal gospels to see how foolish such a claim is.

As you know, this Gospel was written by Matthew, otherwise known as Levi. He was a publican, and publicans were those men who took the taxes from the people. His name means “the gift of God,” and to call a tax collector by that name obviously indicates that he was converted. It was perhaps our Lord himself who designated him Matthew, just as he changed Simon’s name to Peter, and perhaps the names of others of the disciples as well. Tradition tells us that Matthew lived and taught in Palestine for 15 years after the crucifixion, and then he began to travel as a missionary, first to Ethiopia and then to Macedonia, Syria, and Persia. Finally he died a natural death in either Ethiopia or Macedonia, but this is not certain. It is one of the legends or traditions that have come down to us about Matthew.

The book obviously dates from a very early day. The idea that it was written in the fourth century is pure poppycock because there is much evidence that dates it in the early part of the first

century. It is quoted, for instance, in the well-known *Didache*, which is the teaching of the twelve apostles which dates from early in the second century, so it obviously precedes that. Papias, who was a disciple of the Apostle John, says “Matthew composed his Gospel in the Hebrew tongue, and each one interprets it as he is able.” This was confirmed by Irenaeus and Origen, two of the early church fathers, all of whom were well acquainted with the Gospel of Matthew.

Even in the first century itself we have Jewish voices that prove the existence of Matthew. Two Jewish people, Gamaliel the Second, who was a prominent rabbi, and his sister, Immashalom (which, incidentally, means “woman of peace,” though she was far from that) pronounced a curse upon the Christians in these terms: “A curse upon the readers of the evangelistic Scriptures of the New Testament.” Now, the only evangelistic Scriptures of the New Testament that were extant in their day (about 45 or 50 A.D.) were the Gospel of Matthew and, perhaps, the Gospel of Mark, so that the date of writing of this Gospel is about 45 or 50 A.D. It was probably first written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek.

There are many who think that the Gospel of Matthew is one of the most difficult books of the New Testament to outline, but I would like to challenge that. I think there is no book in the Bible that lends itself more easily to outlining than the Gospel of Matthew. The reason is that the Holy Spirit himself has given the outline within the book. This occurs in several of the books of Scripture, and if you are observant, you can see these marks.

The major divisions of Matthew are given to us by the repetition of a particular phrase that appears twice and divides the book into three sections:

First of all, there is an introductory section which takes us to Chapter 4, where we have the first occurrence of this phrase. It says (Verse 17):

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” {Matt 4:17 RSV}

That marks a major turning point in the argument and presentation of this book.

Then you find a similar phrase occurring in Chapter 16, introducing the third section. We read (Verse 21):

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. {Matt 16:21 RSV}

That is the first mention of the crucifixion in Matthew. From here on it is the aim and point of development of this book.

Now, there are subdivisions given to us in the same way by another kind of phrase. You will find the subdivisions marked for you by a verse which appears five different times:

The first occasion is in Chapter 7, at the close of the Sermon on the Mount. We read (Verses 28, 29):

And when Jesus had finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. {Matt 7:28-29 RSV}

In Chapter 11, Verse 1, you find another subdivision indicated:

And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. {Matt 11:1 RSV}

Look at Chapter 13, Verses 53, 54 where you have another subdivision indicated:

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his own country he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?" {Matt 13:53-54 RSV}

In Chapter 19, we read (Verses 1, 2):

Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan, and large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. {Matt 19:1-2 RSV}

Again, in Chapter 26 (Verses 1, 2):

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of man will be delivered up to be crucified." {Matt 26:1-2 RSV}

You notice that each one of these introduces a complete change of direction – a new subject. These mark the divisions of this book.

The first division is all about the preparation of the King for his ministry. "Lo, your king comes to you;" the prophet Zechariah has said, "humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass," {Zech 9:9b RSV}. Matthew, then, is the Gospel of the King, and that prophecy was fulfilled in the triumphal entry when our Lord entered the city of Jerusalem in exactly that manner. It is Matthew's task to present him as the King. The book opens, therefore, with the genealogy of the King. Every king has to have a genealogy. The ancestry of a king is the most important thing about him. He has to go back to someone; he has to be in the royal line. Therefore, Matthew opens with that exhaustive and somewhat exhausting genealogy that traces from Abraham on down to Joseph, his stepfather, who was called the husband of Mary. Joseph was in the royal line of David. It is from Joseph that our Lord gets his royal right to the throne, because he was the heir of Joseph. It is through Mary, who was also of the royal line of David, that he gets his genealogical right to the throne. His legal right comes through Joseph; his hereditary right through Mary. Joseph, of course, was not really his father, but Mary was really his mother.

The first chapter also recounts his birth. The second chapter describes events which ensued, including the flight into Egypt. In the third chapter we read of the baptism of our Lord. The first two chapters thus relate him to earth. His genealogy ties him to the earthly royal line of David. But his baptism relates him to heaven and gives his heavenly credentials – his heavenly authority – for the heavens opened, and in an amazing way, the Father's voice spoke from heaven and said, "This is my beloved Son." There the royal line is declared according to the heavenly standard.

In the fourth chapter you have the testing of the King. This is his experience of temptation in the wilderness, where he is related to all the powers of darkness; where hell is loosed upon him. Now, the testing of our Lord is the key to the Gospel of

Matthew. He is tested as a representative man. He goes into the wilderness as the Son of man, and is tested as to whether he can fulfill God's intention for man. Man is made up of three divisions – body, soul, and spirit, and it was on these three levels that our Lord was tested:

- You will notice, first of all, that he was tested on the level of the body's demands. The dominant passion of the body is self-preservation. Our Lord's first temptation came on that level. Would he continue to be God's man, even when he was faced by an extreme challenge on the level of self-preservation? For 40 days and nights he had not eaten, and then the temptation came subtly to him: "Change these stones into bread, if you are the Son of God. Preserve your life," {cf, Matt 4:3}. But he insisted upon walking in the will of God despite the intensity of this pressure. What would you have done after 40 days of fasting if someone offered you bread?
- Then he was tested on the level of the soul – that is, through the dominant passion of the soul, which is self-expression. On this level, we all want desperately to reveal ourselves; to show what we can do, or as we put it, to express ourselves. This is the drive that is the primary function of the human soul. Remember, it was during this testing that our Lord was taken up to the top of the temple, and given the opportunity to cast himself down and thus capture the acclaim of Israel. Such temptation plays upon the urge for status, for manifesting the pride of life. But he proved himself true to God despite the pressure that came to him in that way.
- Finally, he was tested in the deepest, most essential part of his humanity – the spirit. The dominant passion of the spirit is to worship. The spirit is always looking for something to worship. That is why man is everywhere essentially a religious being, because the spirit in him is craving, crying out, for an idol, someone to follow, a hero, something to worship. It was on this level that the Devil came to him and said, "All these kingdoms of the world will be yours if you will fall down and worship me," {cf, Matt 4:9b RSV}. Our Lord's answer was,

"... it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve,'" {Matt 4:10b RSV}. So he passed the test. He revealed himself fully and adequately to be man as God intended man to be.

Then, in the Sermon on the Mount, he begins to put this same test to the nation Israel. Israel had been chosen of God through the centuries to be his channel of communication with humanity, and they had regarded themselves as his favored people. Now the nation is to be put to the test, in the Gospel of Matthew, as to whether they can pass the same test our Lord did. This is the essential story of Matthew. He is tracing how the Son of God – God's King – came into the world, and offered himself to be King of Israel, first on the level of the physical, then on the level of the soul. When he was rejected on both these levels, he passed into the realm of the mystery of the human spirit. In the darkness and mystery of the cross, he accomplished the redeeming work that would capture man again for God, body, soul, and spirit.

Redemption, therefore, begins with the spirit. That's why the work of Christ in our own hearts – though we may be attracted to him on the level of the body, for the supply of physical need; or on the level of the soul, for the need of self-expression and improvement in our lives – will never really change us until it has reached the level of the spirit, the place of basic worship, wherein we have committed ourselves, body, soul, and spirit, unto him. Then the change begins to show.

Now you see this worked out in the Gospel of Matthew, with the nation Israel as the recipient. The first ministry begins, as we saw, in Chapter 4, with the mark, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,'" {Matt 4:17 RSV}. Then follows the Sermon on the Mount, where we have the presentation of the King and the laws of the kingdom. This covers the rest of Chapters 4, and 5 through 7. In these rules of the kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount there is an obvious emphasis on the physical life. Notice this as you read through it the next time.

This is one of the most penetrating, most incisive messages ever set before human beings, but it approaches us on the level of our ordinary, physical, material life. There are two physical sins dealt with – murder and adultery. The life of God is il-

lustrated for us in the realm of giving alms and of fasting – physical acts. God is offered to us as One who so cares for us that we do not need to think of tomorrow – how to be fed, how to be clothed – the worries that come to us on the physical level. Our Lord is saying, “If you discover me and receive me as your King, you will discover that I am the answer to all your physical needs.” He is offering himself to the nation, and to us, on this level.

Then this is followed by a section on miracles, and, in Chapters 8 through 12, you have the miracles of the kingdom. These are illustrations of the benefits that our Lord can bestow on the level of the physical. There is no spectacular display here, but a representation of our Lord’s power over everything affecting the body – disease, demons and death. His authority in this realm is that of King.

This, in turn, is followed by a section of parables of the kingdom, where the rejection of the kingdom is declared in a mystery form. It is apparent even before this time that the nation is going to reject our Lord’s offer of himself as king on this physical level, and so a new word appears. In Chapter 11 he begins to utter the word *woe* – “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! Woe to those who have not believed!” {cf, Matt 11:21 ff RSV}. He pronounces judgment upon the nation on this level. The mysteries of the kingdom are in Chapter 13, where the parables are given with truth hidden beneath a type of symbol. Then we have a section that is simply instruction to individuals – to those among them who will believe, who will receive him on this level.

All of this section, by the way, beginning with Chapter 13, Verse 54 through Chapter 16, Verse 20, has to do with bread. There is the feeding of the 5,000 in Chapter 14; the questions on what defiles a man in Chapter 15; and then the incident of the woman who came and asked for crumbs from his table, and he said, “The bread belongs to the sons of the kingdom,” {see Matt 15:22-28}. Then there is the feeding of the 4,000 in Chapter 15; the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees in Chapter 16, and, finally, the revelation of our Lord’s person to Peter in that wonderful time when Peter was given the first insight that here, indeed, was one who would go beyond the level of the physical and even of the soulish, into the depths of man’s spirit.

Beginning with Chapter 16, Verse 21 (we have already noted this major division), we have the sec-

ond ministry of our Lord to the nation, this time on the level of the soul. He is offering himself on this level. His first revelation is to the disciples only, for they are the nucleus of the coming church, and this takes us up to Chapter 18, Verse 35. Here is the transfiguration and the first intimation of his death. This is followed (as in the first section) by parables of the King. These are addressed first to the disciples, and then to the nation. All are parables presenting him as the King who has the right to command and to determine the character of individuals. Nothing is said now about their physical lives, but rather, their soulish lives. Are they willing to follow him; are they willing to let him mold and shape their lives and characters?

Soon we have the triumphal entry into Jerusalem which becomes the judicial entry, when our Lord judges the nation, passes into the temple, stops the offerings, and drives out the money changers. Once again you hear the word *woe* coming in. In Chapter 23, Verse 13, he says, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, ...” {Matt 23:13a RSV}. In Verse 16, “Woe to you, blind guides, ...” {Matt 23:16a RSV}. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” {Matt 23:23a RSV}. All through the chapter, like the knell of death, this word *woe* rings out again and again.

This is followed by a section in Chapters 24 and 25, where we have instructions to individuals again. This is what we call the Olivet discourse – instructions to the believing remnant on what to do until he comes again. It reveals how world history is going to shape up; what will happen in the intervening years; what forces will be loosed upon the earth; how the forces of darkness are going to take God’s own people and test them, try them, and shake their foundations. He declares that they can only stand as they learn to reckon upon the inner strengthening of the Holy Spirit.

Finally we arrive at the last section, where we have the betrayal, the trial of the Lord Jesus, the agony, the crucifixion, and the resurrection, when our Lord, in the mystery of darkness, passes out into the blackness of death. There, alone, forsaken by his friends, he entered into a death grapple with the powers of darkness. In the mystery of the cross, he laid hold of the forces that have mastered the human spirit and he broke them there. In the wonder of the cross, he vanquished the powers that have been against mankind. As Paul puts it later, he mastered them and made an open show of them,

triumphing over them, and leading them behind him as a conqueror would lead a train of captives in open display before the people {cf, Col 2:15}.

In the crucifixion story you see him standing as a lone prisoner before Pilate in judgment, and then passing into the darkness of the garden, from there to the whipping post, and then to the cross where he was nailed up to die. In the anguish and haze of that awful six hours, he grappled with these forces of darkness and vanquished them. Thus, the only crown he ever had as an earthly king was a crown of thorns; the only throne he ever mounted was a bloody cross; the only scepter he ever wielded was a broken reed.

But this is followed by the resurrection, when he broke through into the realm of the human spirit. Up to that time, in effect, God had never been able to move into the spirit of man – on the ground of faith he could – but now the way into the very center of man’s being is opened wide. As we come to know the Lord in our spirit, we discover that the worship of our hearts is given to him there. The spirit is the key to the mastery of the whole man. When you get a man’s spirit, you have all that he is. By means of the cross and the resurrection, our Lord has made it possible to pass into the very holy of holies of man, and to dwell within him.

The great message of the Gospel, then, is that God is not up yonder on some throne; he is not waiting in some distant judgment hall to pass judgment upon us. He is ready and waiting to pass into the center of a hungry, thirsting person’s heart, and there to minister the blessing of his own life, his own character, his own being, pouring them out for us. When the King is enthroned in the life, the kingdom of God is present. That is the message of Matthew – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Heaven does not mean some place out in space; it means the realm of the invisibilities, where

God reigns in the spirit. That kingdom is at hand in the presentation of the King.

The great question to which Matthew demands an answer is, “Is Jesus Christ King of your life?” Have you received him only as Savior of the body, or Savior of the soul? Then he is not yet King. The question that Matthew brings before us is, “Has he become King? Has he penetrated to the spirit? Has he mastered your heart? Has he laid hold of your worship as an individual, so that he is the one single most important person in all the universe to you?” That is when he becomes King. That is the fulfillment of the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me, for you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your strength, and all your mind,” {Deut 6:5, Matt 22:37 RSV}. The result will be that you will “love your neighbor as yourself,” {Matt 22:39}.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that as we look at this Gospel of the King we may see the majesty and the glory, the greatness of this One who has come to master us, who is not interested in merely helping us, but who has come to direct us. He has not come to take sides, but to take over. Lord, we pray that you would make us understand this and yield to him the throne of our lives; that in this very moment, as we worship before you, our hearts may be saying to him “Lord Jesus, come and reign in my heart; be the King over every area of my life; master me in all the aspects of my being; plant your bloody cross as a throne in my heart, and rule unchallenged.” We ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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The Gospel of Mark: HE CAME TO SERVE

by Ray C. Stedman

The Gospel of Mark, the second book in the New Testament, is sixteen short chapters long, the briefest of all the Gospels, and therefore easy to read in one sitting. Its brevity is probably the reason it is the most often translated book of the New Testament. The Wycliffe translators, I understand, almost invariably begin their translation work with the Gospel of Mark because it is so short and gives the whole story in one brief compass.

This Gospel has a completely different atmosphere from the Gospel of Matthew. If you go on to read Luke and John, you will see that they are still different from Matthew and Mark. Matthew, Mark and Luke are more similar to each other than any of these three are to the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, they are all different. There is a reason for this, designed deliberately by the Holy Spirit. We make a mistake if we think these four Gospels are four biographies of the Lord. They are not biographies at all. They are character sketches, intended to be different, intended to present different points of view. Therefore, they constitute four distinct views of our Lord and of his work.

The Gospel of Matthew is written to present Christ as the King. The Gospel of Mark presents his character as a servant. The Gospel of Luke presents him as the Son of man – as man in his essential humanity. The Gospel of John presents him as the Son of God, that is, his deity, and there you find the greatest claims for his deity.

Someone has pointed out that the very clothes our Lord wore indicate this. His robe is the mark of a king, because in those days the king wore a robe, as kings do even today. The towel that he girded about himself as he washed the disciples'

feet at the Lord's supper is the mark of a servant. The fact that his robe was seamless is a mark of his humanity – perfect, without flaw, without seams – not the joining together of two things, but a perfect, unbroken humanity. The fact that on the Mount of Transfiguration it became a shining garment is a mark of his Godhood – his deity – the Glory of God enshrined in a human temple, so that John could write of him, "we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father," {John 1:14 RSV}. He came and tabernacled among us. Yet within that human tent, the glory of God shone forth.

It is also noteworthy that the recipients of these Gospels were quite different:

- Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily for the Jews, and it is filled with references and quotations from the Old Testament. There you have the fulfillment of the sacrificial feast with which the Jews were so familiar.
- But Mark writes his Gospel for the Roman mind. This is the Gospel that has the most Latin words in it – the Gospel of haste and action, characteristics of Rome.
- Luke writes for the Greek mind, the philosophical mind. Here you have our Lord's table talk, as he sat with his disciples in intimate fellowship – the Greeks loved this. His discourses are here, his philosophical utterances, the representation of his thoughts and wisdom as a man.

- But John writes for the Christian, and therefore, the Gospel of John is dearest to Christian hearts. There you have the deity of Christ emphasized. There you have the teaching of the rapture of the Church first brought out. The hope of the Church and the intimacy of the fellowship of communion between the Lord and his own, the Holy Spirit's ministry, are all emphasized in the Gospel of John.

So there are four distinct purposes for writing these Gospels.

This is true of the work of Christ as well. There are four aspects of the cross. If you are familiar with the teaching of the Old Testament about the feasts of Israel, you will remember that five feasts were especially marked out for them, and these are reflected in the Gospels:

- One of the five, the sin offering, is reflected in the Gospel of Matthew, where you have the sacrifice of our Lord and its effect upon human sin.
- Then in Mark the trespass offering is emphasized; that is, the effects of sin, the manifestation of it, the deeds of men.
- In Luke you have what answers to the peace offering.
- The burnt offering is in John. To Israel, the burnt offering was the expression of utter and complete dedication and devotion, commitment to the work of God. All of the burnt offering had to be consumed, every bit of it. None of it was eaten by the priest. All of it speaks of a life totally given to God. This is exemplified so beautifully in the Gospel of John, where you have the devotion of our Lord, how he pleased the Father.

All four of these speak of the meal offering, that is, the perfect humanity of our Lord, sinless being that he was.

Now, if you know these things about the Gospels, it will explain certain questions that are sometimes asked. For instance:

- Why is there no account of the struggle of our Lord in Gethsemane in the Gospel of John? You find the record of Gethsemane's agony in Matthew and Mark, but no mention of it is in John. It is because in the garden he cried out and questioned the Father, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me," {Matt 26:39 RSV, cf, Mark 14:34-35}. Now, the Son of God does not question the Father, but it is as man that he does this, and therefore the account of the garden is found primarily in the Gospel of Luke. There, where he is presented as man, we have the fullest detail of his human struggle, but in John, where he is presented as the Son of God, the account is left out.
- This is also why, in Matthew, the wise men are recorded as coming to offer their gifts, while in Luke it is the coming of the shepherds that is recorded. Now both of them came, but Matthew is the Gospel of the King, and the wise men brought gifts fit for a king. But common, ordinary shepherds came to see the perfect man, the One who came to be one of us, equal with us, on our level. And this was Luke's emphasis.
- Why is there no account of the ascension of our Lord in Matthew? Well, because as King, he came to rule on earth. Matthew's emphasis is on the kingdom on earth. "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." The ascension is not mentioned in John, because Jesus is the Son of God, and God is everywhere. God is omnipresent and does not go from earth to heaven or heaven to earth; therefore, there is no account of the ascension in John.
- Why is there no genealogy of our Lord in Mark and in John? There is a genealogy in both Matthew and Luke, but none in Mark nor John. Well, kings require genealogies; you have to know their descent in the royal line. A man is interested in his ancestry; thus the genealogy in Luke, but no one cares about the ancestry of a servant, and God has no ancestry, therefore, there is no genealogy in Mark and John.

Now, all of this shows the supervision of the Holy Spirit. These Gospels are not merely copies, one

based on another, as the critics tell us, but they are designed of the Holy Spirit especially to present the different aspects of the Lord Jesus.

That brings us to the Gospel of Mark.

The author was a young man named John Mark, the man who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey and proved to be an unfaithful servant. He could not take the pressure, and turned back to go home. It is interesting that the Holy Spirit chose this man, an unfaithful servant, to record for us the faithfulness of the Servant of God, the Lord Jesus. Mark was a companion of Peter, and, therefore, the Gospel of Mark contains primarily the thoughts, teachings and viewpoints of Peter. Matthew was a disciple; Luke got his Gospel through the Apostle Paul; John was a disciple, but Peter himself wrote nothing as far as a Gospel was concerned. Through his son in the faith, Mark, the Gospel according to Peter came to us.

In the tenth chapter of Acts, Peter gives a very brief summary of all that is recorded for us in the Gospel of Mark. Speaking in the home of Cornelius, we read that Peter stood among them and told them “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him,” {Acts 10:38 RSV}.

If you would like to meet Mark personally, turn to the 14th chapter of this little Gospel for the only account of Mark’s appearance among the disciples. This is the account of the passion of our Lord as he is moving to the cross, just after he was captured in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the middle of the account, we suddenly read these words (Verse 51):

A young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. {Mark 14:51 RSV}

No other Gospel tells us that, and it is almost certain that this is Mark. He was the son of a rich woman in Jerusalem and it is very likely that his mother owned the house in which the disciples met in the upper room. Mark, therefore, was present at some of these events. Almost certainly this incident is included because he himself was involved.

The whole Gospel is summed up for us in a phrase about the Lord in Chapter 10:

“For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve,” {Mark 10:45a RSV}

That is the servant, come to give his life as a ransom for many, or as the King James Version puts it, “not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many,” {Mark 10:45b KJV}. In this short verse, you have the divisions of the Gospel of Mark:

1. There is a brief introductory section that presents the credentials of the servant in the first thirteen verses of Chapter 1.
2. Following that is the ministry of the servant, from Chapter 1, Verse 14, to Chapter 8, Verse 30.
3. The rest of the book is concerned with the ransoming work of the servant.

In the section of **the ministry of the servant**, two things are stressed primarily:

First, *the authority of the servant*: Those who listened to him were filled with astonishment. They said, “He doesn’t teach like the scribes and Pharisees, but he speaks with authority, power” {cf, Mark 1:27 RSV}. What he says comes home to the heart. That is because as a servant he knew the secrets of God. He takes out of the treasury of God the secrets of God and makes them known unto men. Since we are men, we hear his words with a sense of awareness that this is reality. There is a note of genuineness about what he says which carries its own convicting power with it. That is why the Gospels and the words of our Lord, as they are read, have power in themselves to convict men.

The scribes and Pharisees needed constantly to bolster themselves with references to authorities and quotations from others, but not our Lord. He never quotes anything but the Scripture. He always speaks with the final word of authority. He never apologizes, never says he made a mistake, never repeats. He speaks always with utter authority.

In this section his authority over the powers of darkness, the demon world, is emphasized. Halloween represents men’s awareness of the existence of evil spirits. It has been distorted and twisted to become a pantheon of goblins, spooks, and witches who ride on broomsticks, which is really a basic attempt to destroy its effectiveness among men.

Behind this facade of clownish humor is the reality of a world of demonic powers that control and affect the minds of men.

As you read through the Gospel of Mark, you see again and again the authority of the Servant of God over the mysterious forces of darkness. The world of the occult was open to him. He knew the black powers, the dark passions that work behind the scenes in men's thinking and minds. Demonic powers, "seducing spirits," they are called later by Paul {1 Tim 4:1 KJV}.

His power in teaching, then, came from his understanding of the minds and hearts of men (remember that John says that no man needed to tell him anything about men because he knew men). Because he knows what is in man, he is the world's greatest psychologist. He knows our basic structure and all that God intended to be wrapped up in the human heart and life. That is why he analyzes so precisely, and why his teaching comes with power.

As you read the Gospel of Mark, you will see that these demonic powers have strange abilities to influence men in remarkable ways, and it is apparent that such influence is always negative:

- They have, for instance, the power to isolate men from one another, to drive a man in madness out into the desert and wilderness to live alone, to be cut off from the rest of humanity.
- They have the power to render him a lawless human being, with his fist against every other man and his face against the world. Lawlessness is always a mark of demonic influence.
- They also have the power to torment men and make them torment themselves. In describing a demonic person in his Gospel, Mark says that he was "beside himself" {Mark 3:21}. Now, that is a significant phrase, isn't it? Imagine standing beside yourself – a split personality; in other words, a schizophrenic, separated from himself and set against himself. This is one of the marks of demonic influence.
- Finally, they have the power to make men become a menace to society, to be against all the social structure of their day.

Over all these influences our Lord had complete power.

Mark also reveals his power over disease:

- The first account of that power at work is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. That has always been a touching thing to me. It is significant that he would begin with a mother-in-law. We make so many jokes about mothers-in-law, but Peter was evidently very concerned about his. Our Lord touched her fever, and it left her. Then all the people of the city gathered about his door, and he healed every one of them.
- The next account is that of a leper. He did the unheard-of thing; he not only healed him, but he touched him. Now, no one ever touched a leper in those days. The Law of Moses forbade that they be touched, and the lepers had to go about crying, "Unclean! Unclean!" No one would remotely think of touching a leper, but the compassion of the servant's heart is revealed as he touched him, healed him, and sent him to the priest, the first instance in all of Scripture of a leper ever being healed according to the Law of Moses and sent to the priest, as the Law demanded.

As a second emphasis, the Gospel of Mark highlights *the various attitudes toward our Lord* that became apparent as his ministry among men developed. A servant is always affecting people. As he performed his ministry and went about doing good, men developed certain attitudes toward him:

In Nazareth, his own home town, they were offended by him. They did not like what he said. They wanted him to do miracles, but he did not do any. Instead, he spoke to them rather sharply, and they were offended.

Then there was Herod the King, who was superstitiously attracted to Jesus, as well as afraid of him. He even wondered if he was John the Baptist risen from the dead.

The account goes on to reveal the attitude of his disciples, after he broke the bread and fed the five thousand, and then amazed them by walking on the sea. We read (Chapter 6, Verses 51-52):

He got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. {Mark 6:51-52 RSV}

This hardening of the heart is characteristic of the attitudes of many toward our Lord in his ministry as a servant.

Then you find the hypocrisy and critical attitude of the Pharisees, in Chapter 7, and the acceptance, then, of many at the close of Chapter 7. They were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak," {Mark 7:37b RSV}. That is the mark of a believing heart, one who can say of him, "He does all things well."

There is a very significant act recorded of our Lord in Chapter 8, Verses 22-26, where we read:

And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man, and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; {Mark 8:22-23a RSV}

Why did he lead him out of the village?

...and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men; but they look like trees, walking." Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly. And he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village." {Mark 8:23b-26 RSV}

Why? Well, what village was it? Bethsaida. In the Gospel of Matthew, Bethsaida was one of those cities Jesus had pronounced judgment upon, saying,

"... woe to you Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago ..." {Matt 11:21b RSV}

Here is a city that has rejected his ministry and his person, and our Lord will not allow any further testimony to go on in that city. He led the blind man out before he healed him. This is the only case where our Lord did not have an instantaneous, complete healing the first time he spoke. When the

healing was complete, he would not even allow him to go back into the village, for here was a village devoted to judgment, having rejected the ministry of the Servant of God.

That incident ends the first division of the Gospel of Mark.

Now we have the introduction of the second theme: He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and **to give his life a ransom for many.** Chapter 8, Verse 31:

And he began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. {Mark 8:31 RSV}

From here on, our Lord's face is set toward Jerusalem and toward the cross. He is going now to be the offering of God, the sacrifice, the servant who gives himself completely for the ransom of those he came to save. The revelation of his program is given in this verse. He came to suffer, to be rejected, to be killed, and after three days, to rise again. That is the way he is going to do it.

Remember Peter's reaction then? He took him and rebuked him; "Spare yourself, Lord." That is always the way of fallen man. The philosophy of the world is "Spare yourself. Don't take on anything you don't have to. Don't get involved. Don't do anything that is not necessary for your comfort." Is that not the philosophy of our age? Our Lord said, "Peter, I recognize where that comes from." He said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men" {Mark 8:33b RSV}. And then:

... he called to him the multitude with his disciples and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." {Mark 8:34 RSV}

That is the way. Sparing yourself is the way of the Devil. Giving yourself is the way of God. This is the program that carries through the rest of this section of Mark.

The account of the Transfiguration follows, where Jesus reveals his intention for man. The very first verse in Chapter 9 suggests it. He said to them:

“Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.” {Mark 9:1b RSV}

Then he led Peter, James, and John up on the mountain top, and they literally did not taste of death till they saw the King coming in glory. Peter refers to this, remember, in his letter. He says,

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ... we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. {2 Pet 1:16, 1:18 RSV}

It suggests here that God’s intention for man and the purpose of our Lord’s redemptive work is that men should not taste of death. He came to deliver us from the sting of death, from the awful taste of death. Christians die, but they never taste death. Death is a doorway into life. Why is it true that Christians can stand with Paul and say, “Oh, death, where is thy sting? Oh, grave, where is thy victory?” {1 Cor 15:55 KJV}. Because Hebrews tells us that Jesus tasted death for every one (Heb 2:9).

In Chapter 10 he speaks of the family, of the children. He goes into the junkyard of human life and takes these gifts of God that men have twisted and misused and strips them of all the encrustation of tradition, the selfishness of man, and beautifully restores them to the purpose God intended.

In Chapter 11, you have the beginning of the passion week, our Lord’s last week as he moves to the cross. In this chapter, another very significant act that only Mark records is given to us (Verse 15):

They [that is, he and his disciples] came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; {Mark 11:15 RSV}

Now this is not the same act John records in his Gospel, (John 2:13-16). In John’s Gospel, this happened at the beginning of our Lord’s ministry.

But now, at the end of his ministry, for the second time, he overthrows the tables of the money-changers, cleanses the temple; and Mark says, “He would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple,” {Mark 11:16 RSV}.

What does that mean? Well, the only ones who carried anything through the temple were the priests. According to the Mosaic Law, it was their duty to catch the blood of the animals sacrificed on the brazen altar in the outer court and to bear that blood into the holy place and before the altar. Then once a year the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle that blood on the golden altar of the mercy seat. It was a very significant ritual.

But our Lord stopped all this. He would not allow any man to carry anything through the temple. In other words, he ended the sacrifices. The Jews resumed them until the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., but they did so without divine authority. The sacrifices are meaningless from here on, because he is standing now as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. From this account he moves right on out to the Mount of Olives, from there to the upper room, into the Garden of Gethsemane, and on to the cross.

The last chapters are concerned with the questions that people asked him:

- In Chapter 11 he answers the questions of the priests and the elders who come out of hatred for him and try to trap him with their questions.
- In Chapter 12 he answers the questions of the Pharisees and the Herodians who likewise try to trap him with their questions, and he sees through their hypocrisy.
- Also in Chapter 12, the Sadducees come and try to trap him. They were the materialists, the ones who did not believe in a resurrection or a spirit life.
- Then a scribe with an honest heart asked him the only honest question so far. He came to him and said, “Which commandment is the first of all?” {Mark 12:28b RSV}. Immediately and forthrightly our Lord answered him.

- In Chapter 13 the disciples come with a question, and in his answer our Lord unfolds the whole revelation of the age to come. This is the great predictive section, closing with his return in glory.
- In Chapter 14 you have two acts that show the gracious character of the servant. Mary came and offered her sacrifice of expensive perfume which she poured out at his feet, and then Judas went out and betrayed him for money. One an act of utter selflessness, and the other an act of complete selfishness.

Beginning with Chapter 15, you have the account of the cross. In Mark's account, this is an act of almost incredible brutality done in the name of "justice." The Lord outwardly seems to be a defeated man, a tragic failure, his cause hopelessly lost. He is hounded, bludgeoned and spat upon; as he himself said, "The Son of man will suffer many things," {cf, Mark 8:31}. Finally, he is crucified. It seems so unlike the picture of the wonder-worker of Galilee that begins this letter – the mighty man of power, the servant with authority.

No wonder the high priests, as they saw him hanging there, say of him, "He saved others; he cannot save himself," {Mark. 15:31b RSV}. That is a strange statement. Yet it is one of those remarkable words that reveal how God is able to make even his enemies praise him, because they are both right and wrong. They were wrong in what they meant by those words, "He saved others; he cannot save himself" {Mark 15:31b RSV}, but they were perfectly right in what they said.

As I read this account, I am impressed with the three things that they could not make our Lord do:

- First, they could not make our Lord speak:

Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered. {Mark 15:4-5 RSV}

- And they could not make him drink; "They offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it," {Mark 15:23 RSV}. Why not? Well, because he could have saved himself if he had. If he had spoken before Pilate, he could

have saved himself. The high priests were right; he saved others, but himself he could not, would not, save. Had he spoken, he could have delivered himself before Pilate, but he could not. Had he drunk, he would have saved himself the effect of the agony of the cross and the weight of the burdens of the world coming upon his shoulders, but he would not. He would not spare himself.

- Then, finally, they could not even make him die. We read, "Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last" {Mark 15:37 RSV}, which is really an interpretation. What the Greek says is, "He unspirited himself." He dismissed his spirit. He didn't die at the hands of the murderers; he let his spirit go, dismissed it, for he himself said, "No man can take my life from me. I lay it down of myself," {cf, John 10:18}. He could have refused to die, and they could not have taken his life from him. He said so. He could have hung on the cross and taunted them with their inability to put him to death, but he did not. He died, he unspirited himself.

When you come to the last chapter, the resurrection of our Lord, you learn his reason. He was silent and refused to appeal to Pilate or the crowd, because he was laying the basis for a coming day, when in resurrection power he would appeal to a far greater crowd, when every knee should bow and every tongue should proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. He would not drink to dull his senses because he was laying a basis by which even those who stood about the cross might enter into a life so wonderful, so vigorous, so abundant, that the most zestful moments of earth would pale by comparison.

He would not let men take his life, but he voluntarily laid it down himself in order that he might overcome man's greatest enemy – death – and forever deliver all who would believe in him from the power and awful sting of death. That is the gospel. "He saved others, but himself he could not save," {cf, Mark 15:31b}.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for your suffering Servant, the One who came not to be ministered unto, as we so frequently de-

mand for ourselves, but to minister and to give his life as a ransom for many. May the impact of that holy, selfless sacrifice imprint itself upon our minds and hearts,

that we may never forget that there is One who saved others, but himself he could not save. In Christ's name, Amen.

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THE PERFECT MAN
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The Gospel of Luke: THE PERFECT MAN

by Ray C. Stedman

The third Gospel presents Jesus as the Son of man. That was our Lord's favorite title for himself, one he used more frequently than any other name. As you read the Gospel of Luke, the one you meet here is, of course, the same person you read about in Matthew and Mark. However, in Matthew the emphasis is upon his kingliness; Matthew is the Gospel of the King. And in Mark you see him as the servant of God, busy in his ministry, constantly giving himself. But in Luke, the emphasis is quite different. Here is the Gospel of the Son of man – Jesus, the man. His essential manhood is constantly being set forth throughout this Gospel.

The key to the Gospel, which forms a brief outline of the book, is found in Chapter 19, Verse 10. This is a very well-known passage spoken by our Lord, in which he said of himself, "The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" {Luke 19:10 RSV}. Or, as the King James version has it, "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost" {Luke 19:10 KJV}, which is really a bit more accurate. He is not talking only about coming to save lost people; he has come to save that which is lost.

Well, what is lost? Perhaps you say it is men who are lost. No, it is man, the secret of our humanity. We no longer know how to be what we were intended to be. The whole dilemma of life is that we still have, deep within us, a kind of racial memory of what we ought to be, and what we want to be, but we do not know how to accomplish it. Man has never forgotten God's commandment to

subdue and master the earth and to discover all its forces. This is what drives him continually in scientific endeavor to unveil the secrets of nature, master them, and turn them to his own use. But we do not know how to be man. The secret of humanity is lost.

I remember reading some years ago of a group of astronomers who were discussing the progress of the science of astronomy. They were facing the many theories that have to do with the expanding universe and trying to explain some of the phenomena they had discovered in the far reaches of space. No one can work in that field without at times feeling something of the littleness of men and sensing, perhaps, the full thrust of David's question in the eighth Psalm, "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man...?" {Psa 8:3-4a RSV}. What is man? In this group of astronomers someone posed that question: "Astronomically speaking," they said, "what is man, compared to the vastness of this universe with its impossibly large distances and its great whirling bodies thousands of times bigger than our sun? Someone stood up and said, "Man is the astronomer." That is the mind of man. Even in its puniness, it is nevertheless coming to grips with these vast questions and issues. That marks something of the mystery of man.

There is something unaccountable about man. One of the questions we are puzzling about is, "What is the difference between man and animals?" We are aware that there is a vast gap, but no one

can quite put his finger on it. There is a deep and unexplainable mystery about man. It is this lost secret, this impenetrable mystery, that our Lord came to reveal and which he particularly set forth in the Gospel of Luke.

Look again at that sentence: “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost,” {Luke 19:10 KJV}. In it you have the divisions of this Gospel. First, the Son of man came, and, in the beginning of this Gospel, Luke tells us how he came into the race. Then, he came to seek. The first part of his ministry consists of seeking man out – of moving into the heart of humanity, penetrating into the emotions, thoughts, and feelings of mankind, discovering the innate centers of human motivation, putting his finger upon them, and showing his mastery over these areas. Finally, he moves on to save by means of the cross and his resurrection. You can see these divisions clearly:

- The first three chapters and beginning of the fourth give us the entrance of the Lord into the race, beginning with his genealogy; how he was born and made one of us.
- Then Chapters 4 through 19 trace for us the first part of his ministry among men, and especially, his journey toward Jerusalem:

When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. {Luke 9:51a RSV}

The record of this journey occupies Chapters 9 through part of 19, and recounts incidents along the way.

- Finally, we read:

And when he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. {Luke 19:28 RSV}

That marks the close of his ministry of penetrating into the character and nature of man, and the beginning of his work to save man. It introduces the last section of the book, in which he enters the city, comes to the temple, goes up to the Mount Olives, then to Pilate’s judgment hall, to the cross, to the tomb, and to the resurrection day.

Now, as you know, the author of this book is Luke, the great physician, the companion of Paul. It is fitting that Luke should be the one to write this Gospel of the manhood of our Lord. He is writing, as you see in his introduction, to another man, a Greek, about whom we know little or nothing, but who was evidently a friend of Luke (Chapter 1, Verses 1-4):

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely [or accurately] for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. {Luke 1:1-4 RSV}

Here is his explanation for writing. Theophilus is evidently someone who had become briefly acquainted with the Christian faith, and Luke now attempts to explain it more fully to him. Luke was a Greek himself, and is writing to a Greek. This is most interesting, for the ideal of the Greek was the perfection of humanity. They sought constantly to discover ways to achieve a perfect humanity. And it is this which is so fully unfolded in the Gospel according to Luke.

In this introduction there is one word to note particularly, because it is obscured by the way it is usually printed. Luke is writing about a person, as much as John wrote in his Gospel about a person. Though it is often obscured, Luke uses the same name that John does. Do you remember how the Gospel of John begins? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” {John 1:1 RSV}. Now notice this, Verse 2:

as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, {Luke 1:2 RSV}

It is not capitalized here, as it is in John, but there is no good reason why it should not be; it is the same person. Here, evidently, the translators have thought Luke meant the spoken word, but Luke is

writing about the final Word from God who reveals the mystery of manhood.

It is impossible to read the Gospel of Luke thoughtfully, and perceptively, without noting some very remarkable similarities in the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is very significant, for it my personal conviction that Luke wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews. At least he wrote it in its final form. It is my belief that Paul was the author of the thoughts of Hebrews, and that he probably wrote it originally in the Hebrew language and sent it to the Jews of Jerusalem. But Luke, wanting to make these same marvelous truths available to the Gentile world, translated it from Hebrew into Greek, partially paraphrasing it rather than actually translating it, so that many of his own expressions are found in it. Scholars recognize immediately in dealing with the original language that the thoughts of Hebrews are Paul's, but the words and manner of expression, in the Greek, appear to be Luke's. If that is true, then we have an explanation of some of the remarkable parallels between Hebrews and the Gospel of Luke.

The message of Hebrews declares the amazing fact that Jesus Christ became a man in order to possess men, in order to enter man. It is built around the symbolism of the Old Covenant and, especially, the tabernacle in the wilderness. Now, the tabernacle was God's picture of something, and the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us what this is. When Moses went up onto the mountain he was given a pattern which he was to follow explicitly in making the tabernacle, a pattern of heavenly things. That does not mean something off in space somewhere, but realities which are invisible to us – these are the heavenly things, of which the tabernacle was a picture. As you read Hebrews, you find that the tabernacle was a very remarkable picture of man himself. The tabernacle was built in three sections: there was the outer court, which even the Gentiles could enter, available to everyone; then there was a building in the center divided into two sections – the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies. The sacrifices took place in the outer court. The priest took the blood and carried it into the Holy Place, where it was sprinkled on the altar there. But once a year, the high priest, only under the most precise conditions, was allowed to enter behind the veil, into the Holy of Holies. Apart from that single entrance no one was ever permitted to enter the Holy of Holies on pain of death, for the

mystery of the Shekinah, the strange presence of God, dwelt in that sacred, awesome place.

Now, what does all this mean? It is a picture of man – man in his fallen state – we are that tabernacle in which God was intended to dwell:

- We have an outer court – a body – which is made of the earth, and which puts us in touch with the earth and the material life around us.
- We also have a Holy Place – the soul – the place of intimacy, where the intimate functions of our being take place; the functions of mind, conscience, memory and other mysterious things. It is very difficult to understand what takes place in the soul and men have been struggling for centuries to study this *psyche* (the Greek word for soul). Psychology, psychiatry – these are the attempts of man to probe the mystery of the Holy Place.
- Then there is that other place, the Holy of Holies, behind the veil, impenetrable. We cannot enter there. We know there is something more, something deeper, underlying the soulish aspects of our lives. Some of the great thinkers of today are recognizing this very fact. Some of the leaders of psychological thought are telling us that we have not explained man when we deal only with the soul – there is something underneath, but we cannot touch it; it is deep, mysterious, impenetrable. It is behind the veil. That is the place where God intended to dwell, and which is the intended center of human life. It is the spirit of man. Because it is largely inoperative in fallen man, men act like intelligent animals. Yet there is something mysterious, reserved, lying deep in an area which they cannot enter.

In the Gospel of Luke we trace the coming of one who at last penetrates into the secret place, who enters the spirit of man, the place of mystery, and rends the veil, opening it up so that man might discover himself and the mystery of his being, and thus fulfill himself. That is what man everywhere is desperately looking for. There is nothing more exciting than a sense of fulfillment, of achieving the possibilities of personality. That is what we are all striving for, but we have lost the key, until that key

is placed in our hand again by the Son of man who came to reveal and redeem man. This is the good news of Luke.

First, the Lord comes to the outer court, and in the first section, through Chapter 4, Verse 13, we have his entrance into this world stage. Luke records three things of him there:

- The first is his virgin birth. We hear a great deal of this today. There are those who openly deny the virgin birth, and who even stand in the pulpits, having taken vows to defend the sacred truths of Christian faith, and openly deny this truth, declaring that it is unimportant and un-historical. But it is extremely important, it is supremely important. Luke (who was a doctor and, as such, put his physician's seal of approval on this remarkable biological mystery) tells us that here one entered the race who was born of a virgin; because Mary had never known a man. Yet she had a son, and his name was called Jesus. The wonder of that mystery is given in the simple, artlessly told story that Luke presents to us. There we have it linked with his human genealogy. Have you noticed the difference between Luke's genealogy and Matthew's? Matthew traces him back to the King, to David, but Luke sweeps on into the past and does not stop until he arrives at Adam, whom he calls the son of God – the first man, the first Adam. Thus he links the first Adam with the second Adam in this Gospel of the Son of man – the Good News of the solving of the mystery of man.
- The second item Luke gives us is the story of our Lord's presentation in the temple at the age of 12, and the way he astounded the doctors with his ability to answer questions – his mental acumen. Here is the revelation of amazing mental ability – his mind presented to us as perfect. Just as his body was perfect, sinless, through the virgin birth, so he is revealed as having a mind that is perfect.
- Third, he gives us the story of the temptation in the wilderness, where the Lord was revealed as perfect in the innermost recesses of his spirit. That is indicated in advance by the announcement at his baptism, when he was pronounced

to be, "my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." {Luke 3:22b RSV}.

Then we see him passing into the Holy Place, beyond the outer court now, into the center of man's being, life, and thinking, where (as Hebrews tells us) he was "made like his brethren," {Heb 2:17b RSV}. This section begins with the amazing account of his visit to the synagogue in Nazareth, where the book of Isaiah was brought to him, and he found the place and read where it was written,

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good
news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the
captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the
Lord."** {Luke 4:18-19 RSV}

He is declaring here what he came to do – to enter into the poor, the oppressed, the blind, the captives, and to set them free. The whole story of the following chapters is of his entering into the commonplace experiences of man, where men live in darkness, slavery, and death. Soon he begins his journey to Jerusalem, as we have already noted, when he begins to enter fully into the soul of man.

At last, in Chapter 19, Verse 28, we see him preparing to enter as the great high priest into the Holy of Holies of man, to restore that which has been lost for all these many centuries. You remember that in the Holy of Holies there were only two articles of furniture. There was the Ark of the Covenant, with its mercy seat under the overarching wings of the cherubim, where God's Shekinah glory dwelt. Then there was the golden altar of incense by means of which the nation was to offer its praise up to God. These two are symbolic of that which is hidden in the depths of man.

The mercy seat speaks of man's relationship with God. Hebrews tells us that it is blood alone which can make that relationship acceptable:

**without the shedding of blood there is no
forgiveness of sins. {Heb 9:22 RSV}**

It was the blood upon the mercy seat that released the forgiveness and grace of God. Our Lord now

prepares to enter into that hidden spirit of man and offer his own blood. As we are told in Hebrews:

he entered once for all into the Holy Place, [the Holy of Holies] taking ... his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. {Heb 9:12 RSV}

The altar of incense speaks of the communication between man and God – the place of prayer. Prayer is the deepest function of the human spirit. There is nothing that goes deeper than that. When you are driven to your knees by despair, or defeat, or need, you discover that you are dealing with the rock-bottom elements of your spirit – unto God. That is what prayer basically is. Thus in the cross our Lord enters into that very foundational area of human experience.

As you continue through Luke, you see the Lord moving from the Mount of Olives down into the city, cleansing the temple, teaching and preaching in it, returning to the Mount to deliver the Olivet Discourse. Then he goes on to the upper room, to the Passover feast, from there to the Garden of Gethsemane, to Pilate's judgment seat, and from there to the cross, followed by the mob as they take him outside the city gates to nail him on the tree.

As we come to the closing chapters, we learn a remarkable thing:

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. {Luke 23:44-45 RSV}

Why? Why was this curtain torn? Because the Holy of Holies was now opened up for the first time to the gaze of men. When the Son of man died, God ripped the veil wide open. He entered into the Holy Place, into the Holy of Holies, and the secret of man, the secret of humanity, was unveiled.

Then we have the wonder of the resurrection morning and the account that Luke gives us of the two men who were walking on the road to Emmaus when a stranger appeared to them and talked with them. Oh, the things he said – the most amazing things – as he opened to them the Scriptures concerning Christ and what had been predicted of him. They said afterward, when they knew who he was,

“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” {Luke 24:32b RSV}

Why? Well, a burning heart is a heart that is caught up with the excitement and glory of a fulfilled humanity. That is where Luke ends his Gospel. The secret is revealed. The man is fully possessed. The Holy of Holies has been entered.

I do not think we could do better in closing our survey of this Gospel than to turn to the Epistle to the Hebrews and read these words:

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, {Heb 10:19-20 RSV}

That is where we stand now. The secret of every human heart is open to anyone who opens his own heart to the Son of man, to the one who penetrates the depths of the human spirit, and from there reestablishes that relationship with God which makes a man what God intended man to be. The writer continues,

and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, {Heb 10:21-23a RSV}

After all, when Christ has entered your human spirit, something has happened to you that no one can gainsay, that no argument can have any force against. You have full assurance, from within; therefore, stand fast without wavering.

for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, {Heb 10:23b-24 RSV}

All the possibility of a fulfilled humanity is available to anyone now, in whom the spirit of Christ dwells. All that you want to be, you can be, in terms of love and good works. The writer goes on...

... not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. {Heb 10:25 RSV}

That gathers it up in one brief paragraph – the strange mystery of the ages – answering all the questions that have been raised by philosophers and thinkers about the mystery of our race:

- Why do we act the way we do?
- Where are we heading?
- What is the aim of it all?

Luke has unveiled it to us in the Gospel of the Son of man – the Man who unveiled man.

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The Gospel of John: WHO IS THIS MAN?

by Ray C. Stedman

The fourth Gospel holds peculiar significance to me for many reasons, but especially because it is written by the disciple closest to our Lord. When you read the Gospel of Matthew, you are reading the record of our Lord as seen through the eyes of a devoted disciple. Mark and Luke, of course, were dedicated Christians who knew and loved Jesus Christ, though they learned about him largely through the testimony of others, but John is one who leaned upon his breast. He was of that inner circle which included Peter and James, who went with our Lord through the most intimate circumstances of his ministry and heard more than any of the others. Therefore, we open this book with a sense of anticipation. Here is the testimony of our Lord's closest friend.

In light of this, it is very startling to see how John's Gospel begins (Chapter 1, Verse 1):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {John 1:1 RSV}

Sometimes I think it is difficult to believe that Jesus is God. I know there is not a Christian who has not at one time or another felt the full force of all the arguments that would make him out to be nothing more than a man. There are times when we find it difficult to lay hold of the full intent of those words and think of the man Jesus as God. But if we find it difficult, how much more did his own disciples find it so? They, of all men, would be least likely to believe that he was God, for they lived with him and saw his humanity as none of us ever has or ever will. They must have been confronted again and again with a question that puzzled and troubled them, "Who is this man?" As

they themselves said, "What manner of man is this who heals the sick, raises the dead, quiets the wind, and changes the water to wine?" {cf, Matt 8:27}.

I have often pictured them lying out under the stars with our Lord on a summer night by the Sea of Galilee. I can imagine Peter or John or one of the others waking in the night, rising up on an elbow, and as he looked at the Lord Jesus sleeping beside him, saying to himself, "Is it true? Can this man be the eternal God? What is the secret of his being, the mystery of his coming?" No wonder they puzzled about him and constantly conversed among themselves about the mystery of his being.

Yet, so overwhelming and convincing was the evidence they saw and heard that when they reached the end of the story, when John began to write down the recollections of those amazing days, he began with declaring the deity of Jesus, "This is the One who was in the beginning. He was the Word who was with God, who was in the beginning with God, and was God," {cf, John 1:1}.

That is the theme of this Gospel of John. In Matthew we see the Lord as the King. In Mark we see him as the servant, always busy in ceaseless activity, serving men. In Luke we see his perfection of humanity, man as God intended man to be. Now, in the Gospel of John, we see his entrance into the Holy of Holies. We learn the secret of his life.

The key to the Gospel of John is found in the next to the last chapter. There are two endings to this little Gospel. John adds a postscript, which we call Chapter 21, that has to do with certain things that occurred after the resurrection. But John had ended his Gospel with these words (Chapter 20, Verses 30, 31):

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these [that is, these signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing [that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God] you might have life in his name. {John 20:30-31 RSV}

That is the twofold purpose of this book:

- First, John is setting out to give evidence why any man in any age or in any place can fully and wholeheartedly believe that Jesus is the Christ – or to use the Hebrew form, Messiah, the Anointed One, the promised one.
- The second purpose is to show that he is the Son of God.

A great deal is made of this term, “Son of God” today, as though there were a distinction to be made between God and the Son of God, but no Hebrew would ever understand it that way. To the Hebrews, to call someone a “son” of something was to say he is identified with, identical with, that thing or person.

Barnabas was named the “Son of Consolation.” That is the meaning of the name *Barnabas*. Why? Because he was that kind of man – an encouraging, consoling kind of fellow. His nickname meant that he was the very epitome of consolation. He was the expression of it.

To the Hebrews, the use of this term *the Son of God* meant, “This one is God.” That is why, invariably, when our Lord used that term of himself, he was challenged by the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, saying, “Who are you? What do you make yourself out to be? Why, you make yourself to be equal with God.” Of course he did. That is what the title means.

In setting out to prove this, John employs the principle of selection. He lets his mind run back over those amazing three and a half years he was with the Lord. Already Matthew, Mark, and Luke had written their Gospels. But John did not write his until the close of the last decade of the first century. He wrote it as an old man looking back on these events.

This fact, of course, has been used by critics to say that we cannot depend upon the Gospel of

John, because it is the account of an old man who is trying to recall the events of his youth. Remember, however, that these events were on the lips, heart, tongue, and memory of the Apostle John every day after those events took place. He was always talking about them. He is writing now to tie together the record that Matthew, Mark, and Luke had written.

Notice how he divides this. Jesus is the Christ – that is the first issue. It was the question on the lips of men in John’s day, the question that divided the Jews. Prominent figures were asking themselves, “Is this the One? Is this the Christ?” They knew there was a deepening sense of expectation running all through the Old Testament. It is forever saying in one way or another, “Someone is coming! Someone is coming!” At the close of the book of Malachi, you find that question hanging in the air, “Who is this One who is to come?”

In John’s day, people were stirred by the fact that John the Baptist had appeared. They asked him, “Are you the Christ?” He said, “No, but he is coming after me,” and when Jesus began to preach up and down the hills of Judea and Galilee, men were saying everywhere, “Is this the One? Is this the Messiah?”

The Lord Jesus declared again and again that he came with the authorized credentials of the Messiah. That is what he meant when he said,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.”

{John 10:1-2 RSV}

The sheepfold was the nation Israel. He says there is One who was to come by an authorized way, by the door. If anyone comes in any other way, he is a thief and a liar, but he who enters by the door, the authorized opening, will be recognized as the Great Shepherd. He goes on (Verse 3):

“To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, ...” {John 10:3a RSV}

He is referring there to the ministry of John the Baptist, who came as the opener of the door, the forerunner of the Messiah. Thus he came as the One who was authorized, with the proper credentials.

Now, what were those credentials? He gives them to us himself in the synagogue at Nazareth. Luke tells us in Chapter 4 that he stood in the synagogue that day and read the book of the prophet Isaiah. He found the place and deliberately read to these people the words,

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me, ...”
{Luke 4:18a RSV}**

What is the meaning of Messiah? the Anointed One? “The Spirit of the Lord has come upon me,” he says,

**“because he has anointed me to preach
good news to the poor. {Luke 4:18b
RSV}
... to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the
Lord.” {Luke 4:18c-19 RSV}**

He stopped in the middle of a sentence, closed the book and sat down. Then he said to everyone there, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” {Luke 4:21b RSV}, that is, “I am this One.”

Take those marks of the Messiah and lay them beside the seven signs that John chooses from the ministry of our Lord and you will see that he selects those particular ones because they are the signs that prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Let me show them to you in the order in which they appear in John’s Gospel:

1. The first miracle of our Lord is the changing of water into wine, {John 2:1-11}. That miracle was a parable. Our Lord was performing a symbolic act at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. He took that which belonged to the realm of inanimate being, water, and changed it into a living substance, wine. He took that which belonged to the realm of death and changed it into that which is forever an expression of joy and life. By this he is declaring in symbol what he came to do: “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” {Luke 4:19}. He did not come to declare the day of vengeance; he stopped before that passage in Isaiah. But he came to declare the day of grace, when God’s purpose would

be to take man in his brokenness, his emptiness and his lifelessness, and give to him life – to proclaim the acceptable time of the Lord.

2. The next sign is the healing of the nobleman’s son {John 4:46-54}. The central figure in that story is not the son, who lies sick at the door of death, but the nobleman, who comes to the Lord with a heart crushed with grief. In the agony of his heart he cries out to Christ, and says, “Will you come down and heal my son?” The Lord not only heals the son at a distance, with a word, but he heals the broken heart of a father. As he said, he was anointed to heal the brokenhearted.
3. The third sign is the healing of the impotent man who lay at the pool of Bethesda {John 5:1-9}. Remember, that man had lain there for thirty-eight years. He had been a captive of this paralyzing disease, so that he was unable to get into the pool. He had been brought to that pool, hoping to be healed, hoping to be set free and our Lord singled him out of the great crowd of impotent folk and healed him, saying to him, “Rise, take up your pallet, and walk,” {John 5:8b RSV}. Now, why? Here he was demonstrating his ability to set at liberty those who are oppressed. For thirty-eight years a man had been bound, and he set him free instantly.
4. The next miracle is the feeding of the five thousand {John 6:1-14}. This miracle appears in all four of the Gospels. Linked with it is the miracle of the walking on the water. What is the meaning of these signs? Well, you cannot read the story of the feeding of the five thousand without seeing that it is a marvelous demonstration of the desire of the Lord to meet the deepest need of the human heart, the hunger of man of God. He uses the symbol of bread. He himself had said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God,” (Matt 4:4). Then he demonstrated what kind of bread he meant. “I,” he said, “am the bread of life,” {John 6:35 RSV}. Taking the bread, he broke it, and with it fed the five thousand, symbolizing how fully he can meet the need of human life.

5. Then, sending his disciples out into the storm, he came walking across the waves to them in the midst of the tempest. The waves are high, and the ship is about to be overwhelmed, and their hearts are anguished with fear. He quiets them and says, "It is I; do not be afraid," {John 6:20 RSV}. In the double miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on water, there is a symbolic representation of our Lord's ability to satisfy the need of human hearts and deliver them from their greatest enemy, fear. This is good news, is it not? This is one of the signs of the Messiah: he came to proclaim good news to the poor.

Can you think of any greater news to tell anyone than that there is a way in which he can find all the clamant cry of his soul satisfied and all the fear of his life removed? That is to proclaim good news to the poor.

6. The next miracle is the healing of the blind man, {John 9:1-12}. This hardly needs comment. Our Lord said he came "to give recovery of sight to the blind," {cf, Luke 4:19}. He chose a man who was blind from birth, just as man is spiritually blind from birth, and he healed him.

7. The last miracle is the raising of Lazarus from the dead {see John 11:1-44}, symbolizing the delivering of those who all their lives had been held under the bondage of Satan through fear of death. Thus these seven signs prove beyond question that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the expected One.

But John goes deeper than that. He says that he is not only the Christ, but he is the Son of God. When you see him in his delivering power, you are indeed seeing the promised Deliverer, the Messiah. Ah, yes, John says, but that is not the greatest secret about him. When you see that he is the one able to do all these mighty things, meeting the deepest need of men's lives, look further and you will see there is glory yet.

You discover that when you stand in the presence of his humanity, see his lovely eyes, feel the beating of his human heart, sense the compassion of his life poured out in service, you are also standing in the presence of God, you are seeing

what God is like. "This One," he says, "is the Son of God."

He declares that for us in the opening chapter of his Gospel:

No one has ever seen God [That is a statement of fact. Man hungers after God, and he is always searching for God; but John goes on]; **the only Son**, [the margin says that many manuscripts read "God" in this, "the only God"] **who is in the bosom of the Father, made him known.** {John 1:18 RSV}

Literally, he has exegeted God. He has unfolded what God is like. Then, in his Gospel, John picks up seven great words of our Lord that prove that statement.

He bases it all on the great name of God which was revealed to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses saw the bush burning and turned aside to learn its secret, God spoke to him from the bush and said, "I AM WHO I AM" {Exod 3:14 RSV}. That is God's nature. That is, "I am exactly what I am. I am nothing more. I am nothing less. I am the eternal I AM." Seven times in his Gospel John picks this word up and uses it about our Lord. In fact, seven times these words came from our Lord's own lips. These constitute the proof that he is Deity.

Does that amaze you? Have you thought that it was his miracles that proved he was God? No, no. They proved he was the Messiah, the Promised One. It is his words that prove he is God. Listen to them:

1. "I am the bread of life," {John 6:35b RSV}. That is, I am the sustainer of life, the One who satisfies life.

2. "I am the light of the world," {John 8:12b RSV}, the illuminator of life. I am one [to borrow a phrase from Paul] "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" {Col 2:3 RSV}, the explainer of things, the one who casts light upon all mysteries and enigmas and solves them.

3. "I am the door" {John 10:7b RSV}, Jesus said; that is, the opportunity into life, the open way. Whenever you are confronted with a sense of

lack, some hungering after something more, these are the words you need to hear.

4. "I am the good shepherd" {John 10:11a RSV}; that is, the guide of life, the only one properly equipped to take an individual and safely steer him through all the problems and chasms that yawn on every side, to lead him safely through life. ("The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," {Psa 23:1}.)
5. Then, "I am the resurrection and the life," {John 11:25b RSV}; that is, the power of life. Do you realize that resurrection power is the only kind that works when nothing else will? It works in the midst of death. Resurrection power is the only kind that needs no outside props, no process of learning. It does not need anything to initiate it, shore it up, or bolster it in any way. When nothing else can be done, then it comes in and begins to act. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says.
6. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," {John 14:6 RSV}; that is, I am ultimate reality. I am the real substance behind all things.
7. "I am the vine" {John 15:5a RSV}, "apart from me, you can do nothing," {John 15:5c RSV}. I am the producer of fruitfulness, the source of fellowship and of identity and communion.

Thus our Lord takes the great, revealing name of God and, linking it with these simple symbols, enables us to understand God. "The Word," John says, "became flesh and dwelt among us," {John 1:14a RSV}. He pitched his tent among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of God become man. That is the tremendous theme of this book. There is not a greater theme in all the universe than the fact that when we stand in the presence of the humanity of Jesus we suddenly discover that, for the first time, we also stand in the presence of God. This is what God is like. This one who heals, loves, serves, waits, blesses, dies and rises again – this is God. That is what John reveals.

The one word that he leaves with us, then, is that believing that he is the Messiah and that he is God, we may have life in his name. He is the key to life. Who does not want to live? Isn't that what

we all want, young and old alike? What we are really seeking is the key to life. We want to be fulfilled. We want to see fulfilled all the possibilities and potential of our being which we sense lie deep inside. We want those deep yearnings satisfied. We want to be able to express ourselves. We want to be what we were designed and intended to be. Then listen! John says:

These [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. {John 20:31 RSV}

This brings us inevitably to two things:

1. First, to **worship**. How can you stand in the presence of this divine mystery and not feel your heart drawn out in worship of this one? As we often sing,

Can it be that I should gain
an interest in my Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love, how can it be
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

That is worship.

Isaiah, who saw the Lord lifted up and the temple filled with the smoke of his glory, bowed down and cried out, "Woe is me! For I am ... a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips," {Isa 6:5 RSV}. Then an angel flew down from the altar, took a coal, and put it upon his lips, cleansing him.

2. That brought him to the next thing, to which we, too, must come, if we see what John is after here: Not only worship, but **service**:

Love, so amazing, so divine," [says Isaac Watts]
demands [what?] my soul, my life, my all.

How can we worship, unless as we hear the words of the Lord Jesus? – "As my Father has sent me, even so send I you," {cf, John 20:21}.

We say with Isaiah, "Lord, here am I, send me," {cf, Isa 6:8}.

What could be greater than to stand in union with this life? – around whom the whole universe gathers – the image of the invisible God!

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray as we bow before this blessed One of whom this book has been speaking, that the eyes of our understanding may be opened, that we may realize that here is One who stands supreme in the midst of those thousands and tens of thou-

sands in Revelation who cry, “Worthy is the Lamb to be praised, to receive honor and glory and blessing. Worthy is this One who is slain and is dead, and is alive, and lives forevermore.” We thank you for this revelation, and pray that our hearts may echo these words, “Lord, here am I; I am nothing but a human being, nothing but a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, but Lord, here I am. Take me. Send me. Use me.” In Christ’s name, Amen.

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The Acts Of The Apostles: AN UNFINISHED STORY

by Ray C. Stedman

Acts is the book that reveals the power of the church. Therefore, when a church begins to dwindle, lose its power, and turn dull and drab in its witness, it needs desperately to get back into the spirit, expectation, knowledge and teaching of the book of Acts. In this book, the principles of the exchanged life – “Not I, but Christ” – is dramatically unfolded.

If the book of Acts were taken out of our New Testament, we would never understand the rest of it. It would be like a child with his front tooth missing. When you close the record of the Gospels, you see nothing but a handful of Jews in the city of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life, talking together about a kingdom for Israel.

When you open the book of Romans, on the other side of Acts, you discover that a man whose name is never mentioned in the Gospels is writing to a group of Christians in Rome – of all places, the center of Gentile culture – and he is talking about pushing out to the very ends of the earth. Obviously, something has happened in between. How did this tremendous change take place? What happened to make the gospel burst out of its confines in Judaism and the city of Jerusalem and reach out in one generation’s time to all the limits of the then-known world?

This book was written by Luke, Paul’s beloved companion, the same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Unfortunately, it bears the wrong title. In almost all the editions of Scripture it is called “The Acts of the Apostles.” But as you read the book through, the only ones whose acts are referred to are Peter and Paul. All the others are left almost entirely unnoticed, so the title is hardly fitting. It really should be titled, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit,” or even, perhaps, “The Continuing Acts of the Lord Jesus Christ.” You find this suggestion in

the introduction of the book. As Luke is writing again to the friend to whom he addressed his first book, he says,

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, {Acts 1:1 RSV}

Obviously, then, Luke was VOLUME 1 and Acts is VOLUME 2. Acts is a continued story of what Jesus began both to do and to teach. Luke goes on to say,

until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” {Acts 1:2-5 RSV}

That is what the book of Acts is all about. It is the account of the way the Holy Spirit, coming into the church, continued what Jesus began to do – i.e., carried on the work which was initiated during the days of his incarnation.

Thus, the record of the Gospels is the story of only the beginning of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. When you come to the end of the Gospels, you have come not to the end, nor even to the beginning of the end, but to the end of the beginning. In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit now begins to fulfill the designed program of God. He begins to carry on his work through the reincarnated body of

Jesus Christ – the church – the body by which the Lord intends to reach out to the uttermost parts of the earth. That work began 1900 years ago, and, as you can see, he is still at it today. We are living now in the age of the Spirit which was inaugurated by the Day of Pentecost, the first major event of the book of Acts.

The church has suffered for many centuries from a very wrong idea. Much of the weakness of the church is due to the fact that somehow, over the years, through the traditions of men, a wrong concept has developed within the body of Christ. Christians have met together and have recited the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to take the gospel out to the farthest corners of the earth,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, {Matt 28:19a RSV}

... and that is unquestionably the will of God. It is one of the favorite tricks of the devil, however, to hold up before Christian people the end that God has in view, and then suggest to them that they go about doing it their own way – trying to fulfill God's will in man's way.

Now that is exactly what the church has been doing. It has gathered itself together, recited the Great Commission, and said, "Now we must mobilize all our human resources to plan the strategy to carry this out." Christ is often pictured as waiting up in heaven, earnestly watching to see what is taking place down here, hoping somebody will get with it and carry out his program. The idea is that the church must somehow plan all the strategy, and figure out how best to reach out to the far corners of the earth, so as to fulfill this expectation of God. But that is because we have listened to only one part of the Great Commission. We have heard the first word, "Go!" but our Lord spoke another little two-letter word that we have almost completely forgotten – "Lo."

Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. {Matt 28:20b RSV}

It was never the intention of the Lord that the whole job of planning the strategy of reaching out to the ends of the earth and of mobilizing the resources should fall upon the Christian. When the church attempts the work on this basis, the Lord simply folds his arms and lets us go about our busy ways. He watches us try to fulfill this Great

Commission in our own strength, while he stands by and quietly waits until we get over it.

When exhausted and utterly beaten and discouraged, as we inevitably will be in this process, we come back to him and cry out, "Oh, Lord, we can never get this job done. We can never accomplish this." Then he quietly reminds us that his program was for the Holy Spirit to accomplish this task through the church, that he is perfectly capable of doing it, and that the book of Acts is the complete testimony to his ability and adequacy to carry out the program he had in mind. "He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" {1 Th 5:24 RSV}. It was always God's intention not only to lay the program before us, but to fulfill it in his own strength.

As you read through this book, you see various aspects of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. First of all, he is visible in directing the activities of the church. It is the Spirit of God who takes the initiative and launches new movements in carrying out the program of God. For example:

- When Philip was in Samaria preaching the gospel, a great city-wide revival was in progress as a result of his preaching. The whole city was stirred. But the spirit of God said to him, "Rise and go down to a man in the desert" {cf, Acts 8:36}. Now, what kind of strategy is that, to leave a city-wide campaign where the Spirit of God is moving in power, where multitudes are coming to Christ, to go down into the desert to talk to one man? But what one man was it? It was the Ethiopian eunuch, a man who was the treasurer of the Ethiopians {Acts 8:27}. Remember the story of how he was prepared by the Holy Spirit {Acts 8:38}. As Philip ran along beside the carriage, he heard him reading Isaiah and asked him if he understood it {Acts 8:39}. The eunuch answered,

How can I if someone doesn't explain it to me? {Acts 8:31b RSV}

When Philip came up to sit beside him, he found he was reading exactly the right place, Isaiah 53. Beginning at that spot, Philip began to preach to him about Jesus. And he was won to Christ.

That is always what Spirit-led witnessing is –

- the right man
- in the right place
- at the right time
- saying the right thing
- to the right person!

This is one of the first evidences in this book of the overall directing activity of the Holy Spirit.

- In Chapter 9, the Holy Spirit calls a man on the Damascus road and sends another man to pray with him – Ananias, who was absolutely astounded by this commission. “Lord,” he said, “you don’t know what you are asking.” God said, “I know whom I have called. He’s a chosen instrument of mine.”
- In Chapter 13 the Holy Spirit is recorded as saying to the church at Antioch,

Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.
{Acts 13:2b RSV}

- Later on in the book, Paul says, “We tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit said ‘No.’ And we started to preach the gospel in Asia, but were forbidden by the Holy Spirit.” {cf, Acts 16:6-7}. All through this book you find that the strategy has all been worked out in advance by the Holy Spirit. As Christians are available to him, he unfolds the strategy step by step. Nobody can plan this kind of a program. We can only be willing to follow the overall directive activity of the Spirit of God at work in his church. That is the divine strategy.
- Further on in Acts you find the Holy Spirit in another aspect of his ministry doing what no man can do – communicating life to those who believe. Wherever the gospel is preached, wherever the Word of God is upheld, wherever the good news of the work of the Lord Jesus is preached to men, the Holy Spirit is there to communicate life.
- Have you ever noticed who gives the altar call in the book of Acts? It is almost invariably the ones being preached to:

On the Day of Pentecost it was as the Spirit of God preached through Peter to those thousands who had been brought in by that tremendous miracle of the tongues after the Holy Spirit descended upon them. Peter got only halfway through his message. He had only reached his second point. What happened? They were convicted in their hearts. They broke in on him and said, “Preacher, what must we do to be saved?” {cf, Acts 2:37}. Now, who gave the altar call there? Well, they did.

When the Philippian jailer is impressed by the singing of Paul and Silas at midnight, and the earthquake comes and shakes down the prison walls, who gives the altar call? Why he does. He comes running and says to them, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” {cf, Acts 16:25-27}.

It is the Holy Spirit communicating to them, imparting life to them when they believe. A most helpful verse in this regard is in the Gospel of John. I have read this many, many times to remind myself that it is not the invitation that makes people come to Christ; it is the truth as it is being proclaimed by the Holy Spirit. In Chapter 8 of John, Christ is explaining his message to his followers. He is the light of the world. He reveals himself to men. Verse 30 says, “As he spoke thus, many believed in him” {John 8:30 RSV}. While the word was going out.

Not only does the Holy Spirit communicate life, as he did in the home of Cornelius (while the message was going on the Holy Spirit fell upon the people gathered there), but he is also at work preserving the purity of the church. Today there are groups of people whose sole occupation seems to be to defend the faith; to preserve, if they can, the purity of the church. Many of these people go so far as to corner unsuspecting pastors, nail them to the wall over this whole matter of defending the faith, and try to convince them to drive out those who disagree, or who have heretical ideas, within the church. Their perfectly proper intention is to try to preserve the purity of the church. But throughout the book of Acts you will discover that the Holy Spirit himself is in charge of this task. As the church fulfills its commission to be available, to be willing instruments of the activity and life of the

Holy Spirit, he is at work to preserve the purity of the church.

For example, there is an amazing incident that occurs early in the book. Ananias and Sapphira's hypocrisy was revealed when they tried to attach to themselves a holiness which they did not actually possess (Acts 5:1-11). They tried to appear more committed or dedicated than they really were. They tried to gain a reputation for sanctity among the Christians by appearance only. The judgment of the Holy Spirit came immediately in the form of their physical death. Now, he does not judge that way today (at least not to that extent). This is a pattern to indicate what the Spirit of God does on the spiritual level. But at the beginning, he judges on the physical level, in order that we might see this principle at work. But whether spiritual or physical, the result is exactly the same. Let somebody begin to use his religious standing, his Christian opportunities in order to advance his own sanctity in the eyes of people – to pretend to a holiness he does not possess – and what happens? The Spirit of God cuts him off from the manifestation of the life of Christ. Instantly that life is as powerless, as weak and fruitless, as dead as far as its effect upon those around, as Ananias and Sapphira were as they lay dead on the floor at Peter's feet.

Finally, the major emphasis of this book and the amazing thing about these Christians – the quality that made them a constant wonder to those who heard them preach – is that the Spirit of God is always at work imparting boldness to Christians. Did you notice how bold these Christians were? At one moment you see Peter and John hiding behind locked doors, afraid to go out into the streets of Jerusalem because of the enmity of the Jews against the Lord Jesus. Now, after the Spirit of God comes upon them, they are out in the streets and temple courts boldly proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ. When they are locked up in prison, the angel releases them and they go right back into the temple courts to pray and preach again. Once again they are arrested, and the church makes prayer for them, asking God that they might go out again and preach the gospel in the very same place. In other words, they are saying, "Lord, do it again. We got into trouble the last time, but Lord, do it again!" Their boldness was simply irresistible. Even those who were bitter enemies of the gospel could not resist the boldness with which they proclaimed the truth.

That is God's program – the Holy Spirit doing the whole thing – energizing, guiding, directing, programming, empowering, and communicating life. He does it all. It is not up to us to do anything except be available, to be his instruments, to go where he wills, to open our mouths, to be ready to take advantage of whatever situation he places us in. It is the job of the Spirit, which he never fails to fulfill, to carry out that ministry. That is what the church has lacked, is it not? That is what you see so much here in the book of Acts.

The extent of this program is revealed to us both geographically and chronologically in this book. In Chapter 1 you have the geographic dimension (Verse 8):

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”
{Acts 1:8 RSV}

You can divide the book on that basis; this is a divinely given table of contents.

1. The first seven chapters gather around being a witness to Christ in Jerusalem.
2. In Chapter 8 you find a break, and the disciples are driven out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria.
3. Beginning with Chapter 13 you have the call of Paul and Barnabas to go out to the Gentile world. That begins the story of the outreach to the uttermost parts of the earth.

That is God's program for the geographical carrying out of the gospel, and it is only in our own generation that we begin to see this completely fulfilled.

In Chapter 2 you see the same program fulfilled chronologically (in point of time). Here, as the people are stunned by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and are asking what they must do to be saved, Peter says (Verses 38, 39): "Repent [that is, change your mind] and identify yourselves in baptism with the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive Christ. Believe in him, for this promise is to you," {cf, Acts 2:38-39}. It was to the very generation to which he was

preaching, “to you and to your children [the next generation] and to all those that are far off” {Acts 2:39b RSV} – down the corridors of time. No matter how many generations may come in this far-reaching age of grace, the promise is to you as it was to them, that to everyone who receives the Lord Jesus Christ, the promise of the Holy Spirit will be given, “to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him,” {Acts 2:39c RSV}. That is the program of God in the dimension of time.

It began, in the first act after the ascension of Christ, with the completion of the twelve apostles once again. Here, I must take issue with those of my colleagues who suggest that Matthias was chosen as one of the disciples in the energy of the flesh, and that it was a mistake on the part of men; that God chose Paul rather than Matthias. I believe that this account makes very clear that Matthias was chosen under the superintendency of the Holy Spirit and that he was put in the right place at the right time. In this account, Peter stood up and quoted the Scriptures, saying that it had been predicted that one should be chosen to take Judas’ place. “His office,” he quoted, “let another take” {Acts 1:20b RSV}. His conclusion is,

“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” {Acts 1:21-22 RSV}

Then, as you know, they put forward two men, Joseph (called Barsabbas) and Matthias. Then through the exercise of a perfectly appropriate method, one which was used in Old Testament time again and again to determine the mind of God (the casting of lots) Matthias is chosen.

Further indication that this choice is indeed under the leadership and superintendency of the Holy Spirit is found in Chapter 2, where it says that on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out, Peter stood up with the eleven. Peter (one) with the eleven (twelve altogether) goes on, lifts up his voice, and addresses the assembled multitude (Acts 2:14).

Then in Chapter 6, long before Paul is called as the apostle to the Gentiles, we read (Verses 1, 2):

In these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists [that is, the Grecian Jews] murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples... {Acts 6:1-2a RSV}

What twelve? Why, the eleven with Matthias, who was chosen to take Judas’ place, completing the number of witnesses. It is upon this twelve, the complete number of the apostles, that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost.

You remember in the book of Revelation that the names of the twelve apostles formed the foundations of the city that John saw coming down from heaven – the twelve, with Matthias {Rev 21:12-14). There were twelve apostles to Israel. There had to be twelve. Judas fell, but God chose Matthias to take his place as a witness to Israel, but it is Paul, who is the special apostle, called to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Now, this does not mean that the other apostles do not have a ministry to us; they do. But it was agreed among them that God had chosen that Peter should go to Israel, while Paul went to the Gentiles. The same message was given to each, but the twelve were especially designed to be a complete, divinely chosen witness to Israel, and they fulfilled that ministry completely.

After the full number of the apostles was restored, the great mark of the book of Acts, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, took place. Everything else flows from this event. The interesting thing is to see how Christians, reading about this amazing occurrence, have focused their attention on the incidentals and neglected the essentials:

- What are the incidentals here? The rushing wind, the fire that danced on the heads of the disciples, and the many tongues or languages by which they spoke. These are the incidentals of the story. These are simply the peripheral events that took place, the signs that showed that something important was happening.
- What was the essential, then, the important thing? It was the forming of a new people – the church. One hundred and twenty individuals met in the temple courts. They were as unrelated to each other as any people born in

widely scattered parts of the earth might be to each other today. They were individually related to the Lord, but they had no blood ties. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on them, he baptized them into one body. They became a living unit; they were no longer related only to the Lord; they were related also to each other. They became a living organism, which was from then on, and still is, to be the body of Christ, the means by which he speaks to the world, by which he is given a flesh and blood existence in our day. They were made a new people, by means of a new power – the Holy Spirit, indwelling them and tying them to one another – and given a new program. As we have already seen, this was to reach out to Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth, through time, from one generation to the next, until the coming of Jesus Christ. Those are the essentials.

Isn't it strange how we focus on these tiny little incidentals, neglecting the tremendous matters that the Holy Spirit would impart to us?

The rest of the book deals with the calling of Paul, the wise master builder, the one whom the Holy Spirit selected to be the pattern for Gentile Christians. This is why Paul was put through a very intensive training period by the Holy Spirit, during which he was subjected to one of the most rigorous trials that any human being could undergo. He was sent home to his own home town to live in obscurity for seven years, until he learned the great lesson that the Holy Spirit seeks to teach every Christian, and without which no one of us can ever be effective for him. In the words of our Lord, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone" {John 12:24b RSV}.

As you trace the career of the Apostle Paul, you discover that, like every one of us, when he first came to Christ he did not understand this. As we would have reasoned in his place, he thought that he had all it took; he was especially prepared to be the kind of instrument that could be mightily used of God to win Israel to Christ. Undoubtedly he said to himself (as he reveals in the letter to the Philippians): He had the background, he had the training, he was by birth a Hebrew, he was educated in all the Law and the understanding of the Hebrews, he had the position, he was the favorite pupil of the greatest teacher of Israel, Gamaliel, he

was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He understood everything of the Hebrew background. Out of this consciousness of his own background and training arose in his heart that pulse beat that you find constantly breaking through from time to time in the writings of this mighty man – this hungering to be an instrument to reach Israel for Christ:

- In the ninth chapter of Romans he said, "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race" {Rom 9:3 RSV}. But God had said to this man, "I don't want you to reach Israel. I'm calling you to be the apostle to the Gentiles, to bear my name before kings, and to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ," {cf, Acts 9:15}.
- Do you remember how he went out into the desert, and there God taught him? Then he sent him back home to Tarsus. After he tried in Damascus to preach Christ out of the energy of his own flesh and found it failing, he was driven out of the city and let down like a criminal over the wall in a basket. Broken-hearted and defeated, he found his way to Jerusalem and thought the apostles at least would take him in, but they turned him aside. It was only as Barnabas finally interceded for him that he was given any acceptance in the eyes of the apostles at all.
- Then, going into the temple, he met the Lord, who said to him, "Go back home. Get out of the city. They won't receive your testimony here. You don't belong here. This isn't the place I've called you to," {cf, Acts 22:17-21}. In Tarsus he faced up at last to what God was saying to him all the time, that unless he was willing to die to his own ambition to be the apostle to Israel, he could never be the servant of Christ. And when at last he received that commission and took it to heart, and said, "Lord, anywhere you want. Anything you want. Anywhere you want to send me. I'm ready to go." God sent Barnabas to him, and he took him by the hand and led him down to Antioch, a Gentile church, and there the Apostle Paul began his ministry.

The book ends with Paul in Rome, preaching in his own hired house, chained day and night to a Roman guard, unable to get out, unable to pursue the evangelizing of the ends of the earth as his heart longed to do – limited, fettered, bound – and yet, as he writes to the Philippians, his heart overflowing with the consciousness that though he was bound, the word of God was not. One of the most amazing words in all of Scripture is given there, as he writes to his friends in Philippi and says, “All these things which have happened to me, have happened to advance the gospel,” {cf, Phil 1:12b RSV}. They have not limited anything. They have not held anything back. These obstacles, and these apparent disappointments have not stopped a thing; they have only advanced the gospel. And then he gives two specific ways in which this was happening:

- One was that the cream of the crop in the Roman army who formed the special palace guard of the emperor were being brought to Christ one by one. The praetorium guard was being reached, and, of course, you know how it was happening. They were being brought in by the emperor’s command and chained to the Apostle Paul for six hours. Talk about a captive audience! God was using the emperor to bring his best boys in and chain them to the apostle for six hours of instruction in the Christian gospel. No wonder Paul writes at the end of the letter, “All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household” {Phil 4:22 RSV}.
- The second thing is that because Paul had been arrested, all the other brethren in the city were busy preaching the gospel, so there was more of the gospel going out in Rome because he was in prison than there would have been if he were loose. He said, “I rejoice in that.” That always suggests to me that one of the finest ways to evangelize a community might be to lock all the preachers up in jail!

- But there is a third advantage the apostle could not see, a thing he never dreamed was taking place. We can see now, looking back, that the greatest thing that Paul ever did in his lifetime was not to go about preaching the gospel and planting churches, as he would have thought. But the greatest accomplishment was the letters which he never would have written if he had not been in prison. Because of those letters, the church has been ministered to and fed and strengthened through 20 centuries of Christian life.

Now, as you know, the book of Acts is an unfinished book. It has never been completed – it suddenly ends. Luke does not even write *finis* at the end, he leaves it there. He never gets back to it, because, of course, the Holy Spirit intended it to be unfinished – it is still being written. The book of Acts is the book of the record of the things which Jesus began both to do and to teach. Is he through yet? No. He is still working, isn’t he?

VOLUME 20 is now being written. When this great book is fully completed and, in glory, you get to read it – what will be your part in it?

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for this wonderful book that challenges us, blesses us, encourages and delights us, and makes us want to cast ourselves anew upon your grace, forgetting all the traditions of men, and to turn once again to the program and the strategy of God. How we thank you, Lord, that every bit of it is still as vibrantly true as it ever was, and that in this 20th century day, we can discover again for ourselves all that this book contains. Thank you, in Christ’s name, Amen.

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The Message of Romans

by Ray C. Stedman

The Epistle of Paul to the Romans is undoubtedly the most powerful human document that has ever been written. It is pure gold from beginning to end.

- This is the book that lit the fire in Martin Luther's heart and brought about the Protestant Reformation, changing the history of Europe, as well as the world.
- This is the book that struck home as John Wesley sat in a little chapel in London listening to Luther's Prelude to the Epistle to the Romans. Wesley said his heart was strangely warmed as he heard the truths of Romans set forth. There followed, through him, the great evangelical awakening that saved England from the fate of France and arrested the decay of English life, completely altering the history of the world again.
- This is the epistle that burned in the heart of Karl Barth, who in our day set forth some of the mighty truths of this letter and thus captured the theological world, calling it back from the crass, empty liberalism of the nineteenth century, restoring much truth to the churches of Europe. The lives of millions of people who have read the letter to the Romans have been drastically altered.
- A church I know of in Montana was once regarded as the most liberal church in the city of Great Falls. The pastor was in Chicago on one occasion, and he went into the Moody Church to see what fundamentalists were saying. He wanted to find something to criticize. He listened to Dr. Ironside teaching the book of Romans, and his heart was captured by that message. Afterward he talked with Dr. Ironside, who gave him a copy of his lectures on Romans. This man read the book on the train back to Montana, and by the time he reached Great Falls, he was a transformed man. He went into his pulpit and began to proclaim the truths of the book of Romans and the church was transformed.
I have, therefore, had the experience of seeing a completely liberal church transformed to an evangelical testimony in the space of a few years by the power of the book of Romans.

Perhaps that will whet our appetites as we come to this great epistle.

It was written to the Christians in Rome by the Apostle Paul. He was spending a few months in Corinth before going up to Jerusalem to carry that famous collection of money which had been gathered together by the churches of Asia for the needy saints in Jerusalem.

We do not know how the church in Rome was started – perhaps by Christians who had been converted at Pentecost and returned to the capital city.

Paul was writing to them because he had heard of their faith, and he wanted to fulfill it to the utmost; he wanted them to be soundly based in the truth. Thus this letter constitutes a magnificent explanation of the total message of Christianity. It contains almost every Christian doctrine in some form, and is a panorama of the marvelous plan of God for the redemption of man.

If you had no other book of the Bible than this, you would find every Christian teaching at least mentioned here. This, then, is what we might call *the master key to all of the Scriptures*. If you really grasp the book of Romans in its total argument you will find yourself at home in any other part of the Scriptures.

In the introduction, found in the first seventeen verses, Paul writes to us about Christ, about the Roman Christians and about himself. As in every good introduction, he declares here the major themes of the letter. The letter itself is divided into three major divisions: Chapters 1 through 8, 9 through 11, and 12 through 16. These divisions grow naturally out of one another. As we shall see,

- The first eight chapters are doctrinal explanations of what God is doing with man; how he redeems the total man – body, soul and spirit.
- Chapters 9-11 illustrate this for us in the nation Israel.
- And 12-16 is the practical section in which all these mighty truths are applied to human situations.

Thus, the book covers all of life. If you will remember that simple outline you will have a key to the book of Romans.

The first major theme is about Christ, because there is no Christianity without him. Christianity is not a creed; it is a life – a life to be lived again in you. Therefore, you must learn about Christ. That is the theme of the letter and it is the note with which it begins.

Next, Paul writes about the Roman Christians because they are just like us. In fact, this is the central problem with which Christianity grapples – human beings like you and me. That is what these Roman Christians were. They are the basic material in which God begins this work. All that is de-

scribed about them in this letter is true of us, as everything that is true of us was true of them.

Third, Paul writes about himself because he is the pattern of what Christ will do; he is Exhibit A, a living example of God's grace. All this is simply to make visible and clear to us what God intends to do in Christ.

This letter requires a summary treatment. In studying certain books of the Bible I have tried to gather up the main themes, the principle thoughts of the book, in order to get the full force of the message. But this letter moves in such a logical development that the best way to handle it is to trace through the argument, without getting bogged down in details, so that we might see the devastating logic by which the apostle develops his theme. When we are through, we will see how magnificently he has captured all the mighty truths of the gospel for us.

To begin with, in Chapter 1, we have the central affirmation of the letter – **the gospel**:

I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God ... {Rom 1:16a RSV}

Who would be ashamed of the power of God, the greatest force possible in the universe, at work in the gospel? It can change lives; it can lay hold of a drifting, purposeless, lost young man who does not care where he is going and does not know what he is living for and suddenly change his life and give him purpose, drive, and meaning. That is the power of God at work. That is the gospel.

it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. {Rom 1:16b RSV}

Paul will show us why as we go along, for in the gospel,

the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live. {Rom 1:17b RSV}

This quote is from Habakkuk and is the verse that burned itself into Martin Luther's heart. That is Paul's theme – the righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel.

To establish **the need** for this, Paul looks at the world around him. In the subsequent verses, through Chapter 2 and most of Chapter 3, he is simply analyzing what mankind is like, taking the two apparent divisions of mankind.

Someone has well said, "There are only two classes of people, the righteous and the unrighteous, and the classifying is always done by the righteous." I remember years ago, when my children were very small, stepping out into the backyard one day and finding that someone had drawn a line down the center of a panel of the fence with chalk. One side was headed "Good People" and the other side, "Bad People." Under the heading, "Bad People," were listed the names of my children. On the other side were the neighbor's children. It was quite obvious that the classifying had indeed been done by "the righteous."

The apostle starts with the unrighteous, those whom we would call "The Bad People," and outcasts of society. But first he summarizes both classes in one verse. This is such an important verse that I call your special attention to it (Verse 18):

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. {Rom 1:18 RSV}

That says a great deal. It says, for instance, that the problem with men is that they have the truth, but they will not look at it; instead, they suppress it.

If you want proof of that, I suggest you look at your own life for a while, and also at the lives of those around you. Is it not true that we push the things we do not like down into our subconscious mind? We do not like to think about them. This is why men keep so busy in the rat-race of life, never wanting to be alone, never wanting to stop and think, or really look at things, but always attempting to keep busy in a constant whirl of life. Suppression of the truth – that is the central problem.

Because of this suppression, the wrath of God is continuously pouring itself out upon mankind. That wrath is described for us as this chapter develops. It turns out not to be lightning bolts from heaven, flung at wicked people who step over the traces, but rather God saying to mankind, "Look, I don't want you to do a certain thing because it will

destroy you, but if you insist upon doing it, you may, but you will have to accept the consequences. You can't make a choice to live wrongly and still avoid the consequences that come from that choice."

Three times in this chapter the wrath of God is indicated in the repeated phrase. "God gave them up." It results in this condition (Verses 29-31):

They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. {Rom 1:29-31 RSV}

That is the condition of the rebellious people who display their enmity towards God and their suppression of the truth of God by flagrantly disobeying him, observing no standard, living as they please, and doing what they like. The result is a moral decay, and a perversion of the natural drives of life. Even the sexual drives become perverted, so that men give themselves to men, and women to women, as this chapter describes. This is exactly what is taking place in society today, wherever man lives in open rebelliousness.

But that is not all of society. In Chapter 2, the apostle turns to the other side, the "good" side, the "Good People" – the so called "moral" and "religious" people who are by this time very delightedly pointing the finger at the crowd which is living in open and vile wickedness. Paul says to them, "Wait a minute!" Verse 1:

You have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. {Rom 2:1 RSV}

Then in a most remarkable way, he shows how this is true. He reveals that these people who are saying, "Why, we don't do these things. We don't live like this. We don't smoke. We don't carouse. We don't go in for sexual licentiousness. We observe the laws. We try to behave ourselves," are, nevertheless, equally as guilty as the others.

They, too, are fulfilling certain of the things on the list above, as fully as those who do the more open things. They indulge in such things as malice,

strife, deceit, malignity, gossip, slander, and so forth. They, too, are “inventors of evil;” they, too, are “foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.” They cover it by an external appearance of being good, but inside, their hearts are as filled with malignity, envy, jealousy, strife and evil against one another as the others.

So there you have the picture of humanity. “Do-your-own-thing” people are on one side, looking at these moral, respectable people, reading their hearts aright and saying, “Look at the hypocrites. I wouldn’t touch them with a ten-foot pole.” And all the “moral and respectable” people are looking at these others and saying, “Look at that licentious, lascivious crowd. We don’t want anything to do with them.” But God, turning the spotlight of his omniscient eye on humanity, says, “You are all equally guilty.” There is no difference.

Then the Jew comes in and says, “What about me? After all, I am a Jew and have certain advantages before God.” Paul examines this claim and shows that the Jew is in exactly the same boat as the others. Despite his advantages; he is filled with the same kind of heart-enmity as the others. So Paul’s conclusion is that mankind stands, without exception, in need of a Redeemer.

Now, that prepares the way for the gospel. When man sees this, the conclusion is found in this well-known passage (Chapter 3, Verses 19-20):

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. {Rom 3:19-20 RSV}

And then, in Verse 23:

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. {Rom 3:23 RSV}

As Phillips so beautifully renders that last clause, “everyone falls short of the beauty of God’s plan” {Rom 3:23b J.B.Phillips}. That lays the basis for redemption.

There are **three phases of redemption**, as Paul outlines them for us. These are familiar to you: justification, sanctification, and glorification:

Chapter 4 illustrates the meaning of *justification*. Paul begins this theme in the closing part of Chapter 3, where he shows us that justification means that God gives us a righteous standing before him on the basis of the work of Christ. Another has died in our place. Another has met our need. We could never do it ourselves, for we are totally incapable of pleasing God apart from this change that occurs in the heart. It makes no difference whether we build a moral, respectable life outwardly or kick over the traces and live like a bohemian or a hippie. Both are guilty; neither is accepted; neither is any better than the other. Therefore, the only way righteousness can come to us is by accepting the gift of God in Jesus Christ. That is justification. It has to do with the spirit of man. Each of us is a three-fold being; we have spirit, soul, and body. It is God’s program to save the whole man, and in the next series of chapters Paul tells us how God does it.

He begins with the spirit, the deepest part of man. What God does in the spirit is to implant his Holy Spirit there. That gives us righteousness, a righteous standing before God. Justification is therefore a permanent, unchangeable thing. It is far more than forgiveness of sin, although it includes that; it is a position before God as though we never had sinned at all. It is Christ’s righteousness imputed to us, reckoned to our account. When this takes place we are delivered from the penalty for sin.

- Paul illustrates this in Chapter 4 with Abraham and David, who were both justified on this basis, and not by circumcision or by obeying the Law or by any of the things that men do to please God. No religious hocus-pocus, no attempt to obey an unreachable standard, would be adequate in God’s sight. It was to be simply by faith; these men believed God about his Son.
- Abraham looked forward and saw the coming of Christ and believed God and he was justified by faith. David, although he was guilty of the twin sins of adultery and murder, believed God and was justified, so that he could sing about the man “to whom God would not impute iniquity.” Thus, these men are examples from the Old Testament of how God justifies.

Unfortunately, many Christians stop right there. They think that all salvation is about – a way to escape hell and get to heaven. But there is more to the human life than the spirit; there is also the soul and the body.

Beginning in Chapter 5, Paul sets forth for us *the way God works to deliver the soul*. That consists of our mind, our emotions, and our will. The soul of man, as he is born of Adam, is under the reign of sin. The flesh (if you want to use the Biblical term for it) rules us. The life of Adam possesses us, with all its self-centered characteristics. Even though our spirit has been justified it is quite possible to go on with the soul still under the bondage and reign of sin. So, though our destiny is settled in Christ, our experience is still as much under the control of evil as before we were Christians. That is the cause of the miserable experience of being up-and-down, sometimes reckoning on the promises of God for justification, then experiencing again the implacable bondage of sin ruling in the life, causing selfishness and self centeredness. Well, what is God's program for this? To sum it up in one word: *sanctification*.

God intends us to see that in Jesus Christ this whole thing has been taken care of, even as our destiny was, so that we can be as free from the reign of sin as we are from the penalty of sin:

- In Chapter 5, Paul outlines the whole program for us. He takes these two really basic divisions of mankind, man in Adam and man in Christ, puts them side-by-side and says, "Look, when you were a man in Adam (that is, before you became a Christian) you acted on the basis of the life that you had inherited from Adam. You did things naturally, and what you did naturally was wrong, it was self-centered. You didn't have to plan it, or to program it. "You didn't have to get up in the morning and think about how to be bad, did you? You didn't catch yourself making resolutions never to be good again, and then suddenly find yourself breaking your word, and being good again when you really didn't intend to. No. You simply expressed the life that was in you, the life of Adam. You learned how from babyhood and it was so widespread around you that it seemed perfectly natural."

But now, Paul says, when you become a Christian, God does something to that old life. He cuts you off from this life in Adam. You are no longer joined to fallen Adam, but you are joined to a risen Christ, and your life is now linked with him. He plans now to express his life through you in the same natural way as Adam once expressed his life through you. What you experienced of defeat, misery, heartache, bondage and blindness in Adam will be exceeded much more by what you will experience of victory, glory, blessing, peace and joy in Christ.

When you learn the process, it is as easy to be good in Christ as it was to be bad in Adam. It is just as natural, and done without struggle. But it will take a while for you to learn to put it into practice. You will do feebly at first and you will struggle with it. Perhaps it will take you quite a while to really see what Paul is talking about, but when you do, you will discover that where once sin reigned over you unto death, Christ is now reigning over you unto life. Right now, in this life, you can experience victory in Christ where once you experienced only defeat in Adam.

- Chapter 6 begins to show us how. Here Paul declares that God, through the death of Jesus, not only died for us, but we also died with him. That is a great truth. When God says he set us free from the life of Adam and linked us to the life of Christ, he really did. Through for quite a long time our feelings will tell us differently, God wants us to understand this. We are to believe it regardless of how we feel, because what he says is true. If we will believe it, despite our feelings, we will soon discover that it is true. More and more we shall enter into the realization of this tremendous thing – that we can be good in Christ as easily as we were bad in Adam.

He begins, then, by announcing the fact, and then says that we must learn to reckon on this. Day by day, as you come into situations of pressure and temptation, you must remind yourself that what God says is true and act on it, even though you do not feel like it. You will not feel dead with Christ; you will feel as if this evil within is very much alive, and that it has control over you, that you must do wrong

things. You will feel unsatisfied if you do not, afraid that you will not find what you are looking for in life, or that you will miss out on what the world around you is experiencing.

These are the pressures that will come upon you, but whom are you going to believe? The One who loves you? Will you reckon that what he says is true and act on that basis? If you do, you will soon discover that it is true, and you will be brought right out into liberty.

- Chapter 7 faces the fact that there are two levels of understanding and experiences in this matter. We know already, even before we become Christians, that certain aspects of our natural life – the Adamic life, the flesh – are bad because they get us into trouble. We know that selfishness is bad. We know that sexual misadventure is bad. We know that stealing and lying are bad. We think that we understand what the flesh is, and what God means when he talks to us about these bad things in our lives. At first, this is the level on which we respond. We stop lying and stealing and doing other outward things. Then we discover that something strange is happening; despite the fact that we have learned how to walk in victory over the things we have labeled bad, we are still in bondage. We still do not have the power we are looking for in our Christian experience. Thus we enter into the experience that Paul describes in Chapter 7. There he speaks of an inner conflict in which he wrestles with himself. What is wrong? What we have not learned yet is that there is what we might call a “good” side of flesh which is really as bad as the “bad” side. Self effort – the effort we make to try to do something for God, or to gain some kind of flavor or pleasure or advancement for ourselves by the things we do for God – these are just as bad as the “bad” things.

When we finally learn that there is nothing we can do for God, but that he intends to do everything through us, then we come into deliverance. That is when we begin fully to realize the experience of mind, emotion, and will brought under the control of Jesus Christ and the fulfilling in glorious, triumphant power all that he has in mind for us. That is the sanctifying of the soul.

But now what about **the body**? Chapter 8 deals with that. Here Paul shows us that while we are still in this life the body remains unredeemed, but the fact that

- the spirit has been justified, and
- the soul is being sanctified
- is a guarantee that God will one day redeem (glorify) the body as well.

When we enter at last into the presence of Christ, we shall stand – body, soul, and spirit – perfect before him.

That line of thought erupts into a great, tremendous paean of praise at the close of this chapter.

In Chapters 9 through 11 some of **the questions** that have inevitably been raised by any thinking mind which has followed through this great plan of redemption are answered:

- First, there is the question of *the sovereignty of God* which is magnificently treated in Chapter 9. God is a sovereign being, and his sovereignty answers the question of why I am part of Christ’s body and not someone else. The whole matter of election and the predestinating choice of God helps us to see this whole problem as it really is. We tend to think of ourselves as in a neutral condition before God, and depending upon how we live or act, or what choices we make, we will either fall off on the side of being lost or go on to be saved. But this is not the case. This chapter shows us that the whole race is already lost, lost in Adam; we were born into a lost race. We lost our right to be saved in Adam, when he sinned, and we have no rights before God at all. Therefore, it is only God’s grace that saves any of us. No one has any right to complain to God if some are saved, when none have any right to be saved. Thus, he sets before us in a most powerful way the sovereign power and choice of God.

- In Chapter 10 he links the sovereignty of God with *the moral responsibility and freedom of man*. He shows us that salvation is a choice of faith. You need not climb up into heaven to bring Christ down, or go down into the grave to bring him up from the dead. In other words, if you were planning to work your way into heaven, this is what you would have to do. You would have to climb into heaven and bring Christ down to earth, and then after he had been here a while and died, you would have to go down into the grave, make him alive and bring him up – all by your works. How are you going to do that? Well, you cannot, and furthermore, you do not have to. The word is already in your mouth that Jesus is Lord; only believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, and you will be saved.
- In Chapter 11 he shows us that even as God set aside Israel for a time, in order that grace might do its work among the Gentiles, so God has completely set aside the flesh, the fallen nature, what we are by human nature, so that we might learn what God will do for and through us. When we freely admit, in practice, that without Christ we can do nothing, then we shall learn that we can do all things through him who strengthens us. Faith is the process of this, and it will never be any different. No matter how long we live as Christians, we will ourselves never become any better or any more able to serve Christ, apart from simple dependence upon him. It is always and only Christ working in us which accomplishes the Father's will.

Pride, therefore, is our greatest temptation and our cruelest enemy. Some day even our flesh will serve God by his grace. In the day when creation is freed from its bondage to sin and the sons of God stand forth in resurrection bodies, then even that which was once rejected and cursed shall be made to fulfill the promises and demonstrate the power of God. This is all illustrated by God's treatment of Israel. And that leads us to the doxology at the close of Chapter 11, Verse 33:

O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! {Rom 11:33 RSV}

The final section, Chapters 12 through 16, covers **the practical application** of these truths in life. I will call attention to only one or two things.

First, in Chapter 12, Verse 1, he begins,

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, [justification, sanctification, glorification] to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship [or reasonable service]. {Rom 12:1 RSV}

In other words, the most reasonable, intelligent, thoughtful, purposeful thing you can do with your life, in view of all these great facts that Paul has declared to you, is to give yourself to God and to live for him. Nothing else can fulfill you to any degree. Therefore, give yourself to him. It is the reasonable thing to do.

When you do, you will find your life being changed in all your relationships:

- First, it is changed with regard to your brethren, as the latter part of Chapter 12 shows. Presenting your body will affect your life in the church.
- Then, in the latter part of Chapter 12 and in Chapter 13, he says it will affect your relationship to the governing powers, to mankind in general, and to all society.
- Even your inner attitudes will be different, as discussed in Chapter 14. Your attitudes toward the weak will be entirely opposite to what it was before you were a Christian.
- And your attitude toward the lost (Chapter 15) will be entirely different. There will be a burning passion to reach them, for a quite different reason than you ever could have had before.

Paul's closing words are wonderful (Chapter 16, Verses 25-27):

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory evermore through Jesus Christ. {Rom 16:25-27}

Prayer:

Our Father, teach us these mighty truths. Teach us to give ourselves to them that we might learn them understand them and put them into practice in our own lives might fulfill the wonderful potential that is possible in the inheritance you have for the saints. And that you, Lord Jesus, might discover and fulfill in us all that is involved in your inheritance in us. For we pray Christ's name. Amen.

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The Message Of First Corinthians

by Ray C. Stedman

The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians is a very, very important letter for us because it so thoroughly captures the problems that we face as moderns living in this modern age. The reason is, of course, that Corinth was the most American city in the New Testament – it was a resort city, the capital of pleasure in the Roman Empire.

If you remember your geography you know it was located on the Peloponnesian peninsula, and the conditions under which the Corinthians lived were very much like the conditions under which we live, or to put that the other way, the conditions under which we live today are Corinthian conditions. Corinth was a beautiful city, a lovely city of palms and beautiful buildings, the center of pleasure for the whole empire, and it was devoted to two things – the pursuit of pleasure (largely passion), and of wisdom. It was a Greek city, and its inhabitants loved to philosophize, and they were given to what Paul calls, “the wisdom of words.”

So the two major forces that were active in this city, creating the atmosphere in which the Corinthian church had to live, were these: intellectualism and sensualism. This was a city devoted to the worship of the goddess sex. That is why I speak of it as so like modern conditions today. In the city of Corinth there was a temple that was dedicated to the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, and part of the worship of the Greek goddess was the performance of certain religious ceremonies that involved sexual relationships; therefore, the priestesses of this temple were really prostitutes, and there were some 10,000 of them attached to the temple. The city was openly given over to the practices of li-

centiousness; it was regarded as a normal, proper part of life and no one ever thought twice about it. If we think we are living under conditions where sensualism is rampant and worship of sex is widespread, these conditions do not yet approach those of the Christians who had to live in Corinth.

Furthermore, they were continually assaulted by the doctrines, dogmas, and ideas of men following the great philosophers. This city was the heir of the great thinkers of the Golden Age of Greece – Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all had their followers within the city of Corinth. And, as in every Greek city, they loved to gather in the public plazas and debate these issues endlessly. They were people given over to the love of wisdom.

Now into this city comes the Apostle Paul. You remember the story from the book of Acts; he had come down through Thessalonica and had been driven out of that city by an uprising of the Jews against him, had gone for a brief time to the little city of Berea and then had come down into Athens. There in Athens, as he walked about the city alone, he noted the many temples and was finally taken up to preach to the Athenians on Mars Hill. When he left Athens at last, he came down across the little isthmus into Corinth. There he stayed for a period of about a year and a half to two years, preaching the gospel and making tents for a living.

He had found a couple who had come from Rome, named Aquila and Priscilla, who were also tent makers, and he stayed with them and led them to Christ. He formed a church in their home and gradually the gospel spread throughout the city and many of the Corinthians on hearing it, we are told,

believed, and were baptized, and became members of this church.

That was the church to which Paul wrote this letter, and as you read it, you see that it was a church in trouble; it was the biggest problem church in the New Testament. But, although there were a great many things wrong about it, there were some things that were right, too. As Paul began his letter to them, he recognizes some of these things that are right. First, he calls them saints, he says,

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, {1 Cor 1:2a RSV}

then his eyes lift to the horizon of both geography and time, and he sees even us and he says,

**together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:
{1 Cor 1:2b RSV}**

and then his usual greeting,

**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
{1 Cor 1:3 RSV}**

Then the apostle begins to talk about some of the things that made these people Christians – the great themes of our Christian faith. He mentions the fact that they had received Christ by faith, and, by grace, had entered into a new life, and had been enriched by him. And there was also much for which he could commend this church in the opening verses of this letter; but he soon comes to what is the key to the entire letter. If you never remember anything else of First Corinthians, at least remember this verse, because everything in this letter is built around it:

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. {1 Cor 1: 9 RSV}

There is the central thing in the Christian life – we are called to share the life of the Son of God. That is what fellowship is – it is sharing. Fellowship with anyone is sharing time, and this is what God has called us to. Paul puts that first in this letter to call the attention of these Christians to

what was lacking in their experience, and everything in the letter gathers about this verse.

The letter falls into two major divisions – there is, first of all, a great section dealing with what we might call *the carnalities*; that takes you from Chapter 1 through Chapter 11. Then there is a closing section, from Chapter 12 through Chapter 16, that deals with what Paul himself calls *the spiritualities* – the carnalities versus the spiritualities. The carnalities included everything that was wrong with this church; the spiritualities were what they needed to correct it.

As you read this letter through, you will see that we suffer today from all the carnalities, in principle at least, and that what we desperately need to set our lives right are the spiritualities. Therefore, this letter is especially written to those who live in a sex-saturated, wisdom-loving atmosphere and are trying to live as Christians in the midst of all the pressures that constantly come from these two areas.

In the first section, speaking to the church in trouble, there are three major areas that Paul deals with:

- There is, first of all, the problem of divisions,
- Then there was the problem of scandals in the church, and,
- Finally, he took up certain matters they had written to him about – questions that were troubling them.

And all these are brought together under the major heading, **the carnalities**, the things that were troubling the church.

The first problem, this matter of *divisions*, was caused by the fact that the spirit of the city had come into the church.

There are those who are telling us that the need in the church today is to capture again the spirit of the age in which we live. There could be absolutely nothing further from the truth than that! The one thing the church must never do is to capture the spirit of the age. The job of the church is to correct the spirit of the age. When a church begins to reflect the spirit of the age in which it lives, it imme-

diately loses its power, and that is what had happened to the church at Corinth.

They were allowing all these divisions over the philosophies of men to come into the church, and they had chosen certain religious leaders around whom they were gathering in little factions, saying that so-and-so was better than so-and-so, and the insights of this man were better than that man. They were forming little sects and cliques and schisms within the church. These divisions were largely built around certain insights they felt each man contributed, and Paul mentions certain names here to indicate what he means; some were following Peter, some Apollos, some were gathering about his name, Paul. And then there was an exclusive little group who said they were the purest of all; they said they were following Christ, and Christ only – and they were the worst troublemakers of all. But the problem was, that they were each thinking that their leader's special bit of insight represented a superior view. And they were doing exactly what the people out in the city were doing, dividing up over the views of men.

Now Paul answers this with a tremendous word in which he shows that the wisdom of men is of no avail. He sets it aside completely, and he says that in the church these insights of men are always partial and untrustworthy to a great degree, and that the Corinthians will never learn anything until they give themselves to the wisdom of God. "The world," Paul says, "By wisdom does not know God" {cf, 1 Cor 1:21 RSV}, and they will never get to the heart of their problems by trying to pursue the insights of current popularity or secular philosophers.

Now that is still true today. The church will never solve its problems as long as it constantly pursues this writer and that writer, this man and that speaker, thinking that it will gather from the efforts and knowledge of men the insights it needs to understand its problems. The apostle says it is impossible that we can ever arrive at a solution to our needs on this level, because there is something vitally missing. That missing element is the life of the Spirit in man, and without this, he can never solve all the riddles of life. So the apostle answers these schisms and factions and divisions by confronting them with the word of the cross – the word that presents the cross the Christ as that instrument by which God cuts off all human wisdom, not as

being worthless in its own narrow realm, but as being useless in solving the major problems of man.

When we understand this, we realize that we will never begin to learn until we first learn that we do not know anything. When we come to appreciate the word of the cross, we understand that in the cross of Jesus Christ, God took his own Son, now become man like us, identified with us in every way, and nailed him up to die as being useless as far as solving any of the problems of mankind is concerned. That is the word of the cross; that is why it looks so foolish to the natural man; that is why it proceeds on a totally different principle than the wisdom of the world. And when we accept that, the apostle says, we begin to discover that true, secret, hidden wisdom that unfolds little by little the answers to the problems of life. We begin to understand ourselves and to see why this world is what it is, and where it is heading, and why all the confusion and the difficulties and the problems exist, as the deep things of God, the wisdom which God has hidden in Christ, is unfolded to us through the teaching of the Spirit by the Word of God. It is a wonderful section.

And Paul says, "I'm not going to waste any time at all arguing with you about Socrates or Plato or Aristotle, or any other wisdom of men: They have their place, but when it comes to solving the deep-seated problems of human nature, there is only one wisdom that can touch it, and that is the word of the cross." This becomes, then, one of the mightiest answers of all time to the intellectualism that constantly hounds the Christian church and attempts to undermine it – a false intellectualism.

I mean by that, that the Word of God never attempts to set aside or call worthless the pursuit of knowledge. God intends men to learn things, he designed us that way; but it must be knowledge based upon a right beginning and we are called back to the principle set forth in the Old Testament,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, {Prov 9:10a RSV}

That is where we begin.

Now, Paul goes on here to show that the true reason for their division was not what they thought it to be – differences of human points of view – but rather, it was carnality, the love of the flesh for being puffed up, and for finding itself idolized and followed. This was their problem. Paul says that

while that principle is at work, they would remain babes, they would never grow. The word of the cross must come in and cut off the flesh before you will ever begin to grow. As long as this keeps on, you will find yourselves constantly involved in little squabbles and bickerings and divisions, and you can live your whole Christian life on that basis, Paul says.

But one of these days you are going to come to the end, and the testing, the analysis of what your life has been worth, and in that day you will see that if you have been living in the flesh, it is all wood, hay, and stubble. It is burned up, completely worthless, and your life – except for the fact that you have received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior – is a wasted enterprise. It is possible, even in the religious realm,

- to gain the approval of men, and
- to be accepted as quite a figure in the church, and
- to enjoy the favor of others, and
- the prestige that comes from position,

and to come to the end, only to discover that the absolutely relentless judgment of God has not been impressed in the least degree by that which originates from anything else but the work of the Spirit of God in you – it has to be the Spirit and not the flesh.

Now Paul turns to the matter of the *scandals* that were occurring in this church. These were, of course, the effects of the divisions.

There was first of all an intolerable case of sexual immorality in the church that was being openly regarded with a considerable degree of acceptance and toleration, and he says, “this is absolutely wrong; you must deal with this.” Whenever sin breaks out openly like this, and it is not repented of, then the church must act in discipline, and he scolds these leaders for not moving to bring this before the judging of the church and to set aside this iniquity that was eating away at their ranks.

Here is another similarity to the church today. It is almost frightening to see how certain leaders of the church are now openly advocating sexual immoralities, and certain of the pastors and leaders of youth groups in the church are openly encouraging young people to sleep together, and to live together.

Now, at the time this letter was written, the atmosphere was such that sexual immorality was widely accepted within the city as the normal way of life. Within the church, however, it is absolutely set aside as being totally incongruous with the Christian profession, because it was a violation of the humanity of the individuals involved. The love of God burned in zealous judgment against this because it was destroying and would destroy those involved in it. That is why the apostle speaks in such scathing words concerning this matter. Chapters 5 and 6 both deal with this matter of immorality, and the apostle points out that the defense of the Christian must not be derived from any moral standards outside himself – it is not “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” that keeps young people, or older people, free from sexual problems and pressures, but rather it is the recognition that their bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. The Son of God himself dwells in us, and we are never out of his presence. Everywhere we go, he goes with us, and is in us, and, in that sense, everything we are doing is done in the presence of the Son of God himself. That is what keeps the young person free from the pressures that come.

Then, beginning with Chapter 7, Paul turns to the questions they had written to him,

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. {1 Cor 7:1a RSV}

And they wrote about four major problems:

1. First, there was a question about marriage; they asked Paul if it was right to be married, in view of the pressures that were around them, if perhaps they should give themselves to the service of God in an ascetic life. Although Paul himself was not married, nevertheless he told them in this section that it is best, it is good for men and women to be married, that marriage is a perfectly proper way of life, and because of the temptation to immorality, he says, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband; that was in view of the Corinthian conditions.

Then he shows them that it is also right to have a single life, if God grants this as a special calling to any individual – this is a perfectly honorable way of life. Marriage is not a necessity, though it often is an advantage, and

yet it can be a problem. Paul deals very thoughtfully, helpfully, and carefully with this whole question of marriage.

Then they wrote to him about three things that were troubling them; largely in the church at Corinth:

2. First, they were worried about offending God, and about offending the conscience of the weaker brother, in the matter of eating meat that was offered to idols.

Although we are no longer troubled by the problem of whether we ought to eat meat offered to idols or not, nevertheless in this section, we are confronting in principle this whole thorny issue of Christian taboos – smoking, drinking, dancing, everything that has ever been brought up as a problem within the church that is not specifically identified as an evil in the Scriptures. What do you do about it?

It is most interesting that Paul was an apostle, with all the authority of an apostle, but he absolutely refused to make up any rules along this line. This is because the weak, immature Christian always wants somebody to put him under law, but if you put a Christian under law, then he is no longer under grace! And Paul knows that Christians must learn to deal with what he calls “the law of liberty.” The fact is that all things are right; nothing is wrong in itself: the devil never made any of the capabilities and capacities that are in the human being – God made them all. And no urge or desire, or tendency is wrong in itself – we are at liberty in these things.

But with this law, he links two other laws. One he calls the “law of love.” That is the law that says, “I may be free to do it, but if I am really putting a stumbling block in somebody else’s path, I won’t do it” – that is the law of love. The limitation is imposed not by my conscience, but by another’s conscience. The other is the “law of expediency,” i.e., everything is legal, is lawful, but not everything is helpful. There are a lot of things I could do, and many directions I could go, as a Christian, but if I spend all my time doing all the things I am free to do, I no longer have any time to do the things which I am called to do, and therefore, it is not always helpful. These things can

be a waste of time and drag us back, even though they are not wrong in themselves. That is what Hebrews calls the “weights.” As the writer says, “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely,” {Heb 12:1b RSV}.

3. Then, they wrote also about women – women were a problem in the church at Corinth too. (I did not mean anything bad by that!) But they were, because they were involved with a very difficult problem about hats.

Now this had peculiar local overtones about it – if a woman was seen bare-headed in Corinth, she was immediately identified as a prostitute, one of the temple priestess, and that is why Paul writes to these people in Corinth and says, “You ladies, when you come to church, put a hat on; it is a sign that you are a Christian woman subject to your husband.”

Now in practice that applied to Corinth; in principle (the principle applies all the time) Christian women are to be in subjection to their husbands – as you see all through the Scriptures – in every way, as an indication and a sign that the church is in subjection to its Lord. The Christian woman fulfills her ministry to her Lord in being subject to her husband, and all this is involved in this problem of headship which the apostle defines as equality, cooperation, and yet submission.

4. Then the third problem concerned the Lord’s table; there were certain ones who were eating this in a mechanical, perfunctory way, not seeing any meaning of having any insight into what they were doing, and so the apostle had to show them that everything the Christian does must be done realistically and with a recognition that it is done as unto the Lord.

Now in Chapter 12 through the rest of the book, he is dealing with **the great spiritualities**, the correction to these carnalities. You do not correct these things by just trying to straighten yourself out. How do you correct them?

- Well first, by a recognition of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life. That is why Chapter 12 begins with that very word.

Now concerning spiritualities [it is translated “spiritual gifts” here, but it is actually one word], **brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed.**

{1 Cor 12:1 RSV}

Why not? Well, because this is what makes life work, and he goes on to explain that it is the presence of the Spirit that makes Christ real to us, and the gifts of the Spirit that are designed to make the body function and reach out and perform its work of touching society on every side.

Here again, we have missed so much of the great richness of the provision of Christ for his church. We know so little about the gifts of the Spirit. What is your gift – do you know? And are you using it? Are you putting it to work? Or do you need Paul’s admonition to Timothy, “rekindle the gift of God that is within you” {2 Tim 1:6b RSV}. The body functions by the exercise of its gift, and every Christian has a gift – at least one – and there are different gifts; we do not all have the same.

God has sent different gifts within the body, and we all function as these gifts are put to work; therefore, this is a beautiful chapter – showing us that we must not despise another because of a different gift. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’” {1 Cor 12:21a RSV}, nor must we neglect the gift that has been given to us; it is all necessary – even the head cannot properly operate without the foot. Think of that – the head is Christ himself, and yet we are all members one of another, and so, as the body of Christ, we fulfill our functions – both in the church to the body itself and to the world – through the exercise of spiritual gifts in the power of the Holy Spirit.

- And the proof that we have learned the secret will be as set forth in Chapter 13. You know what that is – love – the manifestation of love. This is a wonderful chapter, because it sets forth for us the value of love, the portrait of love, and the power of love.
- Then in Chapter 14, Paul takes up another problem that was causing confusion in the church – the misuse of one of the gifts, the gift

of tongues, and the presence of the false gift of tongues that was at work in that church as it is in our society today. In the correction for these abuses, he tries to focus the whole weight of this section on the importance of the gift of prophecy.

It is always amazing to me how many read this chapter and entirely miss the apostle’s point. The whole purpose of the chapter is that we start talking about the gift of prophecy and emphasizing it, and urging it upon others, and encouraging those who have it to exercise it. But you hardly ever hear anything about that: it is all tongues, is it not? Yet Paul was trying to play down the gift of tongues, and play up the gift of prophecy.

Now, the gift of prophecy is simply the ability to explain and expound the Scriptures, to speak comfort and edification, and encouragement from the Scriptures.

- That brings us to Chapter 15 with its great emphasis on the resurrection. What would any of these things be worth if we did not have a living Christ to make them real? The resurrection is the great pivot for the whole of the Christian faith – everything comes back to that. If Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead, then, as the apostle says in this chapter, we are hopeless, and not only that, we are the most to be pitied of all people – we are nuts, we are fools, we ought to be locked up somewhere, if Christ be not raised from the dead.

But what a triumphant paean of proof and praise is in this chapter concerning the resurrection. Paul closes it with what is his whole point. Everything in this whole letter comes right down to this one verse (Verse 58):

Therefore, [because of all he has said up to this point] my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. {1 Cor 15:58 RSV}

- Chapter 16 is just a postscript in which he catches up certain little things that the church needed to know, very important to us, but then he comes back to this theme again:

Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong, Let all that you do be done in love.
{1 Cor 16:13-14 RSV}

And you have got the equipment to do it with.
Now do it!

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you that we who live also in a sex-saturated society, given over

to the love of wisdom and intellectualism, have in Jesus Christ, in the word of the cross, everything that it takes to meet the pressures that come upon us in this day; there is no reason for failure. And so, Lord, we pray that we may learn more about these great themes, and discover the exciting fascination of everyday living on this level and in these terms, thus discovering the adventure that you intended life to be. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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The Message of Second Corinthians

by Ray C. Stedman

Reading through Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth makes you aware that this is the most personal and emotional of all his letters. It throbs with a sense of the glories of God's grace.

Visiting Corinth on my recent trip was a moving experience for me. There is very little left standing of the original city – it was destroyed by the Romans shortly after Paul's visit there and has been lying in ruins ever since. Certain temple columns remain, though, as well as the market place and other public areas of the city. They can be clearly discerned, and the actual pavement of the judgment hall of the Roman proconsul is well preserved.

It wasn't hard for me to imagine the Apostle Paul as he came down from Athens into this city which was at the time a center of pleasure, a great commercial city and a city of great beauty, with many, many temples. It had gained a reputation as the center of lascivious worship – the worship of the Goddess of Love. There were some 10,000 prostitutes attached to the temple of Aphrodite and the city lived up, or perhaps I should say, down, to its reputation as a place of sensual pleasure. It represented a sex-saturated society. You can see indications of this in Paul's letters to the church there. It was easy to imagine the apostle arriving in the dust of the road, unknown and unheralded, a simple tentmaker by all appearance. Finding two people of the same trade, Aquila and Priscilla, he lived and worked with them, and preached up and down the city streets and in the market places and synagogues. Thus God used him to lay the foundations of the church at Corinth.

As I stood there I couldn't help thinking of certain phrases that come right out of this letter of Paul's. In the sixth chapter he speaks of himself,

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. {2 Cor 6:3-10 RSV}

Standing in the midst of the ruins of the city, it was easy to understand those words. The apostle was regarded as the scum of the earth by the intelligentsia of Corinth, with its love of philosophy and the wisdom of men's words. They looked down upon this traveler, this peasant from Judea who was passing through. He had neither reputation nor evidences of wealth or power, aggrandizement or influence. Yet before he left he shook the city and established a church that survived the life of that city. The gospel that Paul preached is today a living power on earth although the city has long since crumbled into ruin.

You cannot understand this second letter of Paul to the church at Corinth without some grasp of its background. After Paul had established the church there, and had labored in the city for almost two years, he left and went to the city of Ephesus on the Asian mainland. From there he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. Its purpose was to

correct some of the divisions that had arisen in the church at Corinth as well as some of the irregularities, scandals, and immoralities that were creeping into the church from the life of the city outside. We have that letter preserved for us and perhaps you are familiar with its great themes – calling Christians back to an understanding of what fellowship with Jesus Christ can mean, declaring again the great spiritual values which make Christian faith a living vital thing.

That is what the church at Corinth needed, but after Paul had written that first letter, the Jewish party – which had caused him so much trouble in the city – evidently continued to gain strength. They were headed by an anti-Pauline teacher who possibly had come down from Jerusalem and had organized opposition to the apostle's teachings. Paul was plagued with a group of Judaizers who hounded him and followed him around wherever he established churches, teaching the people that they had to observe the Law of Moses. They said that the great themes of the grace of God were not the accurate and authentic Christian gospel, and that people had to be circumcised and meet other particulars of the Law. They represented themselves as being the true followers of the Law. They called themselves the "Christ party." Paul makes reference to this in his first letter.

After Paul had written the first letter, this party apparently took over the church in Corinth, and so Paul revisited Corinth for a very short time and apparently was rebuffed by the church leaders. The very church that he had planted himself now had become so permeated with false Christianity that, when the apostle himself came to them, they rebuffed him and refused to allow him to teach within the church. You can see that as you read between the lines in the second letter. So Paul returned to Ephesus. From there he wrote a very short, sharp, caustic letter, rebuking and reproofing them for their attitudes. But that letter has been lost to us. It is clear that Paul wrote one, and yet it has not been preserved, perhaps because Paul, writing in the peak of passion may have said things that went beyond what the Holy Spirit intended so that the letter, not being fully and wholly inspired as were the others of Paul's writings, has been lost. Or it may have dealt so wholly with local issues that it lacked the universal application which inspired Scripture requires.

That letter was sent by the hand of Titus. While Titus took the letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle remained in Ephesus earnestly, anxiously, waiting to hear what the results would be. This is the note upon which the second letter opens. Paul tells them that he has been troubled about them. He also had undergone intense suffering while he was waiting in Ephesus for word from them.

In Chapter 1, Verse 8, he says,

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly crushed that we despaired of life itself. {2 Cor 1:8 RSV}

Then he tells them how anxious and concerned he was about them in Chapter 2, Verse 4,

For I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. {2 Cor 2:4 RSV}

So he was waiting in Asia for word to come as to what had happened, but while he was waiting, the trouble arose in Ephesus which is recorded for us in Chapter 19 of the book of Acts. Perhaps you remember that the silversmiths caused a great commotion in the city, and Paul was threatened with being dragged before the Roman judges there. He escaped this and decided to go on to Macedonia to meet Titus, who would be coming up through Macedonia on his return from Corinth. Paul could wait no longer for news, his anxiety over the Corinthians was so great. He also intended to raise some money there for the relief of the Christians in Jerusalem who were experiencing great difficulty because of a famine there. With these two concerns at heart, he went to Philippi in Macedonia.

There he met Titus and received word that the sharp, caustic letter he had written had accomplished its work, and that the majority of the Corinthian Christians had repented of their rejection of his ministry and had begun to live again the life of Jesus Christ. A minority was still unyielding, however, and still rebelling against the authority of the apostle. So, from the city of Philippi. Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthians which expresses so much of the anxiety and agitation of the heart that he experienced.

With that background you can understand something of the passion of the apostle as he writes. From the trouble, tears, and heartache that are reflected in this letter come the three great themes which it embodies:

- the ministry within the church;
- giving and service, or ministration by the church; and
- the subject of authority, i.e., where spiritual power and authority actually reside.

When you read them through you will find that the first five chapters, particularly, are a wonderful explanation of what **the ministry within the church** ought to be. The apostle knew that the church at Corinth was failing to understand the true functions of ministers of Jesus Christ. As a result, they were waiting to obey the teaching of the true ministers of Christ – Paul himself, Silas, Timothy, Titus and others who had come to them. Because they were failing to obey the teaching of the Word of God, they were thus failing to fulfill the ministry in Corinth. That is why this church, which seemingly had everything, could do nothing in the city of Corinth. It is to correct this difficulty that these two letters were written. With that key, we can understand the reason for Paul’s trouble, tears and his anxiety.

In these opening chapters we get a great declaration of what the ministry ought to be. As Paul states in Chapter 3, for instance, it is not the ministry of the old covenant, but of the new. In other words, the message is not the demand of the Law upon people to compel them to follow certain rules and regulations. When Christianity becomes that it always becomes a deadly, stultifying, dangerous thing. Unfortunately, it has become just that among many, many people. Then it is no longer a matter of following an indwelling Lord, but simply a grim determination to try to follow certain rules and regulations – demands that are made upon the flesh. As Paul says that – that old covenant, exemplified by the Ten Commandments – makes its appeal to us, and its demand upon us, but without an accompanying dynamic to fulfill it. It is always a ministry of death. “The letter kills,” he says, “but the Spirit gives life” {cf, 2 Cor 3:6b}.

He goes on, then, to set forth the wonderful ministry of the new covenant. This is the new arrangement for living, not the old grim determination to clench your fists and set your teeth and try to do what God wants you to do – that is never Christianity – but the realization that he has provided in you the Holy Spirit to minister to you the life of a risen Lord in whose strength and grace you can do all that life asks of you. That is the new arrangement for living. In this section, therefore, he sets forth the resources of a Christian:

- First, there is the Word of God. The business of a minister of Jesus Christ (that is, every Christian) is to declare the Word of God. Notice how he puts it in Chapter 4:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, {2 Cor 4:1-2a RSV}

There is where the failure of the church lies in so many areas today – clever, subtle tampering with the Word of God, undermining its authority, changing its message, ignoring its declarations, refusing to act upon the facts that are declared. Paul says we have renounced all this.

but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. {2 Cor 4:2b RSV}

That is the first resource of the ministry – the truth and light of God’s word.

- Second, as I have already suggested, there is the indwelling treasure, the mysterious indwelling Spirit of God. You see this in Chapter 4, Verse 7:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. {2 Cor 4:7 RSV}

It is not because of our personalities, nor that we are such clever, smart, educated people

that we can live victoriously. It is obvious that what is happening is something far beyond what we can naturally do. We have this treasure in an earthen vessel in order to show that the power is not ours, but that it belongs to God.

- With this, Paul links the principles of the Cross. This is the secret by which the power is released:

Is your life this way? Are you showing the kind of life that can only be explained in terms of God at work in you? That is what Christianity really is. As people observe you, they should see the earthen vessel and say, "Well, I don't understand. The kind of life this person is exemplifying can never be explained by the sort of stodgy, dull person he naturally is. Something else must be at work." The secret of the release of that kind of radiant power is the principle of the Cross.

You find it set forth in Chapter 4, Verse 10,

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. {2 Cor 4:10 RSV}

That means always to accept God's judgment upon the flesh – upon the natural life. He has judged it in the Cross and declared it to be worthless. Paul says, "I am always carrying about with me that sentence of judgment upon the natural life, in order that the life of Jesus, with all its glorious possibilities, might be manifest in me." Furthermore, "while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake," i.e., we are always being put into places of difficulty, pressure, hardship and trouble. Why? In order that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

That is why you have difficulties. That is why tomorrow morning you may have a hard time at the office. Your boss may call you in and rip you up one side and down the other quite unjustifiably. If you whine to yourself, "Why does this kind of thing happen to me? Why does it always have to be me? What have I done to deserve this?" – it will reveal how totally ignorant you are of the basis of Chris-

tian living. You are put into these situations in order that you may react, not like the men and women of the world with resentment, bitterness, railing, and fighting back, but, rather, in such a way that the life of Jesus might be manifest in your mortal flesh.

That is the secret of the new arrangement for living, and that is what Paul says is the glory of the Christian ministry and the Christian life.

- He goes on to declare the great hope of the believer, that "we look not at the things which are seen, but the things which are unseen" {2 Cor 4:18 RSV}. We know that we have a body which cannot be destroyed "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" {2 Cor 5:1 RSV}. God has a great future ahead for us. The life we now live is the preparation for that life which is to come. Therefore, as he says,

this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, {2 Cor 4:17 RSV}

The present is but prologue to the future.

- Then he declares his motives in Chapter 5, Verse 11,

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men; {2 Cor 5:11 RSV}

And in Verse 14:

For the love of Christ controls us [constrains us, drives us to move out] {2 Cor 5:14 RSV}

- This brings us into a face to face confrontation with a great scriptural declaration of the transforming character of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This good news does what nothing else can do. That is why Paul was never ashamed of it, in Corinth, Rome, or anywhere else, because it can do what nothing else in the world – no philosophy, no line of argument, no education process, no reformation of any type – can ever accomplish. It is a transformation by the implantation of a new life.

And he [Christ] died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. {2 Cor 5:16-21 RSV}

Paul says that God has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation and “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” and declaring that he has already reconciled the world unto himself and that his message then to all men is “be ye reconciled unto God.” “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” That is the gospel.

In Chapters 8 and 9 we have Paul’s declaration of **the ministrations of the church**. The great discourse on giving was occasioned by the collection Paul was taking for the relief of the famine-stricken saints at Jerusalem. Giving, he says, is to be the proof of love. In this section we find that great verse (9 of Chapter 8):

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. {2 Cor 8:9 RSV}

That is the reverse process by which Christianity operates – as poor, and yet making many rich. Even out of their poverty Paul says, the Macedo-

nian Christians gave liberally, beyond themselves, and thus God poured spiritual enrichment back into their lives. This is the essence of Christian living, and it is the basis for the great principles of Christian giving which are declared in Chapter 9, primarily in Verses 7 and 8:

Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. {2 Cor 9:7 RSV}

There is no warrant here for financial campaigns or pressure programs to try to extort money from Christian people. Nobody is to be put under any pressure. Nobody is to be put under any compulsion. We are to give as each one has made up his own mind, “not reluctantly, nor under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” With that goes this great promise,

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. {2 Cor 9:8 RSV}

Have you dared to try that? That word is as true in this 20th century as it was in the 1st century when Paul wrote it. “He that scatters abroad,” Paul says, “shall receive much; he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, but he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully,” {cf, 2 Cor 9:6-7 RSV}.

Now in Chapters 10, 11 and 12 we have a change of tone entirely. Here Paul begins to speak to that rebellious minority of Christians in Corinth who were still refusing the authority of his ministry among them. It wasn’t, Paul says, that they were refusing the word which he brought; they were disobedient to the truth of God. From this situation comes a great dissertation on **the basis or ground of authority in the Christian life**. These false teachers were claiming the following of the people on the basis of certain things about which they were boasting before them – how faithful they were, how abundant they were in serving them, how they endured much hardship and such difficulties for the cause of Christ. They were exalting themselves before these people and boasting about their lineage, their background, and their education.

The apostle cuts right across all this, saying, in effect, “You have been deceived. This isn’t where authority is based; this isn’t where mastery comes from.” Then in an ironic almost sarcastic fashion he shows them the true basis of authority. He says, “If you insist upon being impressed by these kinds of things, well, I could boast before you too. If I did, I would be a fool. I would only act like these foolish men whom you follow so easily, but since you are so impressed by this kind of thing, all right, I will boast a little. I will tell you what God has done through me.”

And then there comes this great passage in Chapter 11:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one – I am talking like a madman – [“Anybody who talks like this is foolish, but that is what you like; that is what impresses you. All right”] with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. {2 Cor 11:22-23 RSV}

Then he gives this tremendously impressive list of ordeals that he underwent:

Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. [Thirty-nine stripes five different times in his ministry.] Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. [We have the record of it in the book of Acts.] Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city; danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. {2 Cor 11:24-27 RSV}

Then, he says, this is all idle boasting. “This is not where my authority lies. If you really want to know,” he says, “where my authority lies and where true spiritual power comes from, let me tell you how I began to learn the lesson. This is not going to sound very impressive, but I want you to know that I am telling you the truth. This is the

event I boast about more than anything else in my life – the moment when I began to learn the secret of genuine power.” Then he says this amazing thing, starting with Chapter 11, Verse 31:

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed for ever, knows that I do not lie. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped his hands. {2 Cor 11:31-33 RSV}

What a thing to boast about! But Paul says, “As I look back upon that night, when I was so discouraged, so defeated, I can see that then I started to learn the secret of effective, victorious living, I had thought my learning and my intelligent understanding of the Scriptures, my Hebrew background and all my qualifications would be the keys that would open the hearts of these Jews in Damascus to me, but I found that they weren’t. I had to flee like a common criminal. There and then the Lord Jesus began to teach me the wonderful lesson that out of weakness I am made strong; that when I am weakest, he is the strongest. Out of that,” he says, “I have learned the great lesson of rejoicing and glorying in my weakness.”

For when I am weak, then I am strong. {2 Cor 12:10b RSV}

In this connection he recites his experience with a “thorn in the flesh,” this ugly thing that kept pestering him, prodding him, aggravating him and hurting him. He begged to have it taken away, but the word of the Lord came,

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.” {2 Cor 12:9b RSV}

That is the secret of strength: not outward impressiveness; not great prestige, pomp and favor; not great ornate buildings decorated to the highest degree, enclosing impressive statuary and wonderful paintings. Oh, no. Spiritual power never lies there. Neither does it lie in a brilliant, impressive personality, nor in ability to speak with eloquent oratory, with command and mastery of language. No, it never lies there. It lies in a heart that realizes that it can do nothing apart from a dependence on a

living Lord within. The weaker you are, the stronger Christ can be.

Isn't that encouraging?

Doesn't that strengthen you?

Are you saying, "Well, I can't do anything"?

Of course you can't. If you could, it wouldn't amount to anything. But he can do all things through you. That is the great secret of this letter. That is what the apostle longed to impart to these people. This is what Corinth so desperately needed, just as Palo Alto so desperately needs it today – men and women who will quietly believe this great, commanding, and compelling principle by which God's power is manifested in human life: Out of weakness comes strength.

So Paul closes the epistle by addressing these people at Corinth as he addresses us today,

Examine yourselves to see whether you are holding to your faith. {2 Cor 13:5a RSV}

Are you believing God? Are you counting on him to do what he says he will do through you? Are you walking into situations and crawling out on limbs where, if God does not come through, you will be made a fool of? "Examine yourselves, whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves."

Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? {2 Cor 13:5b RSV}

That is the secret of Christian living.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that the passion of this apostle may not be lost upon us today, that we may realize afresh that the world is as sick and as troubled and as anxious, as problem-ridden and as despairing in this 20th century as it was in Paul's day. It needs, above everything else, the declaration of the mighty gospel of God, the new arrangement for living, the new covenant by which the Holy Spirit takes the image of Christ within us and makes it fresh and new to us, thus empowering us to live in the strength and glory of his life in us. "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." May these truths grip our hearts in reality, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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Don't Submit Again to the Slave's Yoke
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GALATIANS: Don't Submit Again to the Slave's Yoke

by Ray C .Stedman

In many ways Galatians is the most colorful epistle in the New Testament. It is filled with vivid and vigorous language. If you have read it, I am sure that you were struck by its forcefulness.

In looking at any individual book of the Bible, it is worthwhile to consider where and how it fits into the whole. Let's review the overall structure, then, before beginning this study of the message in Galatians:

We can first divide the Bible according to its natural divisions of Old and New Testament to find out what each testament contributes to the supreme message of the Scripture. That central message, essentially, is that the whole revelation of God – the entire Bible in other words – is given so that we might be complete human beings in Christ. That is its aim. The Bible was given so we might experience all God intended for man in the beginning, wholly filled and flooded with God himself. To this end the Old Testament contributes the theme of **preparation**, the groundwork. The New Testament contributes the note of **realization**. It actually confronts us with the person of Jesus Christ, who is himself God's program and plan for making life complete for us.

As you may recall, there are several divisions within the New Testament:

- The Gospels and the Book of Acts present Jesus Christ to us.
 - Each Gospel gives a **different aspect of his life**.

- Acts ties these gospel presentations of Christ to his present **manifestation** in the world today, in his body, the Church. This is Christ at work: Christ in human life.
- Next, the Epistles give us the **explanation** of Jesus Christ – his person, his work and their significance – all spelled out for us so that we might understand and grasp them.

The Epistles are further divided into three major groups:

1. The first four – Romans, First and Second Corinthians, and Galatians – express the truth **Christ in us** – what it means to have Jesus Christ living in us.
2. The second division, encompassing the rest of the Epistles through Philemon, gathers around the theme, **you in Christ** – the significance of the fact that we are made part of his body. These Epistles explain the work of the Church and the proper life of the Church.
3. The third group, beginning with the letter to the Hebrews and including those to James, Peter, John and Jude, are the letters which describe the operative word **faith** – what faith is, how it works, why it suffers, and what it faces in life. Faith is the means by which all that Christ is in us and all that we have in him are made manifest in our experience.

- The last division of the New Testament is the book of Revelation, standing by itself as the great **consummation** of what Christ has come into the world to do. It describes for us the great scene when all will be ended and the work of redemption is accomplished.

This, in brief, relates the study of Galatians we are now beginning to the Bible as a whole.

You who have read this little letter carefully will have noticed that it is very closely related to the epistles to the Romans and to the Hebrews. These three letters of the New Testament form what might be regarded as an inspired commentary on a single verse from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. It was to that Old Testament prophet that God gave the great truth,

the righteous shall live by his faith. {Hab 2:4 RSV}

All three of these letters quote this verse, "The just [or the righteous] shall live by faith." It is interesting that each of them shows a different aspect or gives a different emphasis to the verse:

- In Romans the emphasis is put on the words, *the righteous*. Paul details what it means to be righteous, how a man becomes justified before God and declared righteous in Christ. It was this epistle that finally delivered Martin Luther from a terrible legalism.
- Then, in Galatians, the emphasis is upon the words *shall live* – what it means to live as a righteous person, justified in Christ. This is the letter about liberty which is the fullest expression of life.
- Finally, in Hebrews, you find the last two words, *by faith*, emphasized. This is the great letter on faith, culminating in that memorable section in Chapter 11, called "the heroes of faith."

Galatians comes to grips with the question of what real Christian life is like. The answer can be characterized by one word, *liberty*. The Christian is called to liberty in Jesus Christ. The cry of this epistle is that Christians might discover the liberty

of the sons of God in accordance with all that God has planned for man in the way of freedom and enjoyment. Its aim is freedom of our human spirits to the utmost extent, restrained only as necessary for us to exist in harmony with the design of God. Therefore, this letter has been called the "Bill of Rights of the Christian Life," or the "Magna Carta of Christian Liberty," the "Emancipation Proclamation" from all forms of legalism and bondage in the Christian experience.

In the introduction of the letter we read:

Paul an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: {Gal 1:1-2 RSV}

This is not a letter written to a single church as in the cases of those to Corinth and Ephesus. This is a letter addressed to a number of churches. Who were these Galatians? If you read the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the book of Acts you will discover the background of these churches. They were churches begun by Paul when he was on his very first missionary journey, traveling with Barnabas into the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. In Lystra, on one occasion, he was stoned and dragged outside the city and left for dead after having first been welcomed and treated as a god. In all these cities he experienced persecution. These were the cities of Galatia.

The name of the province comes from the same root as the word *Gaul*. Any of you who took Latin in school remember that you began your reading of Julius Caesar with the words, *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*: "Gaul as a whole is divided into three parts." Gaul is the ancient name for France. About 300 years before Christ some Gauls from what is now France had invaded the Roman Empire and sacked the city of Rome. Then they crossed into northern Greece and continued across the Dardanelles straits into Asia Minor. At the invitation of one of the kings of the area, these Gauls settled there.

So they were not Arabs or Orientals but a Celtic race, of ancestry similar to that of the Scots, the Irish, the Britons, and the French. Since many Americans are also of that ancestry, this letter is particularly pertinent to us, as you will recognize when you read Julius Caesar's description of the

Gauls: "The infirmity of the Gauls is that they are fickle in their resolves, fond of change, and not to be trusted." Or, as another ancient writer put it, "They are frank, impetuous, impressionable, eminently intelligent, fond of show but extremely inconstant, the fruit of excessive vanity." Doesn't that sound like Americans? Most of the world would agree to that.

On his second journey, this time with Silas instead of Barnabas, Paul set out to go back through these Galatian cities and visit the churches that had been established, and on this occasion he stayed a considerable time in various cities because he became sick. He refers to this illness in a rather oblique manner in this letter. Evidently it was some kind of serious eye trouble, for he says to these Galatians,

For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. {Gal 4:15 RSV}

Some Biblical scholars feel that he had inflamed, pus-filled eyes that made him almost repulsive at times. But these Galatians, as Paul admits in this letter, received him with great joy, treating him as though he were an angel of God, or even Christ Jesus himself. They reveled in the gospel of grace that he brought because he had set forth for them, with amazing vividness, the glory and the work of the crucified Lord. They had entered thereby into the fullness of life in the Spirit and had received the love, joy, and peace that Jesus Christ, entering the heart, gives.

But when he wrote this letter, probably from the city of Corinth, something had happened. Certain people, whom Paul labels in another place "wolves in sheep's clothing," had come among them; certain Judaizers had come down from Jerusalem with what Paul calls an alien gospel – not a totally different gospel, but a perversion of the true gospel. To these Gentile believers in Jesus Christ in the freshness of their new-found faith, the Judaizers were declaring that, in order to grow and really become genuine Christians, the Gentiles would have to become circumcised, keep the Law of Moses, and obey all the Old Testament ritual. These legalists were trying to impose all the restrictions and the ceremonial obligations of the Law of Moses.

Now, they hadn't set Jesus Christ aside – very few gospels that have any chance of spreading ever do that. But the Lord was given second place and keeping the Law was made paramount. Furthermore, the Judaizers challenged the apostolic authority of the Apostle Paul. They pointed out that he was independent, very undependable, overly enthusiastic, and he had graduated from the wrong seminary. So they were trying to get the Galatians to reject his authority as an apostle.

Paul was greatly disturbed by this news. As you read this letter you can see that he is moved and agitated to the utmost. Listen to some of the expressions he uses. In verse eight of the first chapter we read,

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. {Gal 1:8 RSV}

Or, to put it bluntly, as Paul actually said, "let him be damned." And he repeats it again: "If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be damned," {cf, Gal 1:9b RSV}. He was not merely hurling acrimonious challenges or insults here. He was simply facing the fact that anybody who comes with a different gospel has already damned himself. He hasn't found the truth. Those apart from Christ are accursed, as the apostle makes clear not only in this letter, but in many others.

At the close of the letter his emotions are stirred again and he is greatly concerned about these people who are preaching circumcision and the bearing in the flesh of the marks of the Law. He says,

I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves! {Gal 5:12 RSV}

Literally, he says, "let them emasculate themselves!" Since they are so zealous in trying to get some mark in the flesh on you," he says, "I wish they would go all the way and emasculate themselves!"

You can see now some of the fire that flashes throughout this letter. The apostle is deeply disturbed. He is wearing his war paint and wastes no time with pleasantries or personal greetings. He moves right to the matter at hand with vigor and vehemence. He can't even wait for his secretary.

As he tells us in the later part of the letter, he painfully scratches it all out in large letters, in his own handwriting, despite his poor eyesight.

What is the theme of the letter? What has him so upset? This is the theme of Galatians:

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. {Gal 1:3-4 RSV}

What has disturbed him is that this perverted gospel, this legalistic approach to Christianity is concealing the two great truths that are inherent in the gospel – the true gospel:

- First, Christ gave himself for our sins: that is justification.
- Second, he gave himself to deliver us from this present evil age: that is sanctification.

All of it is by grace and not by works. It is the assault upon these truths that has so deeply disturbed the apostle. He knows that anything that challenges them is a false gospel that will lead its victim into heartache, bondage, desolation of spirit and ultimately to spiritual death. So he is disturbed.

Let's take a more detailed look at these two great truths which provide the basic outline of the letter. In the first four chapters he handles the great matter of **justification by faith**. Christ died for our sins. He gave himself for our sins. That is, of course, the basic declaration of the gospel, the good news that Christ has borne our sins. That is always good news. Therefore Paul spends the first chapter defending this good news.

1. First he shows that it was revealed by Jesus Christ directly to him. He didn't get it from any man, not even from the apostles. Christ himself appeared to him and told him this good news.
2. Second, it was acknowledged by the other apostles as being the same that they had received.

This, by the way, is one of the answers to what is called *hyper-dispensationalism* in our day. There are certain persons who claim that Paul had a different gospel than Peter, James, and John and the others – that his gospel is superior to theirs. But Paul himself in this letter says that when at last, fourteen years after his conversion, he went up to Jerusalem and had an opportunity to compare notes with the other apostles, they were amazed to discover that this man, who had never been a part of the original twelve, knew as much about the truth of the gospel as they did. In fact, he knew what went on in the secret, intimate gatherings that they had with the Lord Jesus Christ. You can see an example of this in First Corinthians, where the apostle is speaking of the Lord's Supper. He says,

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, ... {1 Cor 11:23-24a RSV}

How did Paul know that? Well, he said, "I received it from the Lord Jesus." When Peter, James and John heard that this man knew as much about what went on in that upper room as they did, they recognized that here indeed was a man called of God. His apostleship rested upon that fact.

3. Third, it was not only revealed to him by Christ and acknowledged by the other apostles, but it had been vindicated when Peter came to Antioch. Peter, the one who was supposedly the head of the apostles, was in error in Antioch. You can read the story in Chapter 2. The difficulty was over the matter of eating kosher versus Gentile foods. Peter had been a Jew, raised to eat nothing but kosher foods, but when he became a Christian he ate with the Gentiles and thus indicated the liberty that he had in Christ. But then, when certain men came down from Jerusalem, he began to compromise and went back to eating only with Jews, thus denying the very liberty that he had formerly proclaimed. This is what stirred Paul up and he withstood Peter to his face. Think of that! This maverick

apostle challenged Peter to his face. He vindicated the gospel as he did so.

Then he goes on to show us:

- First, that the gospel is salvation by faith and not by works. The gospel is of salvation by faith in the work of one who has already done it all, not by the works that we ourselves employ.
- Second, it was by promise and not by Law. Abraham was given the promise four hundred years before the Law was given. The Law, therefore, cannot change the promise. The promise of God stands true whether the Law comes in or not.
- Further, he shows that those who are in Christ are sons, not slaves. They are no longer servants but they are part of the family of God. In this connection he deals with the great allegorical passages concerning Hagar and Sarah, the Law and the mount of grace (Jerusalem above). From these passages he declares the great fact of justification by faith.

Now all that is wrapped up in that little phrase, “who gave himself for our sins.” Jesus Christ has paid the price himself. He didn't send an angel...

No angel could our place have taken,
highest of the high tho' he.
The one who on the cross was forsaken,
was one of the Godhead three.

It was this truth that delivered the soul of Martin Luther. More than 450 years ago the monk of Wittenberg strode up and nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the castle church and thereby began what we call the Protestant Reformation. Here was a man who had tried his very level best to find his way to heaven according to the pathway of works. He had done everything the church of his day suggested. He had tried fasting, indulgences, the sacraments, the intercession of the saints, penances, and confessions. He had endured long night vigils and heavy days of labor. He had done everything he could, but the harder he worked, the more his inner distress increased.

Then, absolutely desperate, he went to the head of the Augustinian Order, of which he was a monk,

and asked for some kind of release. The dear old man, not knowing very much, told him all that he could. He said, “Put your faith not upon yourself but in the wounds of Christ.” Then a dim ray of light began to break through into Martin Luther's soul. But it wasn't until he was in his little room in the tower preparing lectures on the Psalms for his students that the full light began to break. He was struck by a verse in the Psalms that said,

in thy righteousness, deliver me! {Psa 31:1 RSV}

This gripped Martin Luther's heart because the righteousness of God was to him a terrible thing – that unbendable righteous judgment by which God would destroy everyone who failed in the least degree to measure up to the full expectation of the holiness of God. Luther said that he even hated the word “righteousness.”

But then, as he began to investigate the word, it led him to the Epistle to the Romans where he read the words, “the righteous shall live by faith,” {Rom 1:17b}. That struck fire in his heart and he saw for the first time that another had paid the penalty. Christ himself had entered the human race and borne the guilt of our sins so that God might, in justice, accept us – not on our merits, but on his. When that truth broke upon Martin Luther's heart, he was never the same man again. It led him to challenge the system of indulgences and all the other legalistic bondage of the Roman Church and caused him at last to nail the Theses to the door.

It is interesting, as someone has pointed out, that every single religion known to man is a religion of works – except the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

- Hinduism tells us that if we renounce the world and relate ourselves to the “spirit of the universe,” we will at last find our way to peace.
- Buddhism sets before us eight principles by which man is to walk and thus find himself on the way to salvation.
- Judaism says we must keep the Law absolutely and inflexibly and then we will be saved.

- Islam says that a man must pray five times a day and give alms and fast on the month of Ramadan and obey the commands of Allah. All are ways of works.
- Unitarianism says that man is saved by having good character.
- Modern humanism says salvation is by service to mankind.

In every case salvation is said to be achieved by something *we have to do*. But the good news of the gospel is that ***Christ has done it!*** He alone has done what no man can do for himself and thus has set us free.

In Chapters 5 and 6 the apostle turns to the second and equally important aspect of this great truth, summarized in these words in Chapter 1, Verse 4:

to deliver us from the present evil age, {Gal 1:4b RSV}

Christianity is not merely going to heaven when you die. It is also living now, in this present life. It is being set free from the controlling bondage to the world and its ways, its evil and wickedness, in our life now. It is to be delivered from this present evil age right now. This too is by the gift of Jesus Christ. Here again the apostle waxes hot upon these Galatians. He said earlier, "Oh, you foolish Galatians" {Gal 3:1a RSV}. "You simple minded people. Do you really think that you can begin in the Spirit and then proceed by means of the flesh and in that way accomplish your profession? Why, it is all of faith, all by the power of God that the Christian life is led."

He goes on to develop this theme, showing that the gospel of liberty in Jesus Christ, the life of freedom, must neither be lost through legalism nor abused through license. It certainly doesn't give us the right to do anything we like, any way we like. That is bondage just as much, but merely of another sort. True freedom is to be expressed in loving service for one another. This is truly life.

All legalists sum up their faiths essentially in the following way: They say that:

SINCERITY + ACTIVITY = LIFE

You can test any religious experience in the world by that measure and, unless it is the gospel of the grace of God, you will find that what it says, in one way or another, boils down to that. "Sincerity (that is 'faith') plus activity equals life as God intended it to be lived – salvation or whatever you want to call it." But the truth is quite the opposite. It is that

LIFE + FAITH = ACTIVITY

That is an entirely different thing. We work, not in order to be saved, nor to be blessed by God, but we work because we share the life of Jesus Christ in us.

Galatianism is still found today even though we are not likely to be asked to be circumcised or to observe the Sabbath. (There are groups who do this, but, essentially, this is not a common danger to us.) Legalistic ideas about keeping Lent, holy days, and rituals are better known modern forms of Galatianism, although they aren't serious threats to us either. But what we are in grave danger of forgetting is that Christ himself came to deliver us from this present evil age and that he does it by living his life in us. That is the key. We know that this age is evil. We feel its pressures to conform, to lower our standards, to believe all the lies shouted at us by TV, radio, billboards, magazines and in conversations – everywhere. The danger is that we think we can deliver ourselves from the grip of these pressures by setting up Christian programs, by filling our time with activity –

- teaching in the Sunday School,
- playing the organ,
- leading young people's groups,
- joining Christian clubs, and
- taking part in meetings.

We think that this is what keeps us free, but that is Galatianism. It is the same kind of bondage that the apostle wrote about and it will deaden and dampen the spirit of an individual and bring him into bondage just as it did in Paul's day.

Compare it with the truth that Paul declares in the last two chapters of Galatians – that Christ lives in us by the Spirit and reproduces his life in us. Therefore, the whole Christian walk is to re-

puciate the life of the flesh with its self-centeredness and to rely upon the work of the Spirit of God to reproduce in us the life of Jesus Christ. How beautifully all this is gathered up in the verse (Chapter 2, Verse 20) that is perhaps the best known of this whole letter:

I have been crucified with Christ; It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. {Gal 2:20 RSV}

The old self-centered “I”

- has been crucified with Christ so that it no longer has any right to live, and
- your task and my task is to see that it doesn't live,
 - that it is repudiated,
 - that it is put aside,

along with its determination to express what Paul calls “the works of the flesh.” See what they are (Chapter 5, Verses 19-21):

immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery [by the way, sorcery is a word linked to pharmaceutical matters, including drugs like LSD and other psychedelic substances], **enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. {Gal 5:19b-21a RSV}**

All of these ugly characteristics are the works of the flesh – the old self-centered life which, Paul declares, was judged and cut off in the cross and was replaced by the life of Jesus Christ made available to us. Therefore, dependence upon him to live in us and a willingness to let it be done, and to let him move us in the direction he desires, results in “the fruit of the Spirit” which is (Verses 22-23):

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. {Gal 5:22b-23 RSV}

Now this is where Christian liberty enters in. You haven't begun to live as God intended you to live until the fruit of the Spirit is a consistent manifestation in your life. Anything less is the bondage of legalism, with its dullness, apathy, indifference – and its death.

Then Paul concludes with his wonderful sixth chapter in which he describes how being filled with the Spirit will result in our bearing one another's burdens, restoring one another in meekness, in gentleness of spirit, not in judgment nor in harshness, in giving liberally and freely to one another's needs, and in patient continuing in well-doing – sowing to the Spirit instead of to the flesh.

Finally, the Apostle closes on one of the most personal notes in the whole New Testament. He says (Verse 11):

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. {Gal 6:11 RSV}

Painfully scratching it, hampered by poor eyesight, he says, “I don't want to glory in your flesh like these Judaizers do. They love to compel people to be circumcised because they think each person circumcised is another scalp they can hang on their belts as a sign that they have done something tremendous for God. That is not my glory.” He says, “I glory in the cross of Christ which cuts off that kind of living, cuts it right off at the roots, cuts off the ‘old man’ with all his self-seeking, ambition, and self glory. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ which crucifies me unto the world and the world unto me – that is my glory.”

Now he says, “Don't any of you write to me and tell me that what I have written you is all wrong, because I want you to know that living this kind of life has been costly. I have earned the persecution of many. I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.”

If you challenge the world and its ways, you will find those who are resentful of the way you live and the way you think and some will be actively antagonistic. Some will be ready to burn you at the stake if they get a chance because you are defying the accepted standards of life. You are setting aside the principle upon which the world seeks to accomplish its ends. Your life is judging theirs and they resent it. But the apostle says, “It doesn't make any difference to me. I glory in the

GALATIANS: Don't Submit Again to the Slave's Yoke

Lord Jesus Christ who has taught me what true liberty is, what it means to be a son of the living God and to live my life in the freedom and the joyfulness of personally knowing Jesus himself.”

Prayer:

Our Father, how this letter challenges us in these lukewarm days in which we live, in which men and women talk much about commitment but very seldom evidence it. We pray that we may be captured by these words and see once again that life is not

worth living if it be not lived for Christ, that the deceitfulness of our hearts must be judged in the light of your word, that we not be content with mere expression but only with that which comes from the reality of your Spirit at work in us. Produce in our lives, O great Spirit of God, that blessed fruit that glorifies the Father, and deny within us and help us to repudiate that which has been crucified and set aside in Jesus Christ, that we may receive from him all that he has provided. We ask in his name. Amen.

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EPHESIANS: The Calling Of The Saints

by Ray C. Stedman

The Epistle to the Ephesians is, in many ways, the crowning glory of the New Testament. But perhaps this letter ought not to be called “Ephesians” for we do not really know to whom it was written. The Christians at Ephesus were certainly among the recipients of this letter, but undoubtedly there were others. In many of the original Greek manuscripts there is a blank where the King James translation has the words *at Ephesus*; just a line where the names of other recipients were apparently to be filled in. That is why the Revised Standard Version does not say, “To the saints at Ephesus,” but simply “To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus...”

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians there is a reference to a letter he wrote to the Laodiceans. Our Bible does not include an epistle called “A Letter to the Laodiceans,” but many have felt that it is the same one we call “The Letter to the Ephesians.” The reason is that the Revelation of John (the last book in the Bible) begins with letters to the seven churches of Asia, the first being to Ephesus and the last to Laodicea.

These cities were grouped in a rather rough circle in Asia Minor, and it evidently was customary for anyone who wrote to one of the churches to have the letter sent along to each of the others in turn, continuing around the circle until it came at last to the church at Laodicea. This may account for what would otherwise seem to be a lost letter from the Apostle Paul to the Laodiceans. At any rate, this letter sets forth, in a marvelous way, what no other book of the New Testament describes so

completely – the nature of the body of Christ, the true Church.

The first four letters of the New Testament – Romans, First and Second Corinthians, and Galatians – are the development of the phrase, “Christ in you,” teaching us what the indwelling life of Christ is intended to do. But beginning with the letter to the church at Ephesus, we are to learn and understand what it means for us to be “in Christ” and to share the body life of the Lord Jesus Christ – “you in Christ.” Here is the great theme of this letter – the believer in Christ, or the nature of the Church.

Verse 3 of the first chapter is in many ways the theme of the letter – in Christ – is the key:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, {Eph 1:3 RSV}

There are many who take the phrase, “the heavenly places,” which appears several times in this letter, as a reference to heaven after we die, but if you do this, you will miss the whole import of Paul’s letter. While it does talk about going to heaven some day, it is talking primarily about the life you live right now. The heavenly places are not off in some distant reach of space or on some planet or star; they are simply the realm of invisible reality in which the Christian lives now, in contact with God, and in the conflict with the devil in which we are all daily engaged.

The heavenly places are the seat of Christ's power and glory. In Chapter 2, Verse 6 we are told,

[God] raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, {Eph 2:6 RSV}

But in Chapter 3 we learn that here also are the headquarters of the principalities and powers of evil:

... that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. {Eph 3:10 RSV}

The conflict that occurs is set forth in Chapter 6:

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. {Eph 6:10-12 RSV}

So you can see that this is not a reference to heaven at all, but to earth. It is to the invisible realm of earth – not to that which you can see, hear, taste, or feel – but to that spiritual kingdom which surrounds us on all sides and which constantly influences and affects us, whether for good or evil, depending upon our willful choice and our relationship to these invisible powers. Those are the heavenly places. In this realm, in which everyone of us lives, the apostle declares that God has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing; i.e., he has given us all that it takes to live in our present circumstances and relationships. Peter says the same thing in his second letter: “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness,” {2 Pet 1:3a RSV}.

That means that when you receive Jesus Christ as your Lord, you have already received all that God ever intends to give you. Is that not remarkable? The weakest believer holds in his hands all that is ever possessed by the mightiest saint of God. We already have everything, because we have Christ, and in him is every spiritual blessing and all that pertains to life and godliness. Thus we have what it takes to live life as God intended. Any failure, therefore, is not because we are lacking any-

thing, but because we have not appropriated what is already ours.

This, of course, eliminates any foundation for the notion of a “second blessing,” or a third, or a fourth. It is all here, now! There will be blessing after blessing as you take them, one by one, moment by moment. That is the import of the hymn, “Jesus, I am resting, resting” – every moment receiving from him all that he is – resting in his power, resting in his life.

The apostle develops the theme of this epistle for us with six wonderful figures of speech, by which we learn that the Church is the whole body of Christ. But I find that when you approach the subject from that angle, it is difficult for people to grasp the significance of the truth in this letter. We all have the tendency to think of ourselves as somewhat remote from the Church. Every now and then someone comes to me and says, “The Church ought to do so-and-so.” I reply, “Well, you are the Church; go to it.” The fact that they are the Church seems to strike them with a degree of amazement. Someone said to me not long ago, “The Church ought to be more friendly.” I said, “All right, you and I are the Church, let's be more friendly.”

The Church is people. Every believer is a member of the body of Christ – the Church – so I would prefer to go through this letter using not the word “church,” but “Christian,” because every believer is a small replica of the whole Church. If we understand that God lives within the Church we see that he also lives within each believer. Each one of us, as a believer in Jesus Christ, is a microcosm of the whole body. We can, therefore, go through this whole epistle relating what Paul says not to the Church, but to each one of us, as individual believers.

In the first figure, the apostle refers to the Church as **a body**:

... and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. {Eph 1:22-23 RSV}

The first chapter is entirely devoted to the wonder and amazement that we normal, ordinary, sin-possessed human beings should be called by

God in a most amazing way – reaching back even to before the foundation of the earth – to become members of that body. It is a tremendous declaration. The Apostle Paul never got over his amazement that he – bowlegged, baldheaded, despised by many, regarded with contempt in many circles – was nevertheless a member of the body of Jesus Christ, and was called of God before the foundation of the earth and given such tremendous blessings that he was equipped for everything that life could demand of him. That is what it means to belong to the body of Christ.

Now what is the purpose of the body? It is to be “the fulness of him who fills all in all” {Eph 1:23b RSV}. In other words, it is the expression of the head. That is what your body is for. It is intended to express and perform the desires of the head. The only time that a healthy human body does not do that is when some secondary nervous center is artificially stimulated.

You know, for instance, that if you hit your knee in the right place with a hammer, your leg will kick up in the air without your even willing it. Even if you choose not to kick, it will still react. I sometimes wonder if some of the activity of the Church can be ascribed to a sort of reflex movement – the body acting on its own without direction from the head.

At any rate, the function of the body is to express “the fulness of him who fills all in all.” What a mighty phrase that is! Do you ever think of yourself that way? Do you ever dare think of yourself the way God thinks of you – as a body to be wholly filled and flooded with God himself?

Next, Paul refers to the Church as **a temple**:

... in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. {Eph 2:21-22 RSV}

Here is a holy temple. One of the greatest things taking place in the world today is the growth of this building that God has been erecting through the ages. When all the worthless products of human endeavor have crumbled into dust; when all the institutions and organizations that we have built have long been forgotten, the temple which God is erecting will be the central focus of attention

through all eternity. That is what the passage implies. Furthermore, he is building it now, using human building-blocks; shaping them, edging them, sandpapering them, preparing them just as he desires, putting human beings into this temple where he wants them. Why? What is his purpose for you, and his purpose for the whole temple? It is as Paul says – to be the home of God, the dwelling place of God. That envisions and includes everything which we understand by the word home.

When my family and I come back from a long trip, as soon as we get home, we take off our coats, stretch out, and make ourselves at home. We all say how great it is to be home. But what is it about our home that makes us feel that way? Isn't it that at home we can relax and be ourselves? That does not mean that when we are away from home we are something other than ourselves, but we are always somewhat restrained. While at home, we can be all that we want to be – just relaxed and ourselves. That is what God is building the Church for – to be the place where he can be what he wants to be in you, fully relaxed and all that he is, in you. That is why he is calling you and building you.

The third chapter introduces the third figure. Here we learn that the Church is **a mystery**, a sacred secret:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; [Here is the mystery:] that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. {Eph 3:8-10 RSV}

There are wonderful intimations here – that God has had some secret plans at work through the centuries which he has never unfolded to anybody. But he has had a goal and a purpose in mind that he intends to fulfill, and the instrument by which he is doing it is the Church. This is something we can never fully grasp, but it involves the education of the whole universe. Paul is saying that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God – the multitudinous aspects and facets of God's wisdom – will now be made known to all the principalities and powers that inhabit the heavenly places, the invi-

ble realm of reality anywhere and everywhere, in all ages. The education of the universe is the purpose of the mystery.

In Chapter 4, now, the apostle uses still another figure:

... and put on the new nature [the King James Version says, “the new man”] **created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.** {Eph 4:24 RSV}

The Church is a **new man** because every Christian in it is a new man. This is linked with Paul’s word in Second Corinthians:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old had passed away, behold, the new has come. {2 Cor 5:17 RSV}

The present creation, which began at the beginning of the heavens and the earth, has long since grown old and is passing away. The world with all its wealth and its wisdom belongs to that which is passing. But gradually through the centuries God has been building up a new generation, a new race of beings, a new kind of man which the world has never seen before – better even than Adam. In Romans we learn that all we lost in Adam we have gained back in Christ and more, much more! {See Rom 5:15-17 RSV}. Here is revealed a race of beings of which the world has never before dreamed.

Also in Romans the Apostle Paul says that the whole creation is standing on tiptoe (that is the literal meaning), craning its neck to see the manifestation of the sons of God, the day of the unveiling of this new creation (Rom 8:19). But remember, this new creation is being made right now, and you are invited to put on this new man, moment by moment, day by day, in order that you might meet the pressures and problems of life in the world today.

That is why the Church is here. The Church is a new man, and the purpose of the new man is to exercise a new ministry. In this same chapter of Ephesians, we read,

But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. {Eph 4:7 RSV}

This new man in each of us has been given a gift that we never had before we became a Christian. Our job, our reason for existence – the reason Jesus Christ put us here on earth and leaves us here – is that we might discover and exercise that gift. I do not know of anything more important than this. The reason why the Church has flagged and faltered, failed and lost, is that Christians have lost this great truth which each one receives directly from the Lord. That includes us all, from the youngest to oldest, who know Jesus Christ. The risen Lord has given a gift to you, just as the man in the parable gave the talents to each of his servants, entrusting them with his property until his return. And when he comes back, his judgment will be based on what you did with the gift he gave to you. That is the exercise of the new man.

Chapter 5 introduces still a different figure for the Church; we learn here that the Church is a **bride**:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. {Eph 5:25-27 RSV}

And then quotes the words of God in Genesis:

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.” This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church. {Eph 5:31-32 RSV}

The Church is a bride. And it is to be a bride for the enjoyment of the bridegroom. Paul says Christ’s intention in preparing the Church as a bride is that he might present it to himself. Isn’t that what every bridegroom desires – that his bride shall be his? During their early days of courtship she may go out with some other fellows, but when they are engaged she is promised to be his and they are both waiting for the day when that can be realized. Then at last the day comes when they stand before the marriage altar and promise to love and honor and cherish one another until death shall part them. They then become each other’s – she his and

he hers – for the enjoyment of each other throughout their lifetime together. Now that is a picture both of the Church and the Christian.

The Christian is to be the bride of Christ, for the Lord's enjoyment. Do you ever think of yourself that way? That concept helped revolutionize my own devotional life when it dawned upon me that the Lord Jesus was looking forward to our time together, and that if I missed it, he was disappointed. I realized that not only was I receiving from him, but that he was receiving from me, and that he longed and yearned for me. When I met with the Lord after that it was with a new sense that he loved me and delighted in our time of fellowship.

The last picture of the Church in this epistle is as **a soldier**:

Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. {Eph 6:13 RSV}

What is the purpose of a soldier? It is to fight battles, and that is what God is doing in us now. He has given us the great privilege of being the battlefield upon which his great victories are won.

That is the essence of the story of Job. This dear man was struck without warning by a series of tragedies. All in one day he lost his possessions one by one. Finally he lost his entire family, except his wife. He didn't understand what was happening, but God had chosen Job to be the battlefield of a conflict with Satan. God allowed Satan to go to the utmost limit in afflicting Job's physical body. In addition, his mind was troubled; he could not understand what was happening. But when the battle was over God greatly blessed Job, and has used him mightily to teach the people of God in all ages that trials and difficulties are not always for the sufferer alone, but are a means by which God wins mighty victories against the unseen powers. We are called to be soldiers who have learned how to fight.

In his first letter John writes to his young Christian friends,

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:14 RSV}

That is, you have learned how to fight – how to move out, how to throw off the confusing restraints of the world, how not to be conformed to the age in which you live – and to move against the tide, against the current, thus greatly glorifying God.

I love the story of Daniel who, as a teenager, was a prisoner in a foreign land. He was exposed to a pagan environment and had to fight the battle day by day, counting time after time upon God's faithfulness to keep him when everything was against him. The pressures brought to bear upon him were almost incredible. But again and again Daniel and his friends met the tests and won the battles and carried on. Toward the close of the book Daniel was sent a visitor, the angel Michael, who told him some tremendous things. Daniel was allowed to see down the stream of time well beyond our own day. Yet when the angel first appeared to him, Daniel was greatly troubled. He fell upon his face, his knees shook, and he was fearful and afraid of his holy visitor. But the angel said to him, "O Daniel, man greatly beloved ..." {Dan 10:11b RSV}, "Fear not," {Dan 10:12b RSV}. Why was he beloved? Because he was a faithful soldier.

This is the privilege to which God is calling us in this day of world unrest and distress. God is calling us to be soldiers, to walk in the steps of those who have won the battle before us, having been faithful unto death if necessary.

This is the privilege of those who are called and equipped with every spiritual blessing, so that there might be

- a body,
- a temple,
- a mystery,
- a new man,
- a bride, and
- a soldier

for Jesus Christ. That is quite a calling!

The exhortation, then, of this letter is contained in just one verse, in which Paul says,

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, [writing this letter from prison] beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ... {Eph 4:1 RSV}

Do not lose sight of what God is doing. The world cannot see it. It has no idea what is taking place. But you know, and you can see it, so do not lose heart.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this reminder, from the pen of your faithful apostle, of the character of the world in which we live,

and the nature of the battle which we fight, and the glory of the calling which we have. We ask that you will make us faithful – faithful to the end, faithful unto death if need be. And may all the pressures be met by the answering power of the Lord Jesus himself, the Son of God, who dwells within us and makes his home in our hearts. What a precious fellowship this is. In Christ's name, Amen.

The Message of Philippians

by Ray C. Stedman

The letter to the Philippians has been called not only the tenderest letter that Paul ever wrote, but also the most delightful. It brims over with expressions of praise, confidence, and rejoicing despite the fact that this is one of Paul's prison epistles, written in Rome during his first imprisonment.

You can find the background for this letter in the closing section of the book of Acts, and also in Chapter 16, which tells of Paul's visit to Philippi and the founding of the church to which he later wrote this letter. You may remember reading of those exciting and danger-filled days when Paul and Silas were in Philippi together. They first met a group of women who were having a prayer meeting by the riverside, and to these women they spoke the gospel. One of them, Lydia, a seller of purple goods (one who dyed garments for royalty and the wealthy), invited them into her home, and her name has been known throughout the centuries because of her kindness and hospitality to the apostle. In Lydia's home the church of Philippi began. Paul's preaching throughout the city stirred up a great deal of interest and reaction. Finally it aroused the resentment of the rulers and he was thrown into jail. It was on that occasion, when he and Silas were locked in stocks down in the inner prison with their arms and heads held immobile, that an earthquake shook the prison, toppled the walls, and released the prisoners, setting them free. Then the Philippian jailer came running in and fell down before the apostle. Thinking his life was forfeit because the prisoners had escaped, he cried out in those words that have been the subject of so many gospel sermons,

"Men, what must I do to be saved?" {Acts 16:30b RSV}

The apostle's answer was brief and to the point,

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." {Acts 16:31b RSV}

Paul later went on to the cities of Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and other places in Greece. But now as he writes to the Philippians, he is in Rome, a prisoner of Nero. Although he is allowed to stay in his own rented house, awaiting trial before the Emperor Nero, he is chained day and night to a Roman soldier. Paul knew his life could easily be forfeit when he appeared before Nero. And yet this epistle glows with radiance and joy, confidence and strength. It is a great encouragement to any downcast or discouraged heart to read this letter to the Philippians. If you are going through times of pressure and trial, I urge you to read this little letter. It will encourage you greatly, especially if you remember the circumstances out of which it comes.

The letter is divided into four chapters which represent, for once, natural divisions within the text. The subject or theme of this letter is Jesus Christ and his availability for coping with the problems of life. The church at Philippi to which Paul wrote was not beset with serious doctrinal problems but only the normal, usual problems of everyday, commonplace existence – Christians who did not get along with one another, and incipient divisions within the church created by certain persons who were trying to mislead others with ideas not quite in accord with the Christian faith. To

deal with these problems, Paul designed this epistle as a guide for ordinary living. It faces the normal problems a Christian has, and proclaims the victory which a Christian can appropriate in overcoming these problems. The recurring theme, running throughout the letter, is that of joy and rejoicing. Repeatedly the apostle uses phrases like, “Rejoice, and again I say rejoice, rejoice in your sufferings, rejoice in your difficulties.” This becomes, then, a letter in which we are instructed how to live victoriously and joyously in the midst of the normal difficulties of life.

The four chapters present Christ in four different aspects. The themes are caught up for us in four key verses that appear in these chapters.

He is presented in Chapter 1 as our life – **Christ our life**. I think you will immediately recognize the key verse of Chapter 1. It sets forth this idea that Christ is our life. In Verse 21 the apostle says,

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. {Phil 1:21 RSV}

I think often times we read that verse as though it were the cry of a man fed up with life, who could hardly wait to get to heaven, who had ‘had it.’ He was in difficulty with pressures and problems and he just longed to go to heaven and get away from it all – sort of a Christian escapism. We usually put the emphasis at the end of the sentence, “to die is gain.” I think this reflects a very common attitude that we Christians sometimes have – that we would like to get away from it all. We do not like living life the way we have to live it, and we look longingly to heaven and sing songs like *Sometimes I Grow Homesick for Heaven*. But that is not what Paul is saying at all. If you look closely you will see that he is really saying, “I don’t know which to choose. To me to live is to have Christ and to die is to gain heaven, but if I had to choose, I don’t know which I’d choose. To live is to experience Christ who is my life. Thus life is continual adventure and excitement and I can hardly wait to live it.” This certainly indicates that he was not fed up with life at all, nor was he discouraged because of his circumstances. The entire context of the passage confirms this. Writing to these Philippians he says, “Don’t be disturbed about me, brethren. You hear that I’m in prison, but let me tell you some-

thing. My circumstances have served to advance the gospel, and my imprisonment has made it possible for the gospel to be spread in Rome as it never has before. And I’m not discouraged; I’m rejoicing. Furthermore, the other Christians in Rome are stirred up and are preaching around the city,” {cf, Phil 1:12}.

An unique evangelistic enterprise was occurring, the like of which has perhaps never been seen before or since, and he tells them what it is. God had designed a plan for reaching the Roman Empire that Paul never dreamed of. And do you know whom he made head of the arrangements committee? Nero, the Emperor! Paul tells us in Verse 13,

... it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; {Phil 1:13 RSV}

If you read between the lines, you can see what was happening. Nero, the Emperor, had commanded that every six hours one of the finest young men in the whole Roman Empire, from the elite who constituted his personal bodyguard, would be brought in and chained to the Apostle Paul in order that Paul might instruct him in the things of Christ. Isn’t that amazing? One by one they were coming to Christ, and there was being formed a picked band of young men, the very keenest, most intelligent, finest and strongest young men of the empire. If you do not believe that, look at the last chapter of the letter, where in the next to last verse he says,

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household. {Phil 4:22 RSV}

Now isn’t that a unique plan for evangelizing the Roman Empire? But that is the kind of God Paul had, and that is why he could say, “To me, to live is Christ. I don’t know what he is going to do next but this is exciting, this is adventurous, and to step out into the daily adventure of a new experience with Jesus Christ captivates me. I don’t know which to choose, whether to live this exciting life or to die and be with him.” Now that is what life in Christ means.

We know that Christ died for us, but it was in order that he might live in us. The experience of the outworking of Christ’s life in us is what turns life on, and makes it a vital, glorious experience. You cannot read the first chapter of this letter

without seeing how thoroughly the Apostle Paul had discovered this. Even as he contemplates appearing before Nero he says,

For I know through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. {Phil 1:19-20}

What had made the difference? This man had found the secret that God intended for humanity – God indwelling man. It takes God to be a man. And no life is complete that does not have God in it. Paul had found this out, to the glory of his day-by-day existence, and he never forgot it. He lived life to the fullest in the knowledge that Christ is our life.

In Chapter 2 he applies this secret in a different way. Here he deals with the problem of the disunity which was threatening some of the saints at Philippi. The fact was that certain ones among them were quarreling, and there were divisions within the body of the church. This is constantly happening in almost any church. People get irritated with each other; they get upset by the way other people do things; they do not like the attitude that someone displays, or his tone of voice. Then cliques and divisions, which are always destructive to the life and vitality of a church, tend to develop. So Paul points out to these people that **Christ is our example** in settling difficulties and problems. The key passage that sets this forth begins in Chapter 2, Verse 5,

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus. {Phil 2:5 RSV}

That sounds strange, doesn't it, "Have this mind which you have?" What he means, of course, is that you have the mind of Christ, since you have Christ. All right, let it be expressed. Allow it to come forth. Let it show itself. And what is the characteristic of this mind? Paul goes on to tell us,

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, {Phil 2:6 RSV}

The phrase *to be grasped* means "to be held onto at all costs." He did not count the fact that he was equal with the Father – one with God the Father and God the Spirit, one of the three persons of the triune God – a thing to be held onto at all costs. Think of that! The greatest relationship that could possibly be true of any being or person was his. But rather than clutching it to himself,

emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. {Phil 2:7-8 RSV}

That was the self-condescension of Jesus Christ. It was the emptying out of all that he held of value in his life. And this, says Paul, is the mind of Jesus Christ. In your quarrels, one with another, have this attitude toward each other. Do not hang onto your rights at all costs. How apropos this is in these days, when we hear so often about clinging to "my rights" and that we should insist upon "our rights." How different is Christ's example!

In this connection I can never forget the incident that Dr. H. A. Ironside used to relate. When he was a boy of only eight or ten years of age his mother took him to a business meeting of Christians. Two men were having a quarrel – he didn't remember what it was about – but one of them stood up and pounded on the desk, and said, "I don't care what the rest of you do, all I want is my rights." Sitting in the front row was a dear old Scottish man, somewhat hard of hearing, who cupped his hand behind his ear, leaned forward, and said, "Aye, brother, what's that you say? What do you want?" The fellow said, "Well, I just said that all I want is my rights, that's all." And the old Scot replied, "Your rights, brother, is that what you want, your rights? If you had your rights, you'd be in hell. The Lord Jesus didn't come to get his rights, he came to get his wrongs. And he got them." The fellow who had been bickering stood transfixed for a moment. Then he sat down and said, "You're right. Settle it any way you like." And in a few moments the argument was settled. Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who gave up his rights, and humbled himself, became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. But don't stop there. What was the result?

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {Phil 2:9-11 RSV}

When he gave up his rights, God gave him every right in the universe. He put his problem in God's hands, and God the Father vindicated him. This is what Paul is saying to quarreling Christians – give up your rights. Don't insist on them. He says, "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves," {Phil 2:3 RSV}.

The opening words of Chapter 2 are his practical application of this truth:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. {Phil 2:1-2 RSV}

Paul goes on in the rest of the chapter to show that when anyone decides to do this, God will be at work. It is God who works in you, he says, "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" {Phil 2:13b RSV}. Paul closes the chapter by mentioning two of his co-workers who exemplified these very attributes, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Timothy was faithful, and Paul says of him,

I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, ... {Phil 2:20-22a RSV}

Epaphroditus had come from these saints at Philippi and had brought a gift from them to Paul, and then had fallen desperately ill. They had heard about his sickness and were troubled. Paul says that they were right to be concerned, as he was very ill, but that God had had mercy on him and now he was sending him back to them. He says,

So receive him in the Lord with all joy; and honor such men, for he nearly died for the

work of Christ, risking his life to complete your service to me. {Phil 2:29-30 RSV}

He gave up his rights. Have this mind which is in you – Christ's mind, Christ's example.

I think that if we would put that admonition into practice we would be different people. There would be no quarreling within churches and no divisions among Christians.

Chapter 3 sets forth Christ again, this time as our confidence – **Christ our confidence**, our motivating power. He is the One who moves us to want earnestly what we ought to want and who makes us confident that it can be achieved. I do not think there is any quality in life in more desperate demand than confidence. Who is not looking for motivation? All the courses on personality buildup are designed to try to give us the spark that energizes, that motivates us, that makes us want to do what we ought to do and would like to do. All this, the apostle says, we find in Jesus Christ. He is the motivator. Paul puts it strongly in the well known Verse 10 of Chapter 3,

that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, ... {Phil 3:10a RSV}

For contrast he outlines the things that motivated him and gave him confidence, or rather, a false sense of confidence before he became a Christian. In Verse 3 he describes Christians as those who should worship God in spirit, glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. But that is the problem with us. We are constantly trying to build up confidence in the flesh – in the principle of self-effort. That is the philosophy underlying all the personality buildup courses – Dale Carnegie, the Powers Girls, and all the others – an attempt to teach us confidence in the flesh. Paul lists the training that he had had in that. He tells those who think they have reason for confidence in the flesh to look over his qualifications. "These," he says {cf, Phil 3:4-5 RSV}, "are the things in which I had pride and confidence: first, in my ancestry – I was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" – an absolute Boston blueblood. You can't beat that for ancestry. Furthermore, he says, "I was proud of my orthodoxy – as to the Law, a Pharisee, the strictest sect of my religion. I

was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. And then I was proud of my activity – as to zeal, a persecutor of the Church. And then of my morality – as to righteousness under the Law, blameless. But now,” he says, “whatever these things were to me, I count everything as loss because I have found that Christ could be my confidence. All the confidence I once got from these secondary sources I found to be of absolutely no value compared to that which Jesus Christ gives. And in resting upon his life in me, I have found so much more, that now all these other things are but dross, but dung, but refuse compared to what Christ gives” {cf, Phil 3:6-8 RSV} – Christ our confidence.

In the latter part of Chapter 3 he sets in contrast those who seek secondary values in the guise of religion. He says,

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. {Phil 3:19 RSV}

But on the contrary, those whose confidence is in Christ do not end with this life, but we look for a city, a commonwealth which is in heaven and from it we await the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, to change our lowly bodies to be like his, by the resurrection power which enables him to subject all things to himself.

Then in Chapter 4 you see Christ not only as our motivator, but **Christ our strength**, our energizer. Not only does he move us to want the right things, but he makes it possible for us to do them. He provides the dynamic that fulfills the desire. It is mental torture to give a person great desire but then not to give him the ability to fulfill it. That is a certain recipe for frustration. So the apostle closes with the declaration that Christ gives complete fulfillment. He supplies our strength as well as our desire. In Verse 13 he declares:

I can do all things in him who strengthens me. {Phil 4:13 RSV}

How practical some of these things can be is demonstrated in the context.

First there is the problem of getting along with others. There were two ladies in the church at Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche. We know they were ladies because in the Greek the form of their

names is feminine. (Of course, you all remember the story of the man who couldn't quite pronounce these names but read them this way, “I entreat Odious and I entreat Soontouchy to agree in the Lord.”) Unfortunately we still have in our churches odious people and soon-touchy people – those whose feelings get hurt very easily and those who delight in hurting others' feelings. But the apostle says, “I beseech you, be of the same mind in the Lord,” {cf, Phil 4:2 KJV}. How? “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” {Phil 4:13 KJV}. That is the secret.

And then there is the matter of worry.

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. {Phil 4:6 RSV}

What a recipe for peace in the midst of anxiety!

How many have tried it and found that it works? Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything – there is a counteraction proposed. Do not just sit there and fret or turn your mind off. Do not suppress your anxieties. Pray to the Lord about them, with thanksgiving, and leave them with him. And the peace of God, which you will never be able to understand – where it comes from or how it gets there – will possess your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, {cf, Phil 4:7}. Christ is our strength.

Finally there is the matter of poverty. Paul says,

Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. {Phil 4:11-12 RSV}

And he passes it on to the Philippians.

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. {Phil 4:19 RSV}

Christ our strength.

This letter embodies the secret of a man who ran the full course, who fought the good fight, who kept the faith. This is his explanation of how he did it. We who live in this 20th century – with its

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perils and problems, its frustrations, its anxieties, its pressures – need to discover and understand this because we have the same One indwelling us who indwelt the Apostle Paul:

- Christ is our life;
- Christ is our example;
- Christ is our confidence; and
- Christ is our strength.

Prayer:

And now, our Father, we ask you to grant that these words will take root in our hearts and lives. May we be not merely hearers

of the word but doers also. Keep us from deceiving ourselves and going away from here having heard these great truths but unwilling to do them. Grant to us that we may begin at whatever level we find ourselves, whether we be young or old, in school, at home, at work, or wherever we are. Make us ready to test these promises, to step out on these mighty truths, and discover with the Apostle Paul the joy that floods the heart of someone who experiences Christ as a living Lord, and the one who can help us to live a daily adventure of new discovery with him. For we ask it in his name, Amen.

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COLOSSIANS: Power to Endure with Joy

by Ray C. Stedman

Most of the letters that Paul wrote to the churches were written to those that he had started himself. But he did not begin the church at Rome, nor did he begin the church at Colossae. It is not certain who started the church at Colossae, but it is very likely a man mentioned in certain of Paul's other letters – Epaphroditus, or, since that was too long a name for even the Greeks to say, Epaphras. He is mentioned in this letter as being from Colossae, and is very likely the one who founded the church. Where he had heard the gospel we do not know, but he had evidently taken it to his own home town and had begun to proclaim Christ. Out of that proclamation had come the church at Colossae.

Epaphroditus had gone to Rome to see the Apostle Paul, who was then a prisoner, carrying with him reports of the church at Colossae. Another man had also gone to Rome to see Paul during his first imprisonment, and he too brought reports of the church at Colossae. So it was to these new Christians who had never met the apostle face to face that Paul wrote the letter from Rome.

It was written at about the same time as the letter to the Philippians, and you will notice that it is very similar in its structure and content to the letter to the Ephesians. They were probably written at about the same time, during Paul's first imprisonment, and are therefore called "the Prison Epistles of the Apostle Paul." The primary difference between the Ephesians and Colossians is that the Colossians had a problem, and it is on this problem that the apostle is primarily focusing. They were on the verge of losing their understanding of the power by which Christian life is lived. Therefore, this letter is the great proclamation and explanation of the power of the Christian's life through Christ as the resource of the individual.

The theme of this letter can be expressed by these words which are part of the apostle's introductory prayer for the Colossian Christians:

May you be strengthened with all power [that is why he wrote the letter], **according to his glorious might** [that is the subject of the letter to the Colossians].

{Col 1:11a RSV}

Since Paul had never been to Colossae, he begins the letter with certain references to himself as an apostle and with greetings to these people, with thanksgiving for the faith that he has heard is prevalent among them, and for their love and joy, and for other evidence that these people have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and have been radically transformed.

That is always the mark that the apostles looked for. Whenever they heard of other Christians they expected to hear that something had happened to them, that they had become a different kind of people, that they weren't going on, as many Christians attempt to do today, utterly unchanged in their attitudes or their outlooks. But to the 1st Century Christians, becoming a Christian meant a radical transformation, resulting from a revolutionary change of government. This was evident in these Colossian Christians.

Now the apostle writes to them and thanks God for what he has heard about them. He comments upon their faith and then prays for them. This prayer is one of the most refreshing and delightful prayers in the New Testament (1:9-12):

From the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. {Col 1:9-12 RSV}

Beginning on that note, then, he sets forth for them the source of all power in the Christian life – Jesus Christ himself. One of the strongest and most glorious proclamations concerning his essential deity is found in this passage (1:15):

**He is the image of the invisible God,
{Col 1:15a RSV}**

An image is an exact expression. He is declaring here that in the man Jesus we have the exact expression of all that God is. And furthermore, he is:

**the first-born of all creation;
{Col 1:15b RSV}**

Perhaps you have had the experience of finding a couple on your doorstep with little green books under their arms, announcing themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses and asking if they may come in and tell you the truth about life and the Bible. If you let them in, sooner or later they turn to this passage to show you that Jesus Christ was not God, but he was essentially a creature – the highest of the creatures of creation – and they use this term “the first-born of all creation” to bolster their argument. They say that this means that Jesus was the first one ever created. (There is, of course, a sense in which this word *first-born* does have that meaning. In referring to our children, we say that the oldest one is the first-born because he or she appeared first on the scene.) That is one of the slick devices by which the cults propagate their errors. It is very subtle because it seems to be logical and scriptural. But what they are doing is giving the term a modern meaning, which is quite different from the usage in the New Testament. Here, the word *first-born* means “the heir,” or “the chief” – the principal one, the owner. This phrase, “the first-born of all creation,” means that the Lord Jesus stands in relationship to creation just as an heir

stands in relationship to his father's property. He is not part of it, but rather, he is the owner of it, the heir.

This term is used in various ways in the Old Testament. There are two specific instances where the one who is born second is the first-born of the family: In the case of Isaac and Ishmael, Ishmael had been born earlier but was not the chosen son. In the case of Jacob and Esau, Esau was born first, but Jacob was the chosen heir. So, you see, Jesus was not the first one of a line of creation, but the heir of all creation – the owner of it. And this fits with what the apostle goes on to say (1:16):

In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. {Col 1:16 RSV}

If you look carefully at the Jehovah's Witnesses' little green translation of the Scriptures, you will notice that in order to substantiate their lie about Jesus Christ, they've inserted the word *other* in these phrases. “All other things were created by him. In him all other things were created.” But there is absolutely no warrant whatsoever in the Greek text for the insertion of the word *other*. This is a clear instance of the kind of deceitfulness to which these people will stoop in order to propagate their lies.

Now here is Paul's great declaration. Here is the Lord Jesus. He is declaring him to be the creator. The One who flung all the worlds into being, who was present with God (and who was God) when the great words went out, “Let there be light; let the earth bring forth,” and all the other great declarations of creation that are recorded in Genesis. It was the Lord who did this, and, furthermore, as Paul goes on to say (1:17):

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. {Col 1:17 RSV}

Now it is one of the puzzles of science why things hold together. We know that everything we can touch is made up of tiny atoms that consist of electrons buzzing around a nucleus. And anything that rotates or revolves has a force that projects outward – centrifugal force. Therefore, things ought to be blowing up. Because of this centrifugal force, every atom ought to be flying apart. Well,

what holds it together? Science cannot answer. Scientists say it is an unnamed force. That always interests me, because it reminds me of Paul's experience in Athens when he found the people worshipping an unknown god. It is the unknown God that science is struggling with today: his name is Jesus of Nazareth. By him are all things held together, and all power in the natural world comes from him.

But further, the apostle says (1:18):

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead. {Col 1:18 RSV}

Twice he uses this term, the first-born. He is the first-born of the old creation; he is the first-born of the new creation – the resurrection – the first-born from the dead. Now that does not mean that he was the first one ever to be raised from the dead, because scripture records others who preceded him. But he is the One who is the heir, the Lord of all the new creation. He is the head of the new creation, as the apostle tells us, and we are part of a new body, the new race of men that God is forming through the centuries, and of that body, Jesus Christ is the head. From him, then, flows all power – resurrection power.

It is my increasing conviction that the problem with most Christians is that they do not understand what the Bible teaches about resurrection power. If they had any idea what this power is like and how it operates, and the areas and situations in which it is intended to operate, they would never again live as they live now. They would be entirely different. I do not mean that they would be dazzling people, making great displays of power and moving mountains. It does not take resurrection power to do that.

Resurrection power is quiet. It is the kind of power that was evident in the Lord Jesus. It was not the fact that he came from the tomb that dazzled the eyes of the soldiers there, nor that produced the earthquake. He came from the tomb absolutely without a sound. The stone was rolled away, not to let him out, but to let people in, so they could see that the tomb was empty. There was no sound, no demonstration. There was the quiet, inexorable power of a risen life which no mechanical or natural power can possibly resist. This is what God has released to us. A quiet power that

changes hearts and lives and attitudes, making everything over from within. That is resurrection power. It flows to us from the head of the new creation, the risen Christ, the source of all power.

Now Paul goes on to show who are the intended recipients of this power (1:21-22):

... you, who were estranged and hostile in minds, doing evil deeds, {Col 1:21 RSV}

That includes us all, doesn't it? We all belong in this category. And we are the ones through whom this power is now to operate.

... he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, {Col 1:22 RSV}

Then Paul gives us the demonstration in his own life of this power. He says that God called him and set him up in the ministry to proclaim a mystery, and he tells us again what it is (1:25-27);

... to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations ... {Col 1:25b-26a RSV}

You will not find it explained in the Old Testament. It was experienced there, but it was never explained.

... but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, {Col 1:26b-27a}

What is it?

Christ in you, the hope of glory. {Col 1:27b RSV}

Christ living in you. This is the supreme declaration of the Christian church. You have never preached the gospel until you have told men that not only will their sins be forgiven when they come to Christ, but that he, himself, will live within them – to do through them everything they are expected to do. He died for us, so that he might live in us. This is the full glory of the Christian gospel.

Now notice how Paul experienced this. He says (1:28-29):

Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy... {Col 1:28-29a RSV}

Where does the energy come from? This amazing apostle, with his indefatigable journeying night and day, through shipwreck and hardship of every kind, working with his hands, laboring, traveling up and down the length and breadth of the entire Roman empire, is ceaseless in his endeavors. Where does he get the energy? Would you like to know? He says (1:28-29):

... striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me. {Col 1:29b RSV}

Christ in you! The hope of glory. Now that is why I say if Christians would begin to understand what it is that God has made available to them, they would never be the same again. We would never have to plead with people in the church to take on needed enterprises, ministries, or teaching Sunday School. We would not be met with the excuse, "Oh, I just don't have the strength to do it. I don't have the energy." You see, here is a source of energy, Paul says, that is constant and consistent and which flows through him, created by the Spirit of God indwelling him. As he saw the task, he moved to meet it with energy which God gave. That is resurrection power.

Now, in Chapter 2, we have the warning against certain false powers which would woo us away from the true power Christ has given us. These warnings are as valid and relevant today as they were when Paul wrote them. Certain things among men are always regarded as sources of power. If you can obtain these, you can be a powerful individual; your personality will be strong and radiant. You will be a dynamic leader of men. You have seen advertisements in which this kind of language appears; "For just ten dollars you'll get a course that will transform you within fifteen days into a dynamic leader. You'll never be the same again." There are many more subtle approaches offering us power, but they all come largely through the three avenues outlined here by Paul. First of all, though, he reminds us of the glory of Jesus Christ (2:3):

In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. {Col 2:3 RSV}

We have all that it takes to live life in him, and in Verse 6 he says,

As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, {Col 2:6 RSV}

You have got what it takes, now live it out, let it show.

... rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. {Col 2:7 RSV}

Have you ever read that verse before? Abounding in grumbling is the way it sounds to us, sometimes, doesn't it? But Paul says, abounding in thanksgiving. Now what robs us of that? Well first, the idea that power comes from human knowledge. Verse 8:

See to it [says the apostle] that no one makes a prey of you [literally, "kidnaps you"] by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. {Col 2:8 RSV}

I do not know how many instances of this kind of kidnapping I have seen, or how many failures of faith on the part of young people going to college to study. Young people who have been raised in Christian homes, but who have been exposed to the wily, subtle teachings of human wisdom, have lost their faith and turned away from the things of Christ, often going off into wild and riotous living. Why? Because no one warned them, or else they did not heed the warning to avoid being made a prey of human knowledge. Now this sounds, at first, as though the gospel is anti-intellectual. But the Bible is not against knowledge. It is against knowledge that does not come under the judgment of the Word of God.

The apostle analyzes what is wrong with human knowledge. There are many things that are right. There is much truth in what man has discovered through the centuries. This we must readily admit. But Paul points out:

- First, that the source is suspect because it comes from tradition. Tradition is the gradually accumulated body of knowledge built up bit by bit through the centuries and passed along from one generation to another. Consequently, human knowledge is made up of great quantities of truth mingled with error, with no way of distinguishing between the two. Those who accept it uncritically are bound to accept as much error as they do truth. It will lead them, therefore, into mistaken concepts and erroneous and injurious ideas.
- In the second place, he says, human knowledge is according to the elemental spirits of the universe. What does that mean? Paul is referring here to the dark powers that, as he brings out in other letters, govern the minds of men, darken their intellects and limit their understanding. Human knowledge, then, is essentially rudimentary. That is, it is elementary. It stays on the periphery of truth, never getting to the real heart of things. That is why you can have a university community, saturated with the highest exponents of human knowledge, and yet filled with vileness, corruption, unrest, distress, with a high suicide rate and evidences of decay and deterioration on every side. Human knowledge does not go to the heart of things as the Word of God does. The two compliment each other, but there must be a critical evaluation of the words, as they are subjected to the wisdom of God.
- The final objection Paul makes is that it is not according to Christ. Therefore, human wisdom lacks the ability to insert the great positives into life. It is essentially negative. It does not produce the qualities of love, truth, joy, peace, and power that come only from Jesus Christ.

He shows us, then, that the answer to the lure of human wisdom is the judgment of the cross. The cross has delivered us and cuts us off from trust and admiration for human wisdom as such. We are brought to the place where we can judge these things and see their moral values properly in the light of the Word of God.

Paul goes on to indicate another false source of power, which also leads many people astray (Verses 16-17):

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only an shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. {Col 2:16-17 RSV}

In that same vein he continues in Verse 20:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch [referring to things which all perish as they are used], according to human precepts and doctrines? {Col 2:20-22 RSV}

What false source is this? It is the power that supposedly comes from a dedicated zeal for God. It manifests itself in the keeping of days and special feasts and regulations and ascetical practices – flogging the body, wearing a hair shirt, laboring long hours out of zeal for the cause. All these things look like sources of power. Sometimes we cannot help but admire the zealousness of individuals who get themselves all wrapped up in a cause. But, says the apostle, they are tricking themselves. They do not discover real power (Verse 23):

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, {Col 2:23a RSV}

There is a kind of false humility that is produced by this kind of behavior. It extracts a grudging admiration from us, but look what the apostle says:

... they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh. {Col 2:23b RSV}

You see, you can wear a hair shirt and be filled with lust. You can beat your body black and blue and still be guilty all the time of thinking lascivious thoughts. These things provide no check to the indulgence of the flesh. Therefore, there is no power here to lead the kind of life that we must live.

Now he mentions a third source of false power (Verse 18):

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind. {Col 2:18 RSV}

What does he mean here? We are hearing a lot about this these days. If you get in touch with the invisible spirits, you will have power. If you contact the dead, and get messages from them, you will have an unseen source of power which will enable you to live as other people cannot live. These Colossians were troubled with these influences as we are troubled with them today. We are seeing a great increase on every hand of this turning to the occult –

- to astrology,
- to the black and devious arts,
- to magic,
- to seances.

All of this is a satanic substitute for the power of Jesus Christ – the indwelling power of Christ.

Now, in Chapter 3, the apostle turns to the true manifestation of power and how to lay hold of the power of Christ (Verses 1-2):

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth. {Col 3:1-2 RSV}

That does not mean that we should go around constantly thinking about heaven. There is nothing super-pious about this. He is simply saying, “Don’t let your desires and your attitudes be governed or directed by desires for earthly fame or power. Instead, let your desires be shaped by the Word of God.” We are to have a desire to exhibit love, truth, faith, and patience – the qualities that mark the life of the risen Lord. That is what he’s talking about. We are not to go around thinking about heaven all the time. We are to go around manifesting heaven in the situations in which we find ourselves.

Paul gives us the recipe for doing this:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you; {Col 3:5a RSV}

God has already sentenced it to death on the cross. When it manifests itself in you, treat it like that – as under the sentence of death from God. He goes on to list these earthly things:

... immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, {Col 3:5b RSV}

And then he moves over into our area:

... now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foolish talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, {3:8-9a RSV}

Put these away. That is Step #1. Step #2 is in Verse 12:

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together. {Col 3:12-14a RSV}

What does he mean by this? That we try to imitate Christ in this respect? Oh no. You see, he has already told us that Christ dwells in us. Having him there, he says, now deliberately let these things be manifest in you. Deliberately set yourself to manifest these characteristics of his life. Count on his life in you to make them real and not phoney – genuine, authentic manifestations of his life. The apostle lists certain areas in which these are to be made manifest:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, ... {Col 3:18a RSV}

Husbands, love your wives, ... {Col 3:19a RSV}

Children, obey your parents ... {Col 3:20a RSV}

Fathers, do not provoke your children... {Col 3:21a RSV}

Slaves, obey ... your earthly masters, ... {Col 3:22a RSV}

**Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly,
... {Col 4:1a RSV}**

And he concludes with these practical admonitions:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; and pray for us also, ... {Col 4:2-3a RSV}

Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, ... {Col 4:5a RSV}

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, ... {Col 4:6a RSV}

In the last section of the letter there are simply some personal greetings from men who are with Paul. These men, too, are demonstrations of the power of an indwelling Christ at work. He concludes the letter, as was his custom, by taking the pen in his own hand and writing:

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my fetters. Grace be with you. {Col 4:18 RSV}

Now I want to return once more to that verse in the first chapter which is the key to this letter:

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, ... {Col 1:11a RSV}

That is tremendous, isn't it? You want that, don't you? Christ's power, Christ's life, manifested in you. What do you want it for? So you can dazzle everybody? So you can go around performing miracles, doing startling things that will get your name in the paper? Is that why? Read what Paul wants you to have it for:

**... for all endurance and patience with joy,
{Col 1:11b RSV}**

Underline those words. That is where resurrection power is made manifest.

The world cannot produce that kind of living. It does not know how to take trials with a smile, to endure hardships with faith and patience and joy. As far as the world is concerned, this takes an unknown kind of power, the power that is resident only in Jesus Christ.

This power will transform our hardships and our difficulties into joyful experiences, not just phony manifestations of joy. They are genuine. We learn things from these trials. If our heart is right with Christ, if we are putting off the old and putting on the new we discover that these experiences, instead of producing grumbling, griping, and complaining provide a basis for joy, as we are "strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might."

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this first-century book that speaks to our 20th century lives, and shows us that not one thing has changed. Not one thing in our world is different from the world these early Christians faced. Not one thing is different about our relationship to Jesus Christ. We, too, can live as they lived, in joy, gladness and thanksgiving in the midst of this life. We pray that we may discover this truth by acting upon these admonitions which Paul has given us. We pray in Jesus' name Amen.

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The Message Of First Thessalonians

by Ray C. Stedman

The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is also the first letter the apostle wrote. It was written to a struggling, yet vigorous church that was only a few months old, made up of Christians who had just come to Christ under Paul's ministry. This is a delightfully revealing letter, showing the heart of the apostle toward these new Christians, and also showing the struggles that were present in the early church.

We sometimes get very distorted conceptions of these early Christians; there's a tendency to regard them as always triumphant, always waging the battle with vigor, and always winning great victories in Christ's name. But they also had very severe problems, some of which are reflected in this letter. It was written about 50 A.D., and may well be the first part of our New Testament to be written. Most scholars feel that the Gospels were written about this same time or shortly afterward, though some hold that the Gospel of Matthew, and perhaps of Mark, appeared about 43 or 45 A.D. At any rate, this letter is at least one of the earliest Christian writings.

The account of Paul's founding of this church is recorded in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. After he and Silas were thrown into prison in Philippi because of their preaching of the gospel, an earthquake shook down the prison doors and freed the prisoners. Paul was then freed by the Roman magistrates, and he left Philippi and went to Thessalonica. Many of the places where Paul preached have crumbled into ruin, but Thessalonica is still a thriving, bustling metropolis. It was then the capital of Macedonia, but it is now in Greece proper, and is called Thessalonike.

From the account in Acts, we learn that Paul had only been there about three weeks when persecution began and he had to leave the city for his own safety. He went down to Athens and from there he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how these Christians were doing. He was very disturbed about them; he felt that perhaps the persecution they were undergoing would drive them from their faith.

He went on to Corinth where he founded a church after several months of difficult labor. After some time, Timothy returned to him at Corinth, bringing word of how the Thessalonians were doing, and of some of the problems they were facing. As we read this little letter through, we can recognize them as the kind of problems that we also face.

For one thing, wherever the Apostle Paul went, he was hounded by a group of Jews who spread the rumor that because he was not one of the original twelve, he was not a genuine apostle. This was not only a problem for Paul, but also for the Thessalonians. Furthermore, the pagans of Thessalonica were severely persecuting the Christians – threatening them, and taking away their property – so these early Christians, perhaps only three or four weeks old in the Lord, were called upon to endure hard things for the cause of Christ.

In that city, as in all the Greek cities, sexual promiscuity was common – was even regarded as a religious right – and to live a life of chastity was to be regarded as a freak. Therefore, as is the case today, there was great pressure upon these new Christians to fall into line with the common sex practices of their day.

Then the major problem of this church was that the second coming of Jesus Christ was greatly misunderstood. The apostle had evidently told them something, but they were confused about this, which produced another grave problem. Some of them were expecting Christ to come back so imminently that they had actually stopped working and were waiting for him to come. Since they weren't earning a living, somebody had to take care of them, and they were leeches on the rest of the congregation. Also, there were tensions developing between the congregation and the church leaders which needed some admonition to settle, and, finally, there were those who were somewhat indifferent to the Holy Spirit's work among them, and to the truth of God as it was being proclaimed in the Scriptures.

Do those problems sound familiar? We can consider ourselves in very similar circumstances as this church at Thessalonica. The letter itself divides simply into two major divisions. In the first three chapters the apostle is just unloading his heart to them concerning his relationship to them, and this is followed by a very practical section with advice on how to behave in the midst of the pressures in which we live.

In this first section Paul pours his heart out for these early Christians. He is afraid they might have misunderstood his leaving Thessalonica, as though he had abandoned them to persecution, so he reminds them that he had just come through a terrible time of persecution himself in Philippi, and that his own heart was deeply concerned for them. The key to this is in the very beginning:

We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope ... {1 Th 1:2-3a RSV}

Those three things marked these Thessalonian believers – their work of faith, their labor of love, and their endurance in hope. These are detailed more clearly farther down, in the latter part of verse nine, where we read, “how you turned to God from idols” {1 Th 1:9b RSV} – that was the work of faith; they turned to God from these pagan idols they were worshipping, and “to serve a living and true God” {1 Th 1:9c RSV} – that was their labor of love; they became an available instrument for the

love of God, and third, “to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” {1 Th 1:10 RSV}. And there is the expression of the patience, waiting in hope for his Son from heaven.

Now interestingly enough, those three things also form a little outline, built right into the text, to guide you in understanding the first three chapters. The work of faith, the labor of love, and the patience of hope – Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 3.

We might say of these early Christians, “they dropped out, tuned in, and turned on.” They dropped out of the stream of society, the world in which they lived, (not out of contact with it: in fact, they spread the gospel through the whole area); they dropped out of the attitudes, the power structures, and the values of the world in which they lived. And they tuned in to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and received the word.

Here the apostle is reminding us that the word he spoke was not the word of men: it came “not only in word,” he said, “but also in power and in the Holy Spirit,” {1 Th 1:5b RSV}. And they turned on, as they waited with expectation for the coming of the Son of God. They had a reason for living, they had a purpose, and they had a hope in the midst of the hopelessness around them.

An archaeological excavation team, working in this very city of Thessalonica, has turned up an ancient, 1st century graveyard. And there among the pagan tombstones they found one which was inscribed in Greek with these words: “No Hope.” But here, in a church in the midst of that city, there were those who had found the endurance based on hope; they were looking for the coming of the Son of God. That is what keeps the heart calm in the midst of perils and persecutions. That is what makes it possible to watch the world apparently coming apart at the seams and maintain quietness; God is in control, and he knows what he's doing. And thus Paul encourages these Thessalonians with these words.

Chapter 2 is a wonderful description of the labor of love – not their labor, this time – but Paul's, and here you have a marvelous description of his ministry (Chapter 2:9-12):

For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we

preached to you the gospel of God. {1 Th 2:9 RSV}

... for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. {1 Th 2:11-12 RSV}

And they did that, for he says (Verse 14):

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; {1 Th 2:14a RSV}

This is the service, the labor of love.

Chapter 3 is an account of how Paul sent Timothy to them, and Timothy brought back word of the persecution they were undergoing, and yet of their steadfastness in the midst of it. And there is a wonderful description of the patience of hope, permitting them to endure difficulties with joy.

Chapters 4 and 5, the practical section of this letter, are divided into four brief sections which take up the problems that were confronting this church:

The first exhortation the apostle gives is to live cleanly in the midst of a sex-saturated society. These words have great importance to us who have to live in the same kind of society today, and he begins by reminding them that he had taught them how to live (Verse 1):

Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. {1 Th 4:1 RSV}

He had not taught them, as many people think Christianity teaches, that they ought to live a good, clean life. Buddhism teaches that. And most other faiths teach that you ought to live a moral life. But that alone is not what Christianity says; it teaches you how to live a good, clean life! And Paul reminds them that he had taught them “how to please God.”

Now, what is it that pleases God? What one quality of life is essential to please God? Faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. A life of expectation that the God who lives in you will manifest his life through you is the kind of life that pleases God. It isn't a life of your efforts, strug-

gling to live up to a standard that you've imposed upon yourself, or someone else has imposed upon you. It is a life in which you are constantly dependent upon the one who indwells you, to keep you able to do and to be what you ought to be.

This kind of life results, then, in a purity that is practiced. If Christians are practicing impurity, that is a clear revelation that they are not practicing a life of faith. But purity practiced is the sign of the principle perceived. Paul says,

For this is the will of God, [even] your sanctification: that you abstain from immorality; [that is the will of God] that each of you know how to take a wife for himself [“possess his vessel,” literally, or “possess his body”] in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. {1 Th 4:3-8 RSV}

It is very clear, isn't it? We are told how to live cleanly.

The second problem he takes up is the matter of living honestly, in Verses 9 through 12 of Chapter 4. They are to show love toward one another, and the practical manifestation of that is for every man to get busy and work with his hands and not have to depend upon somebody else for support; rather,

... to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands ... so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody. {1 Th 4:11-12 RSV}

That's practical, isn't it?

Now in Verse 13, we come to the major problem this book addresses – the misunderstanding about the coming of the Lord. These Thessalonian Christians had gotten the idea that when Jesus Christ returned to earth the second time to begin his millennial kingdom, those who were alive when he came back (and they were expecting him within their lifetime) would enter with him into this kingdom. But they were deeply troubled that those who

had died in the meantime would somehow miss the benefits and the blessings of the millennium.

Now this probably arose because of a misunderstanding of the doctrine of resurrection. They were thinking in terms of one resurrection, a single event which would come at the end of the millennium, when the dead would be raised – the good and the bad alike – to stand before the judgment seat of God. And there are passages, of course, that do speak of a resurrection to come at the end of the millennium. But Paul points out that the resurrection does not proceed as a single event, but that groups of believers are resurrected at various times. Notice his argument:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, [that is, who have died] that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. {1 Th 4:13-14 RSV}

In other words, these who have died are going to be raised again; and they'll come back with Jesus when he comes to establish his millennial reign.

Well, this presents another problem. How is it that they are going to come back with him bodily when their bodies have been placed in the grave? What reassurance can they have on this? "Ah," says the apostle, "let me give you a revelation from the Lord":

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord [this is an authoritative revelation] that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, [the presence of the Lord] shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. {1 Th 4:15-18 RSV}

In other words, there is an aspect of the Lord's coming, before his coming to establish the millen-

nium reign. He is coming for his people, he is coming to gather those who are his to be with him, in his presence (*parousia* in Greek), before his return to establish the kingdom. The 'coming of the Lord' here does not refer to the 'second coming' of Christ. And at the time of this *parousia* the dead in Christ will be raised, so that we all will be with him when he's ready to establish his kingdom. So you see how this answered their problem? They need not grieve over those who have died; they'll actually precede those who are alive when the Lord comes for his own.

Now between that *parousia* the Lord's coming to establish the kingdom, we learn from other passages of Scripture that there will probably be about a seven year period. In the meantime the great tribulation occurs, and Paul now goes on to speak of this as he continues in the next chapter. He says to them,

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. {1 Th 5:1-2 RSV}

Nobody can set a date for this event. It's going to come suddenly, quickly, and when the Lord comes in the *parousia* two great chains of events will be initiated. The Lord will begin one series of events in which all believers will be caught up to be with him, and at the same time, he will begin another series of events on earth known as the great tribulation, or in the Old Testament, "the day of the Lord."

Now there are two "days" we need to distinguish in Scripture: the 'day of the Lord,' and the 'day of Christ.' They both begin at exactly the same time, but they concern two distinct bodies of people. The 'day of Christ' concerns believers, while the 'day of the Lord' refers to what is happening to unbelievers during this time. And it is my personal conviction that when the Lord comes for his own, and the dead in Christ rise – when we who are alive are caught up with them to be with the Lord – that we don't leave this planet at all. We stay here with the Lord, visibly directing the events of the tribulation period as they break out in great judgmental sequences upon the ones who are living as mortals upon the earth – the scenes that are vividly portrayed in the book of Revelation.

Now the apostle says to them that no one knows when this is going to happen:

When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. {1 Th 5:3-4 RSV}

It will surprise the people of the world like a thief, but it needn't surprise you like a thief, because you are looking forward to it – you ought to be expecting it.

For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. {1 Th 5:5 RSV}

Therefore, what should be the practical result? Well, don't go to sleep as others do, but keep awake and be sober. Don't act as though everything is going to go on as usual, but be aware of what God is doing and act accordingly. Remember these signs that Jesus gave that indicate the close approach of these events; these ought to make us aware that it is time to give ourselves more than we ever have before to the work of God. Paul says,

... keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. {1 Th 5:6b-8 RSV}

Now he's not talking about salvation from hell: he's speaking here of the salvation which is to come; that is, salvation from the wrath of God during the time of the judgment. He goes right on to say,

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep [whether we live until the coming of the Lord, or die beforehand] we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. {1 Th 5:9-11 RSV}

How completely he answered their problem! They did not need to be discouraged, or frightened, or distressed, but they could go on about their business, confident that God was in charge of affairs. And although times were difficult, they could busy themselves about the work of the Lord, knowing that they were only investing themselves in a certain future.

The last section speaks not only of living confidently, but of living peacefully in the midst of these conditions:

But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. {1 Th 5:12-13a RSV}

There was some friction that was developing towards some of the church leaders, and Paul says, remember that these men are concerned about your soul's welfare, and although they may have to speak rather sharply at times, it's not because they want to hurt you, but to help you. Therefore, remember that and live at peace with them, and esteem them, and love them because they are concerned about you. And furthermore,

Be at peace among yourselves, {1 Th 5:13b RSV}

and he gives some practical exhortations as to how to do that:

... admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. {1 Th 5:14b RSV}

And most important,

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. {1 Th 5:15 RSV}

That is probably one of the most frequently broken commands in Scripture. When somebody does something to us, what do we say? "Wait 'til I get even with you!" "I'm going to pay back if it's the last thing I do!" And yet, this is the very attitude which the Scriptures denounce as worldly thinking, outside of the grace and truth and love of Jesus Christ.

Then there are these beautiful verses,

Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. {1 Th 5:16-18 RSV}

And after various other admonitions, his final prayer for them is beautiful:

May the God of peace himself [dwelling in you] sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. {1 Th 5:23 RSV}

What a wonderful letter this is! And all of this was addressed to new Christians, yet the apostle expected them to lay hold of these truths. In order to grow, there must be, as Jesus said, a constant hungering and thirsting after more; “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied,” {Matt 5:6 RSV}. And it is

this that the world is waiting to see, especially in these last days.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, in many ways we recognize the days in which we live as very similar to the days in which this letter was written; yet from our vantage point of twenty centuries away, we can see that although their hopes burned brightly for the coming of the Lord, then, they were a long way from the goal. But how much more surely are these promises true for us; how much more certain can we be that we are in the days in which our Lord is moving world events to presage his coming! Lord, help us to walk in the light of this, as we’ve been exhorted and admonished by the Apostle Paul, earnestly and soberly, intelligently giving ourselves to first things first. We ask it in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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2 THESSALONIANS: Restrainers of Lawlessness

by Ray C. Stedman

Before Jesus Christ left this earth he said that he would return, but that before his return there would be a time of difficulty and widespread lawlessness. The seams of society would come apart, and disorders, violence, and riot would be so widespread that men's hearts would literally fail them for fear of the things that were coming on the face of the earth. And Jesus predicted the character of the age that would follow his ascension into heaven, and said that it would culminate in a time of great tribulation "such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be," {Matt 24:21b RSV}.

Now when Christians of Thessalonica were going through their time of trouble, many of them thought they were in that time of tribulation. It was to respond to this question that Paul wrote this second letter. In the first letter, he wrote to comfort them in their distress over their loved ones who had died, but this letter is written to correct certain misunderstandings they had about the "Day of the Lord," and this time of trouble.

There are three chapters in this little letter, and each one is a correction of a very common attitude that many people still have about disturbing times. The first chapter is devoted to a correction of the attitude of discouragement in the face of difficulty. These Christians were undergoing persecutions and afflictions and although they were bearing up with good grace, nevertheless, many of them were getting discouraged. "Why try any more?" they were saying; "There's no justice. Everything is always against us."

And to counteract that attitude, the apostle reminds them that the day when God would repay them for the difficulties they were going through was coming. Paul says (1:5-10):

This [your steadfastness] is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering – since indeed God deems it just to repay [or to recompense] with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. {2 Th 1:5-10 RSV}

Although we in this country have not gone through much in the way of persecution, there are other parts of the world where intense persecution breaks out from time to time. If we lived in one of these places or times, we would appreciate the meaning of these words. Paul is reminding these people that God has not forgotten them – that he is going to straighten things out at last. When people go through a time of great persecution, they say, "Isn't there going to be a time when this injustice is corrected? How can a man like Hitler get by with putting six million Jews to death? Won't things ever get straightened out?"

And Paul says, "Yes, a day is coming when a three-fold repayment will be made."

1. First, to these believers who are undergoing such difficulty, the very trials that they're undergoing, Paul says, are making them worthy

of the coming kingdom of God. That aspect of suffering is what makes us able to take it. It puts strength in our muscles and sharpens our moral equipment so that we're able to endure.

2. And then, he says, there will be a day of recompense to the "unbelieving." There will come a time when God will set them straight, when those who have misused their opportunity of service in life will face a righteous judge who knows their hearts. His vengeance will have two aspects – destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord.

Hell is often pictured as a fiery furnace where people are dragging around in chains, being continually burned and never being able to do anything about it. The Bible does use some symbols of hell that reflect that idea, but hell is really exclusion from the presence of the Lord. God is the source of everything that is good – beauty and truth, life and love, joy, peace, grace, strength, forgiveness. All those things come only from God, and if a man won't have them, then God finally says to him, "I've been trying my best to get you to take these, but if you won't have them, then you must have your own way." And they are shut out from the presence of the Lord. And if they're shut away from the source of all goodness, then what's left? The opposite – darkness and death. That is what they had been dishing out, and that is what they will finally obtain. God will let them have their own way, and when they get it, it will be the last thing they want.

3. And then the Lord himself will be repaid on that day. He will come, Paul says (1:10):

... to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, {2 Th 1:10b RSV}

Notice that he doesn't say he is going to be glorified *by* his saints. But as the world sees the wisdom and the might of the God who can take a self-centered human being, full of anxieties and fears, and teach him how to walk in quietness and joy, rid of his guilt and his fears – a man as God intended a man to be – that is the greatest display the universe will ever see. And that glorifies God!

In Chapter 2 you have another reaction to disturbing times – fear. We read in these opening words (Verses 1-2):

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, [really, the word is *troubled*] either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. {2 Th 2:1-2 RSV}

These people had evidently received a letter from somebody signing Paul's name, telling them that in this terrible time of trouble all they had to look forward to was worse times. But Paul says, "don't be shaken in your mind." Literally, don't be shaken out of your wits by what's happening.

I think many of our young people today are fearful, and striking out against society because they don't know that God is in control of events.

"Well," Paul says, "in my last letter, I wrote to you about our gathering together unto Jesus. The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout and the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will be raised, and we who remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. That's our gathering together unto him," {cf, 1 Th 4:16-17}.

But now he says that the day of the Lord, this terrible time of judgment, is not the same as our gathering together unto him. But having introduced the subject of the day of the Lord, he goes on to tell them what it will be like and how they can tell it's coming. (2:3):

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, {2 Th 2:3a RSV}

I don't like that word, *rebellion*. Literally translated, the word means "the departure" which of course could mean a departure from the faith, and thus, a rebellion. But I think it means the departure he just talked about – the departure of the church behind the scenes to be with the Lord in his second presence on earth.

And then he says (2:3-4):

and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. {2 Th 2:3b-4 RSV}

Now this is an amazing passage. When Jesus was here, he offered himself to the Jewish people as the promised Messiah, and most of them rejected him, so that John begins his gospel by saying, “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not,” {John. 1:11 RSV}. Jesus also had said to them, “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.” {John 5:43 RSV}. Thus he painted the picture of one who would appear to be a deliverer to the world, whom Paul calls the “man of lawlessness” and “the son of perdition.” This character would be an utterly godless individual, and yet so remarkable that people would actually accept him as a divinely empowered being who could deliver them from their difficulties. (It is very interesting that statesmen, historians, politicians, and others are saying repeatedly today that we need a single worldwide leader who can unite all the various world forces, and bring us out into harmony and peace.) And he will be manifest, says Paul, in the temple of God.

When Paul wrote this letter, in about 52 A.D., the temple in Jerusalem was still standing, but in 70 A.D. it was destroyed, and there has never been a temple in Jerusalem since. In some way, however, the Jews will find a way to reconstruct another temple on the site in Jerusalem where the Dome of the Rock is now. And it is in that temple that Paul says “the man of lawlessness” will take his seat.

Paul has a further comment on the subject (2:5-8):

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed. {2 Th 5-8a RSV}

There was something at work which he called the mystery of lawlessness. One thing that has

puzzled statesmen all through history is that they can never solve the basic difficulties of the human race. Why is it that we can come to a certain point in building good government, with widespread blessing and help for all, and then it all seems to crumble and fall apart? This has been the pattern of history. General Carlos Romulo, who was the Philippine Ambassador to the United States, said, “We have harnessed the power of the atom, but how can we bridle the passions of men?” That is the problem – this lawlessness, this spirit of rebellion against authority which is always the greatest danger to any nation.

But Paul says that something is restraining it. Something through the course of the centuries has been restraining lawlessness, preventing total anarchy. And Jesus told us what that is; he said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth; ...” {Matt 5:13a RSV}. “You are the light of the world,” {Matt 5:14a RSV}. Salt prevents corruption from spreading: light dispels darkness, and it is the presence of the people of God on earth that restrains the forces of evil. This is a remarkable thing, yet it is the truth. Wherever godliness diminishes – sometimes because of forces within the church as well as without – a spirit of lawlessness takes over.

But Paul says here that the restraint is going to be taken out of the way, and then the whole flood of human evil will be let loose upon the earth. And when that happens there will come the greatest time of trouble the world has ever seen. Yet, Paul says, it will come to an end (2:8-12):

The Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. {2 Th 2:8b-12 RSV}

This is the characteristic of the spirit of lawlessness – deception – and it must, and will, be destroyed by the coming of Jesus, the Son of Man who destroys the destroyer of earth.

Chapter 3 deals, finally, with the conduct of these believers in the face of difficulty and pressure. Paul was correcting here a third very widespread attitude that many have in times of difficulty – what we might call “fanaticism.” There were certain people in Thessalonica who were saying, “Why not just wait until he comes? Why should we concern ourselves about making a living? Let’s just live and enjoy ourselves, and wait for his coming.” So Paul says to them (3:6):

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. {2 Th 3:3 RSV}

Because, he says (11-13):

For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing. {2 Th 3:11-13 RSV}

As we get nearer to the time of his coming, Paul says, remember that your responsibility is to keep on living normally and working with your hands, taking care of your responsibilities. The Christian life is a normal, natural life, fulfilling all the responsibilities that God places upon us. So Paul rejects the attitude of fanaticism and says that we are to give ourselves to the task that God has set before us.

In this little letter, discouragement is answered by looking to the day when God sets everything straight. Fear is answered by remembering that God is in perfect control of human events, and things will take place just as he has predicted they will take place. And fanaticism is rejected with a specific command – to be busy at the Lord’s work.

And then Paul closes with a very tender gesture. He says,

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. {2 Th 3:17 RSV}

What is? The words with which he closes the letter:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. {2 Th 3:18 RSV}

And if you look at the letters of Paul, you’ll find that they all close this way. He always took the pen from his secretary and wrote in his own hand, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”

The application of this letter to each individual heart is simply this: God’s people are called to be restrainers of lawlessness.

How often are you operating as a restraint to lawlessness?

The measure in which you oppose lawlessness will be the measure in which there is no lawlessness in your own heart, and your own life.

Prayer:

We thank you, our Father, for this letter that reminds us that the hope of the church has not grown dim, and that the very events which Jesus Christ predicted are finding some degree of fulfillment even in our own time, and are moving toward the predicted end. We reaffirm our fidelity and loyalty to the One who has loved us and has given himself for us, and who will come again to be acknowledged by every individual. In the hope of that, we thank you in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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1 TIMOTHY: Pastor's Primer

by Ray C. Stedman

While Second Timothy represents the last word we have from the pen of the Apostle Paul, First Timothy was written a few years earlier, probably immediately after the apostle had been imprisoned in Rome for the first time. After he was released, he wrote this letter to the young man whom he had won to Christ years before when he was preaching in Timothy's home town of Lystra. Timothy was probably no more than sixteen years old at the time. He accompanied Paul on his second journey and was a faithful minister and son-in-the-faith with the apostle for the rest of his life.

This is one of three "pastoral letters" in the New Testament – letters written from a pastor's viewpoint. First and Second Timothy are two of them, and Titus is the third. In these letters, we have very intimate words from the apostle to these young men who frequently accompanied him on his journeys. I have often suspected that some of the young men who were with Paul were once members of the palace guard of the Emperor Nero. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us that the gospel was reaching the palace guard, and that many of them were being brought to Christ.

But this letter was to Timothy, who by this time had served as a son in the gospel with the apostle for several years. He was probably in his late twenties or early thirties, and the apostle had sent him to Ephesus, the great commercial and pleasure resort on the shores of the Mediterranean in Asia Minor.

Both of these letters to Timothy reflect more than just a father-son relationship; although they have intimate remarks in them, nevertheless each one of them begins with these words:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope. {1 Tim 1:1 RSV}

The apostle felt it necessary, even in writing to his own son in the faith, to remind him that he was an apostle. Now surely Timothy did not need this reminder himself; he knew Paul's position well, but perhaps the apostle knew that these letters would have a wider readership than to Timothy alone. His previous letters had frequently been circulated widely among the churches.

It is therefore with the authority of an apostle that Paul begins these two letters, and what he has to say has meaning and authority in all the churches in Christendom. As we recognize that, we must take these words as having the same kind of authority for us as does every one of the other letters.

The apostles were men with a peculiar and unique ministry. Every now and then someone will refer to Paul in a disparaging way. Even Christians will sometimes say, "Well, you know, Paul wrote some things that we cannot take as authoritative. He was a confirmed old bachelor, and what he said about women is not really significant." But this is really to deny the apostolic office and to refuse the authority that the Lord Jesus gave his apostles. This is the mark of an apostle – that they were commissioned by the Lord himself, and given the task of speaking authoritatively in every area of doctrine or practice, whatever it may be.

This first letter has to do with the ministry of the church itself – its character and its nature, its function in the world. The second letter centers around the message that it has to convey – the great

theme is the gospel, and Timothy's relationship to that gospel.

There are two themes intermingled throughout this first letter. The one we will look at first is in Chapter 3, where the apostle says:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth. {1 Tim 3:14-15 RSV}

Now when he talks about behaving in church, he is talking about the church not as buildings, but as people. One of the great weaknesses of the present-day evangelical life is that we still think so much of the church as a building, but the church is people, not buildings. And it was the concern of the apostle as he wrote to young Timothy that he would know how to conduct himself in the ministry and the relationships of the body of Christ, the church of the living God.

Then the second theme is found in the first chapter, where we are told,

the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith. {1 Tim 1:5 RSV}

This is more personal. While the first theme is that of the church and its ministry, the second theme concerns the individual's relationship to the world and to God. As the apostle puts it, it is to be "love that issues from a pure hearts and a good conscience and sincere faith."

Now in the realm of actual experience, we begin with the last of these – sincere faith. That is the way you come into the Christian life; by believing the Word of God, and exercising faith in what he says. And that will lead you to a good conscience, derived from obeying the word. This is to be the mark of every Christian – that we obey what we believe. And that, in turn, will result in a pure heart – actually, a purified heart. None of us has a pure heart by birth; we need to be cleansed, purified by the washing of the Word of God and the cleansing of the blood of Christ. But if we have a good conscience about our faith, it will result in a pure heart, and from that pure heart will flow an unceasing stream of love.

The letter itself falls into two major divisions: the first chapter, and the last five.

In the first division we have the background of Paul's charge to his son Timothy. Remember that Timothy was in Ephesus, a city given over largely to the worship of a heathen goddess, Diana (also called Artemis), the love-goddess of the Greek world. It was Timothy's task to minister to the church that was opposing the blind idolatry, and pagan superstition of this darkened, heathen city – a formidable task.

So the first note that the apostle strikes is that Timothy is to oppose false teaching. This indicates that by now the church has begun to be infiltrated by false teachers; the early church had its share of heretics, as does the church of today. And Timothy is warned against them. He says, I left you there,

that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith; {1 Tim 1:3-4 RSV}

And then he goes on to say that one of the things that was causing problems in the church was the wrong understanding of the Law. There were those who were trying to regulate people's conduct by imposing rigid regulations, to be carried through to the letter, without any understanding of the control of the indwelling life and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the wrong use of the Law.

The Law, he says, is intended for a specific purpose (and by the way, this is one of the best passages I know of to counteract the popular theory that it is perfectly proper to disregard the Law, and that we can resist certain regulations or deny them, in the name of God). Paul says that the Law is given, "for the lawless and disobedient" {1 Tim 1:9b RSV}, and he lists these: "the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers ... immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers" {1 Tim 1:9c-10a RSV}, and so forth. But if you have come to Christ, and your heart is intent upon pleasing him, you do not need the Law to keep you from doing wrong – love will do it! But only remember that love is interpreted by the Law; we understand what love is only when we see it spelled out for us in terms of the Law: thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal – these are ways of describing how love acts.

Then, the second reason Paul has for charging Timothy is his own experience of grace. Paul never forgot that he had been a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insulter of Christ. But God met him, forgave him, delivered him, and every now and then Paul breaks into a lyrical passage, like a spring of water that cannot be stopped up, expressing his love and excitement and thankfulness for the work that God has done in his life.

The rest of the letter is made up of the charge itself that the apostle has for his young son in the faith, consisting of five elements. First, there are certain instructions on conducting public worship, differentiating between the activities of men and those of women. Men, he says, are to lead out in prayer – praying for kings and for those in authority – so that we might live in peace and godliness. Then he turns to the women, and if we read this a little differently, we will understand what the apostle is saying:

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; also that women should [pray] adorn themselves modestly ... {1 Tim 2:8-9a RSV}

The thought of the apostle is that women have the right to minister and pray in public as well as men, although some have misunderstood this passage. But he does include a restriction a little later:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. {1 Tim 2:11-12 RSV}

In the congregation, the idea is that women are not to teach men authoritatively. They are not to be the final word in that church as to doctrine or teaching. The apostle did not permit that, and he gives two reasons.

- First, he says, “Adam was formed first, then Eve” {1 Tim 2:13 RSV}, and,
- Second, “the woman was deceived” {1 Tim 2:14b RSV}, and therefore fell into transgression.

It is interesting to note that Eve’s sin was primarily that of trying to arrive at a theological con-

clusion apart from the counsel of her husband. But the apostle goes on to show that women have a wonderful ministry, in a verse that has been somewhat garbled in translation, and greatly misunderstood:

Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she [literally, “if they,” the children] continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. {1 Tim 2:15 RSV}

Now what does he mean? Women shall be saved through bearing children? I must confess I have struggled long with this passage. There are three major interpretations of it, and I have been an adherent of all three at one time or another. But now, I think they are all wrong! I really believe we have a clue to the meaning of this troublesome passage in the fourth chapter where the apostle says to young Timothy,

Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. {1 Tim 4:16 RSV}

What does he mean here by “save”? Timothy was already saved; he had been a Christian for many years. And certainly other people were not saved by Timothy’s obeying the truth. What does he mean, then? A resolution appears when we see that he is using the word *salvation* in a different sense than we normally think of it, and it appears in several places in Scripture in this way. *Salvation* here means “the solution to a problem.” The word is also used this way in Philippians, where it says “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” {Phil 2:12b RSV} – work out the solutions to the problems you confront with fear and trembling, because it is God who works in you both the will and the doing of his good pleasure, {cf, Phil 2:13 RSV}. So here the meaning is that woman “will be saved,” in the sense that her desire for a ministry will be fulfilled – that problems will be resolved – through child bearing, if the children continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

Now the apostle turns to the qualifications of church leaders, who fall into two major categories – the bishops (elders) and the deacons. Deacons and deaconesses are any who do a special task for the whole church, such as teaching Sunday school.

Those who represent the church in any outreach ministry are also deacons. And he says three things, first, about the elders:

1. They are to be “blameless,” so as to avoid being disapproved or set aside. Paul himself speaks of the possibility in his own life when he says, “I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified,” {1 Cor 9:27 RSV}
2. Second, they are to be pure; that is, they are to be men who understand how to tell the difference between good and evil, and how to apply the word so that it produces righteousness. And Paul gives this requirement of purity so as to avoid pride. The great risk in using an immature person is that he may be lifted up with pride, thus falling into the trap of the devil; pride is always a trap.
3. Third, these men were to be of good repute, to avoid public scandal which would bring the whole ministry of the church into disgrace.

Now deacons are treated somewhat similarly, but he adds one major instruction concerning them – they are first to be tested, to be given work to do on a trial basis {cf, 1 Tim 3:10 RSV}. If they perform it well, they are recognized as men and women who can be trusted with responsibility in the work of the church.

The importance of this charge is that it all relates to the fact that the church is linked with the mystery of Christ. Christ is the greatest figure in the universe – everything relates to him – and Paul uses a 1st century hymn to set forth what he means:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
seen by angels,
preached among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. {1 Tim 3:16b RSV}

That is why this charge is so important; these words must be taken with utmost seriousness because they link to this One who is the center of the universe.

In Chapter 4, quite appropriately, Paul turns to the subject of apostasy. Now apostates and heretics are different:

- A heretic is a Christian, one who basically accepts and knows the Lord Jesus Christ, but who tends to go wrong in some particular doctrinal issue.
- But an apostate has never been a Christian, although he testifies that he is.

As John tells us in his first letter, “they went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us they would have continued with us;” {1 Jn 2:19a RSV}.

The Lord Jesus had told of the sower who went out to sow the good seed of the kingdom, and of the enemy sowing weeds in his way. And Jesus said these would grow up together until the harvest {cf, Matt 13:30}, which is why we will never get rid of the apostates within the church. Apostate attitudes arise from listening to doctrines of demons, of deceitful spirits – not merely from twisted ideas of men, but from deliberately deceitful ideas of wicked spirits who attempt to lead people astray.

Then, in the following verses, Paul says that until their apostasy becomes very, very evident, Timothy is not to excommunicate them. First, he is to inform the congregation about the truth; second, he is to set the example for them in his own personal life; and, third, he is to expound the Scriptures to them:

Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift ... which was given you by prophetic utterance ... {1 Tim 4:13-14a RSV}

This is the guarantee against apostasy – informing the congregation of the dangers, setting the example, and expounding the Scriptures.

In Chapter 5 certain specific church problems are discussed, including how to treat younger and older people within the church, and advice to women on various practical matters. Then he takes up the official problem of how to handle charges against the elders. And finally, he mentions certain personal problems that Timothy himself would encounter.

Chapter 6 goes into the matter of social problems, with a word, first, to the downtrodden and degraded – the slaves. This is a most instructive passage, to help answer some of the questions that are being flung at us from every side about how to counsel those who are degraded, and deprived of certain human rights. Paul addresses this to Christian slaves, and he reminds them that the urge to get material things can be a terrible danger to the spiritual life.

Then in a glowing and wonderful passage, he exhorts Timothy to walk honestly and steadfastly in the sight of God until the day when the Lord Jesus himself calls him home. And finally, having begun with the poor, he closes with a word to the rich, and to the learned, giving them their Christian responsibilities. They are rich, he says, because they have been blessed of God in order to help someone else, not to satisfy their own desire. They have a responsibility, he says, “to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life [right now] which is life indeed,” {1 Tim 6:18b-19 RSV}.

As he closes, Paul gives Timothy a word of warning to those who trust in human knowledge:

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. {1 Tim 6:20-21 RSV}

What an up-to-date letter this is! How thoroughly it speaks to our own time as well as to this 1st century. May God grant that we will understand it and live by it.

Prayer:

Grant to us, our Father, that we may take seriously these words from that long-ago first century. We thank you, Lord, that they come with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and are designed for our times as well. Grant that we may saturate ourselves in this wise counsel so that we too may know how to behave ourselves in the church of God, which is the pillar and the ground of the truth. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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2 TIMOTHY: How Not to Collapse

by Ray C. Stedman

In the sixty-eighth year of the 1st century there was an old man in a prison in Rome – a little circular cell about twenty feet in diameter – who was writing to a young man far across the Aegean and Adriatic Seas in Ephesus, and the subject of his letter was how to keep strong in the midst of a collapsing civilization. That is the theme of the second letter of Paul to his son in the faith, Timothy. And that seems an appropriate subject for this twentieth-century hour, doesn't it?

As Paul wrote to his young son in the faith, who was troubled by a weak constitution (a weak stomach, to be exact), and a fearful spirit – a timid outlook on life – and by intense persecution and challenges far beyond his natural power to handle, Paul realized that he himself was about to depart and be with the Lord, and that he was passing on the torch to this younger man. This word from the Apostle Paul's pen is the last that we have from him, then. It constitutes his swan song, his last words of exhortation, and it is peculiarly appropriate to the hour in which we live.

The first verse catches the key of this letter:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life which is in Christ Jesus, {2 Tim 1:1 RSV}

Have you ever thought of the gospel, or of Christianity, that way, “the promise of the life which is in Christ Jesus” – not life to come so much as life right now? It is generally agreed that one of the big problems faced by old and young alike is how to look at life. And one of the big obstacles in coming to a satisfactory view of life is that Christianity is seen somehow as a detour – that if you are a Christian, you have to give up most of the exciting things about life. But Christianity is anything but a detour around life. It is a highway right straight through the middle of it. It is the key to life; the fulfillment of the hunger and longing of

human hearts. And so, in this second letter to Timothy, the apostle is giving us this key to life.

Now he has four things that he wants to say to this young man, all of them important to him and all of them important to us. He puts them in the form of charges, or exhortations, that he gives to his son in the faith:

- The first one is, “guard the truth,”
- The second, “be strong in the Lord,”
- Third, “avoid traps and pitfalls along the way,”
- And, fourth, “preach the word.”

If I had to write to a young man today, I am sure I could never find anything better to say than those four exhortations.

In this letter the first note the apostle strikes is **guard the truth**. God has committed to Timothy a deposit of truth, which is his responsibility and Paul suggests certain ways to carry out this commission. Admittedly, this is addressed to a young man who is a pastor, the pastor of a great church in Ephesus. Timothy had the responsibility of shoring up the defenses of this church which were crumbling under the pressure of a secular society and a pagan attitude. But it is a word of advice that is needed by every Christian without exception, because to each Christian has been given the same deposit of truth – the fundamental revelation of the Scripture concerning the nature of reality: what the world is like; what God is like; what people are like; what you are like. What makes the world operate the way it does? Why does it fall apart all the time? Why is it that nothing good seems to prosper and everything evil seems to reign unchallenged? The explanation is the deposit of truth that has been given to us through Jesus Christ, and it is this that we are to guard.

Now the apostle suggests three specific ways to do this:

First, by exercising the spiritual gift that God has given to you.

Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. {2 Tim 1:6-7 RSV}

If you want a more exact rendering of that verse, put it this way: “It is not God that gives us a spirit of timidity, but he gives a spirit of power and love and a sound mind.”

Someone asks me, what is going to happen in our relationships with Soviet Russia; with the Communist Chinese? What is going to happen in the Middle East? What is going to happen at election time? I do not know what is going to happen in the elections, or whether there will even be an election this year. I do not know; no one knows. But I know this, that it is not God that gives us a spirit of timidity. If we are anxious, if we are troubled, it is not from God. The Spirit of God is a spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind: a spirit of power in order to do, a spirit of love in order to react properly emotionally, and a sound mind in order to be intelligently purposeful about what we do. And the way to discover that is to exercise the spiritual gift that God has given you.

If you are a Christian, you can do something for God. You have an ability given you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within you, and if you are not putting that to work, you are wasting your life. It does not make any difference what you are doing, if it is not built around the exercise of that spiritual gift, it is all a waste of time, pointless, useless. And in the judgment of the Holy Spirit – the only judgment that counts – it will be counted as so much wood, hay, and stubble.

Now what has God given you to do?

Do you know? Have you found out yet?

Do you know what to look for, do you know how to find it? Find out, because in doing so you will discover that God does not give a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind. When you start exercising what God has given you, you discover that he is right with you to back it up. So that was the first word to Timothy on how to guard the truth, how to keep the faith.

A popular saying, and a book by Adam Clayton Powell, is *Keep The Faith, Baby*. I read the book, but I did not learn much on how to keep the

faith. How do you keep the faith? Well, you keep it by first exercising the spiritual gift. You see, our Christian faith is not a delicate, fragile flower that needs to be protected in some hothouse. Charles Spurgeon was exactly right when he said, “Truth is like a lion. Whoever heard of defending a lion? Turn it loose and it will defend itself.” That is what we need to do with this truth. We do not need to apologize for it with long, exegetical arguments as to why we should believe this, or why we should believe that. Just begin to exercise it – that is the admonition.

Second, the apostle says, guard the truth by suffering patiently. And he reminds Timothy that every Christian, without exception, is called to suffer for the gospel’s sake. “Oh,” you say, “that isn’t me. I don’t suffer.” And I think sometimes we tend to feel we have been excluded from this. It may be because we always think of suffering as something physical – torture and thumb-screws and iron maidens and being torn apart on the rack, this sort of thing. Well, Christians do suffer in this way from time to time. In fact, the 20th century is the most tortured Christian century of all. Did you know that? More Christians have been put to death for Christ’s sake in this century than in any other century since the very beginning.

But the suffering that is involved here is not only physical, it is mental as well. It is the kind of suffering we endure when somebody smiles knowingly and winks at our faith, or jibes at us, or laughs at us, or excludes us from an invitation list, or treats us with considerable and open disdain or contempt because we are a Christian; someone who pokes fun at a prayer meeting, or laughs at the Bible. We are to take this patiently, says the apostle. And as we react, not with anger or with disgust or vengeance, but quietly, patiently, as our Lord did, we guard the truth.

You know, one of the reasons the gospel is not widely accepted in many places today is that Christians have been impatient in suffering, have refused to take patiently the attitude of the world in this respect. Instead they have acted offended and hurt when people have treated them poorly, or they have given up and gone along with the crowd, refusing to take suffering for the Lord’s sake. Now you cannot challenge the world in its wrongness without its being offended. And although we must challenge it in the least offensive way possible, nevertheless the Scriptures make clear that there is

constantly a place for Christians' suffering, and it is one of the ways in which we guard the truth.

The third way Paul suggests in this first chapter is to "follow the pattern of the sound words," that is, to read and trust the Scriptures. I love that phrase, "the pattern of sound words." There are so many today who are departing from the pattern of sound words. They believe that some secular writer, out of the blindness and the darkness of his own heart, has more insight into the problems of life than the Scriptures. They repeat these arguments, or live according to this philosophy, and they soon find themselves engulfed in problems – often neuroses and psychoses and nervous reactions – and they do not understand why. Why is it that our age is suffering so from such a tempest of emotional disturbance? It is because in our blindness we have refused to follow the pattern of sound words.

And so to young Timothy Paul suggests these three ways to guard the truth: exercise your gift, suffer patiently, follow the pattern of sound words, and God will see you right through,

... for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. {2 Tim 1:12 RSV}

That is the proper way to read this verse. It is not, "what I have committed unto him," (as the King James Version has it); it is, "he is able to guard ... what has been deposited with me." That is, the truth – the body of faith. And as I perform faithfully what the apostle suggests, I discover that God protects that truth in my life, and protects me in it, and thus keeps me in the faith.

The second exhortation was, "**be strong in the Lord.**" It is important to understand that you never say this to somebody unless he is capable of fulfilling it. What is the use of saying "be strong" to somebody who is a physical weakling? And when Paul writes this to Timothy he realizes that this young man understands how to be strong. You see, Paul is not saying here how to be strong; you have to get that from other Scriptures. That is simply resting, learning how to trust in the work of Jesus Christ. That is the way to be strong in the Lord. But what Timothy needed was an exhorta-

tion to do it, to actually put it into practice. And that is what we need.

I once heard a little couplet at a conference I attended that helped me a great deal. One of the speakers said this:

When I try, I fail;
When I trust, he succeeds.

I like that. That puts it exactly, doesn't it? When I try, I fail, but when I trust, he succeeds – and that is the way the Christian life is lived.

Now there are three figures the apostle uses here to describe being strong in the Lord.

First, *be strong as a soldier*. The thought here is an utter dedication to the task. No sideline. Give yourself to this so that you might please him who has called you to be a soldier. How can you follow Christ if you are involved in a lot of other aims in life? You have several conflicting purposes. No, says Paul, if you want to be strong, be dedicated as a soldier is dedicated to one thing.

Second, *be strong as an athlete*. That means discipline: no shortcuts, no cutting corners or breaking the rules. Just as an athlete is not crowned unless he observes the rules, so if you are going to be a Christian do not take any moral shortcuts, but follow him.

Third, *follow him as a farmer*. That means diligence. Go to work on this; do not slow down. Any farmer knows that if he expects a crop in the fall he has to spend some time working and planting in the spring. And it ought to be that simple with the Christian. The Christian life is not one in which we simply relax while it rolls along its own way. No, it calls for diligence and discipline and reading and giving yourself to the task of knowing the Scriptures and deliberately applying the great principles of truth that you learn. And if you do these things, Paul says you will be able to be strong, strong in the Lord.

He closes this charge with a reminder of the strength of the Lord. Not merely to be strong, but be strong in the Lord.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David. {2 Tim 1:8 RSV}

Two things about him to remember: he is a risen Christ, able to be with you at any moment, at any time; he is not limited in time and space and

geography; he is available to you now. And he is a human Christ. He has been where you are, he has been through what you are going through. He knows the pressures you feel, he has felt the same fear. “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David,” a risen and a human Christ.

The next charge extends from Chapter 2, Verse 14, to the end of Chapter 3. Here Paul is telling us to **avoid the traps and pitfalls** along the way, and he outlines three of these for us:

The first trap is *battles over words*. Have you ever seen the way Christians get all upset sometimes over some little word in Scripture – the mode of baptism, or the millennium – Christians dividing up into camps and choosing up weapons and battling it out. No, the apostle says, avoid this kind of thing. These are stupid and useless controversies and they will spread like gangrene. Not that these questions are not important; in a sense, they are. But there are areas in the Scriptures in which honest, searching, earnest scholars will find differences. Well then, avoid getting into controversies in those areas; do not make final decisions and divisions over that kind of thing.

Second, he says to *avoid dangerous passions*. Here is a word to a young man, a young man who felt the stirrings of passion within him – sexual drives and other hungers – living in a sex-saturated society much like ours. He was being told, “anything goes, satisfy yourself, it’s nothing but a natural urge,” and all the other propaganda and false doctrines that we hear from so many directions today. These were all hitting at Timothy, and Paul says, “Remember, Timothy, ...”

In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and earthenware, and some for noble use, some for ignoble. {2 Tim 2:20 RSV}

Now this is a beautiful figure because Paul is talking about the whole world as a great house. And he says God has certain kinds of people in that great house. There are those he uses for ignoble purposes and you will find that in contemporary history, God is using men and women to accomplish his will through ignoble ways, that is, wars. All war is ignoble, and yet God uses men in those wars killing and slaying, to accomplish his purpose.

But there are others who are used for noble purposes – not destructive, not divisive, but gathering and building, uniting, healing, and harmonizing. Each of us is going to be used of God in one way or another.

Now, he says if you want to be used for a noble purpose rather than for an ignoble purpose then separate yourself from these things that destroy your life.

... shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart. {2 Tim 2:22 RSV}

One of the great destructive forces of our time is the looseness in sexual matters today. It is tearing apart the fabric of our civilization and yet men are blinded to this fact. But Christians are enlightened and instructed; therefore this word comes right home to us who are living in the midst of this loose society. “Shun youthful passions.” Do not suppress them, as Paul says in another place, but give thanks for them and walk honestly, in purity, before the Lord and God will use you for noble purposes not for ignoble.

And then the third trap or pitfall along the way was *a rebellious attitude*:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. {2 Tim 3:1 RSV}

I just note in passing that the “last days” here is not referring to the final end time of the church on earth. The last days include the whole period of time between the first and the second comings of Christ. From the very day that our Lord rose from the dead these were the “last days.” And in these last days, Paul says, there will come recurrent cycles of distress – we are going through one right now – when peace has forsaken the world and men are all upset; when there are strange, demonic forces at work in society creating immense problems. And through those times of distress we will see certain characteristics at play, and he lists them:

For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates,

fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. {2 Tim 3:2-5a RSV}

What to do? Here, basically, are the characteristics of rebellion, a lawless attitude. How do you avoid falling into this pit? Well, says the apostle, first of all, avoid such people. Do not join with them in their causes. He does not mean not to speak to them, but do not join them, do not associate with this kind of defiant rebellion.

And then, remember that this kind of rebellion always results in a rapid revelation of the weakness of it. This is what happened to Jannes and Jambres, those two magicians who withstood Moses before the court of Pharaoh {Exod 7:11}. And these people today will not get very far either, but their folly will be plain to all as was that of those two men. That is a comforting word in this hour of lawlessness, when we wonder how far today's lawless forces are going to go. Well, says Paul they won't go too far, because their folly will soon become obvious to all.

And then in the closing part of the chapter, the apostle tells Timothy the way out; again, it is two-fold – patience in suffering, and persistence in truth. “Remember the way I behaved “ he says to Timothy. “You watched me, you've seen how I've endured all the trials that came my way. Remember that if you're quietly patient in suffering and continue in the truth holding to the Scriptures and what God has said, you will find your way safely through all the involvements and the perils and the pitfalls of the world in which you live.”

And then comes his final charge:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word. {2 Tim 4:1-2a RSV}

Give this out. Proclaim it. Do not merely believe the word but talk about it, speak it, tell it to others. Declare the great truth that God has given you.

... be urgent in season and out of season, convince [those who are full of doubt], rebuke [those who are full of sin], and exhort

[those who are full of fear], ... {2 Tim 4:2b RSV}

Three things: convince, rebuke, and exhort to counteract the characteristics of a decaying age. And Timothy is to be motivated in this by two things:

- First he is to do it in view of the fact that he lives in the presence of God and Jesus Christ. A whole universe is watching us; our faithfulness is under observation all the time. God is watching Christ is watching, and in his presence we are to live.
- Second, he is to do it in view of the peril of the times.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears ... {2 Tim 4:3a RSV}

Do not give way to this, Paul says. Speak the truth; proclaim the word.

Then he closes with this marvelous word of testimony of his own experience:

For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. {2 Tim 4:6-8 RSV}

That is magnificent – especially when you remember its setting. Here is the apostle in this tiny little cell, cramped and cold, in semi-darkness writing by the light of a sputtering lamp. He knows that his fate is sealed. He has already appeared once before Nero, that monstrous wretch of an emperor and now he must appear before him once more, and he knows what the result will be this time. He will be taken outside the city wall and with a flash of the sword, his head will roll in the dust, and that will be the end.

But you notice he is looking beyond all that. Death is but an incident to the believer. And Paul

is seeing the day when he appears before the Lord himself, when he is suddenly ushered into his presence, in which he has always been by faith, and he discovers himself with the Lord on that great Day. Yet, mixed with this is a very human element. Notice how he says to Timothy,

Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you; ... {2 Tim 4:11a RSV}

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. {2 Tim 4:13 RSV}

He is bored in mind, lonely in spirit, and cold in body. Though he could look beyond to all the greatness of the glory of God to come, see how human he is. Now there is nothing wrong with this. When we get cold or lonely or bored, we can just admit it freely; there is nothing sinful about that. But we must also look beyond these circumstances and add that dimension of faith that sees the reality of an unseen world, and changes the whole complexion of the circumstances in which we live. I have often thought about that appearance of Paul before Nero. He says:

But the Lord stood by me [at his first appearance] and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, ... {2 Tim 4:17a RSV}

Isn't that challenging? Paul stood before that wretch, Nero, and proclaimed the word fully,

... that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. {2 Tim 4:17b RSV}

That was his first appearance, but he knows it will be different this time. And in that day when Paul did stand before emperor the second time, the name of Nero was a name honored among men and known throughout the Empire. Who had heard of this; only little Jew from Tarsus, with his bald head

and his bowed legs and his poor speech? And yet today, 1900 years later, we name our sons *Paul*, and our dogs *Nero*.

Then he closes with some personal words to his friends. What a wonderful letter this is! What a challenge it must have been to young Timothy's heart. I would love to have gotten a letter like that from Paul, wouldn't you? And actually, that is what it is: He is writing to us as well –

- to stand firm,
- to hold fast to the pattern of sound words,
- to take our share of suffering for the gospel's sake with joy and equanimity of spirit

– not returning evil for evil, but good for evil, and remembering that he is able to keep that which he has deposited with us.

Prayer:

Our gracious Father, how these words have stirred our hearts anew as we find ourselves in a similar time of declension and despair. We ask that you who have called us with a holy calling and have imparted to us the Holy Spirit, and given to us your holy word, may keep us and make us to be faithful. Give us the diligence of a farmer, the discipline of an athlete, and the dedication of a soldier that will make us equal to the times in which we live. God grant that our eyes may be lifted above the commonplace obscurity of our daily life to the great things that lie beyond the invisible curtain and see ourselves living constantly in thy presence, even in this hour. Challenge our hearts to be strong in the midst of weakness, and to be faithful in the midst of that which is false. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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TITUS: Truth and Proof

by Ray C. Stedman

Titus, one of the young men who accompanied the Apostle Paul on many of his missionary journeys, first came to Christ as a Greek in the city of Antioch. At the time this letter was written, he was on the island of Crete, just south of Greece.

The church in Crete was probably begun by Paul and Titus after Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. As far as we can tell, Paul was released from that imprisonment, recorded at the end of the book of Acts. You may recall that he had expressed the desire to go to Spain, and many scholars feel that after his journey to Spain, he and Titus went to the island of Crete and began the church there. As he tells us in this letter, he left Titus there to:

amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I [Paul] directed you. {Tit 1:5b RSV}

This letter provides an interesting little insight as to what went on in the early church, as the apostle traveled about and sent these young men as apostolic delegates to do special work for him in various places.

In the background of this letter, we can discover the character of the Cretans. In one of the most unusual passages in the New Testament, the apostle quotes from one of the ancient writers of his day, a secular Greek poet who describes these people among whom young Titus had to labor. He says,

One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." {Tit 1:12 RSV}

Paul is obviously writing a private message to his son-in-the-faith, Titus, and wants him to understand the formidable nature of the problem he is to resolve. He is dealing with people who are characterized in these three ways, and he underscores this by saying, "This testimony is true," {Tit 1:13a RSV}. These people are like this. And as we look at the message of this letter, we see that these three characteristics of the Cretan people seem to be described and amplified in various passages. For example, Paul says about certain ones,

To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds [they're liars]; they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good deed. {Tit 1:15-16 RSV}

Now this was the kind of society in which the Christian church was living, and this was the kind of national character that Titus was up against. Here were people whose minds and consciences were corrupted – they profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds.

He also calls them "evil beasts," that is, they were like animals in their attitudes toward one another. That theme is amplified in Chapter 3, where the apostle says,

But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile. As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is perverted and sinful; he is self-condemned. {Tit 3:9-11 RSV}

These words are referring primarily to those who at least professed to be Christian, but who were reflecting the attitudes of the world around.

When the church has a problem, it is because the world is invading the church instead of the church invading the world. The gospel is intended to be a disturbing element, to change society. Therefore, whenever the church is true to its authentic message, it is always against the status quo. The church is a revolutionary body – it always has been – and we can thus be very much in sympathy with some of the revolutionary movements of our own day. But the difference is that the church challenges the status quo with the power of God, something that no other organization or group can do.

Now what would you do with people who acted like animals, snarling and griping at one another, people who engaged in stupid controversies and quarrels over the Law, and who were factious one with another – how would you handle people like that? And that was not all; these people were further characterized as “lazy gluttons,” easy-going, pleasure-loving people. This too is amplified in chapter three, where the apostle speaks not only of them, but also of himself and of all men as they are before they become Christians. Here is an amazing description of the world as God sees it:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; {Tit 3:3 RSV}

This is the kind of a world into which the apostle sent this young man, with the power of the gospel.

Now the basic need of these people was to have “sound doctrine,” a phrase that occurs several times throughout the letter. Paul knew that to change society, people must be told the truth – this

is the problem with men and women everywhere. This is why they walk in darkness and act like animals, tearing one another apart and hating one another – because they do not understand themselves or the world. So you have to begin by teaching them truth.

Along with that is another very basic need – the matter of “good deeds.” That phrase appears five times; chapter one closes with that idea, “unfit for any good deed,” {Tit 1:16b RSV}. Then in Chapter 2, “Show yourself in all respects a model of good deeds, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech,” {Tit 2:7-8a RSV}. And Chapter 2 also closes with that idea, “to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds,” {Tit 2:14b RSV}. In Chapter 3 it says, “be careful to apply themselves to good deeds,” {Tit 3:8b RSV}, and once again, “let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds,” {Tit 3:14a RSV}.

Isn't this what the church is looking for, what the world is looking for? Sound doctrine – good, solid teaching, straight from the shoulder revelations of truth – and good deeds to back them up and prove the reality of the teaching. Now, first, as to doctrine, the apostle emphasized several points. To begin with, they had to be clear about the basis of men's salvation. How do you change human hearts? Today we are still striving to change people's nature by education, by legislation, and by a change of atmosphere or environment. But as someone has well said, “If you bring a pig into the parlor, it won't change the pig, but it will certainly change the parlor!” And this is the problem here; so they needed to know the truth about salvation. In Chapter 3 the apostle says,

but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, {Tit 3:4-5a RSV}

He saved us. He saved us! He is the only one who can. He saved us – we did not save ourselves. In fact, he goes on to say that:

not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, {Tit 3:5b RSV}

Everyone tries to do good deeds. But good deeds will not save you, and the apostle makes that clear. Only the Savior can save; and he goes on to point this out:

he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, {Tit 3: 5 RSV}

He makes us over from the inside; he does not patch us up from the outside. He does not give us a new leaf to turn over, or try to bolster up our moral courage a bit, or get us to try a little harder, but he changes us by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Psychology is absolutely helpless when it comes to that kind of a procedure. But the gospel does what neither psychology or anything else can do. The supreme message of the church is to declare and proclaim this great good news that there is a means of being regenerated and renewed in the Holy Spirit,

which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. {Tit 3:6-7 RSV}

Now when the Bible speaks of hope, it does not speak of only a faint possibility, the way the world speaks of hope: “I hope I’ll be rich some day,” or, “I hope I’ll be healthy.” But when the New Testament speaks of hope, it is a certainty: the hope of eternal life rests upon the One who came to give us eternal life, and we are justified by his grace.

Now beyond these fundamental facts of the gospel, these Cretans needed to learn some truth about present conduct. In Chapter 2, in connection with the coming of the gospel, Paul writes:

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, [that is, all who believe] training us to renounce irreligion [or ungodliness: to repudiate it, to use our minds and wills to say “No” to these things] and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in the world, {Tit 2:11-12 RSV}

– not in the church, but in the world –

- in the midst of the business of life,
- in the midst of commerce and trade, and
- all the usual enterprise of life

– that is where we are to live sober, goldly, upright lives. That is the truth they needed to know!

And third, they needed to know truth about a future expectation, and he goes on in that same passage:

awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, {Tit 2:13 RSV}

Psychologists are telling us that many people, especially young people, are suffering from future shock. That is a kind of emotional reaction that sets in when someone contemplating the future sees it as hopeless, with no possibility of accomplishing anything. And many young people today are giving up on the future, saying, “What’s the use?” But here is the answer to that despair – “awaiting our blessed hope.” What a phrase to set against that other future shock and “blessed hope – “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,” {Tit 2:13b RSV}.

Do you see how clearly Jesus is called God in this passage? There is one Savior, and it is Jesus Christ who is the great God who will appear in glory to set right the things that are wrong in this world.

Next, these Cretans needed to learn something about the church order, and in the opening chapter Paul indicates that he had left word with Titus to appoint elders whom he later calls “bishops;” they are the same – “elders” refers to the man, “bishop” to his office. And he gives qualifications:

if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or in-subordinate. For a bishop, as God’s steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled; {Tit 1:6-8 RSV}

Where do you find such men? Well, Paul expected to find them in Crete, and he expected to find them among those who had once been characterized as liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons. This is the change the gospel makes, and he did find them there, because Titus was sent to put them into office to carry on the work of the church. In this

way, the church becomes a sort of therapy group, introducing into the community at large the healing virtues of love and light and grace that will gradually transform a community. That is what a church is sent to do.

Finally, these Christians in Crete needed to know something about civic responsibility:

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men. {Tit 3:1-2 RSV}

What a contrast that is with some of the activities that are carried on today in the name of the church! But the church is exhorted here to recognize that the authorities are in some sense the ministers of God, sent and used by him to maintain order, and that there should be courtesy and obedience in every area in which the law speaks, except in those areas where it definitely challenges a spiritual precept.

Now, turning to the need to have good deeds, there is some practical advice here for various age groups: older men are told to,

be temperate, serious, sensible, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. {Tit 2:2b RSV}

Then there is a word for older women:

to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, and to train the young women to love their husbands ... {Tit 2:3-4a RSV}

That is the task of older women – to teach the young women how to behave themselves, and to be good wives, and further,

to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited. {Tit 2:4b-5 RSV}

How practical this letter is! And yet, as the apostle gives these practical guidelines, he is in effect quietly injecting into this Cretan community

a power that would soon become a vital factor in changing the whole life of this island.

Finally, as the apostle closes with some personal words of admonition and advice, we have a glimpse into his own life. He says,

When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. {Tit 3:12 RSV}

Nicopolis was on the western shore of Greece, just across the Adriatic Sea from the heel of the Italian boot. The apostle was apparently writing this letter from Corinth, and was sending two young men down to replace Titus in Crete, so that Titus could rejoin Paul. Later we read that Titus went on up to Dalmatia, on the northern coast, sending Zenas, the lawyer, and Appollos on their way (perhaps to Alexandria, which was Apollos' home), and the apostle admonishes Titus to see that they lack nothing.

Then he closes the letter as he opened it; he says, "And let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds," {Tit 3:14a RSV}. How did he open the letter?

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness, {Tit 1:1 RSV}

There is the theme of this letter; truth which matches up with godliness; sound doctrine and good deeds going hand in hand. And the basis of it, as we have already seen, is "in hope of eternal life which God, who never lies, promised ages ago" {Tit 1:2 RSV}.

That promise is found in Genesis, where God promised before Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden that there would come a redeemer, who would bring life to men (Gen. 3:15), and this is the reference that Paul makes here. Then he speaks of the method by which it would come: "at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by command of God our Savior," {Tit 1:3 RSV}. If your life has been changed at all, it was by preaching, by hearing this delivering word set forth; and when you believed it, you found that you, too, experienced the

washing of regeneration and the subsequent renewing, the continuous renewal, of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer:

Our Father, we are encouraged again ourselves, as we look at this letter of Paul's to Titus, to adorn the doctrine of God in these days. Generation after generation of Christians have lived and died since those

days, but the world is still here, and the promises are still here. And this is our day, Lord: you have called us to be saints, to be members of the body of Christ, as these early Christians were. Grant to us courage and strength, steadfastness and vision, and faith, that we may manifest these truths clearly in our hour of human history. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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PHILEMON: A Brother Restored

by Ray C. Stedman

This little letter to Philemon is a marvelous example of the strongest force in the universe to affect control over someone – grace. It takes up one of the most difficult problems we ever encounter, that of resolving quarrels between family members. We can ignore something a stranger does to hurt us, but it is very hard to forgive a member of our own family or someone close to us.

The key to this little letter is in the 16th verse. Paul says to Philemon that he is sending back Onesimus:

... no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. {Phmn 1:16 RSV}

The background of this story is very interesting. This letter was written when the Apostle Paul was a prisoner in the city of Rome for the first time. It was sent to Philemon, a friend Paul had won to Christ, who lived in Colossae. Evidently Philemon had a young brother whose name was Onesimus.

Some way or another, we do not know how, Onesimus got into trouble – maybe he was a gambling man – and became the slave of his own brother, Philemon. In those days, if a man got into trouble, he could get somebody to redeem him by selling himself to that person as a slave. Perhaps Onesimus got into debt, and went to his brother, Philemon, and said, “Phil, would you mind going to bat here for me? I’m in trouble and I need some money.”

Philemon would say, “Well, Onesimus, what can you give me for security?”

Onesimus would say, “I haven’t got a thing but myself, but I’ll become your slave if you’ll pay off

this debt.” Now that may or may not have been how it occurred, but the picture we get from this little letter is that Philemon is the brother of Onesimus, and his slave as well.

Sometime before this letter was written, Onesimus had run away. In the Roman Empire, if a slave ran away from his master, he could either be put to death or shipped back to his master. Before he left, Onesimus had apparently stolen some money from Philemon. He found his way to the city of Rome, and there he somehow came into contact with the Apostle Paul in prison, and was reached with the gospel (like so many runaway boys, he came under the sound of the Word of God and was soundly converted), and became Paul’s helper there in the city of Rome. But Paul was determined to send him back to Philemon, so he wrote this gracious little note and sent it back in the hand of Onesimus himself.

Imagine the scene at the home of Philemon when this letter arrives. Philemon is standing out on his porch one morning, looking down the road, and he sees somebody coming. He says to his wife, “Dear, here comes someone to see us.” As he watches, he thinks he sees who it is, and he says, “You know, dear, I hope I’m wrong, but that looks like my rascally brother coming home again.” Sure enough, as Onesimus gets closer and closer, Philemon sees that it is indeed his brother who had run away and disgraced the family – the black sheep coming back again. There is a dark cloud on his brow as he goes to meet Onesimus. He throws up his hands and says, “Well, so you’ve come home at last, have you? What brings you back this time? A bad penny always returns, they say.”

Onesimus does not say a word. He knows there is no use trying to defend himself. He just hands him this letter from the Apostle Paul, and

Philemon opens the letter that was in scroll form and begins to read:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker ... {Phmn 1:1 RSV}

Philemon says, “Yes, this is from Paul all right. That’s the way he always begins his letters.” Then he continues:

and Apphia our sister [that’s Mrs. Philemon] and Archippus our fellow soldier, ... {Phmn 1:2a RSV}

We do not know who he was, but it is likely that he was the son of Philemon and Apphia.

... and the church in your house. {Phmn 1:2b RSV}

Isn’t that an interesting little sidelight? People gathered together in Philemon’s home to study and pray together. This is the “church” that Paul greets. Then we have this salutation that is so familiar:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {Phmn 1:3 RSV}

Philemon says to his wife, “I don’t know how this fellow got this letter, but it is from Paul.” So he goes on reading:

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, {Phmn 1:4-5 RSV}

Philemon says, “Listen to that, dear. Old Paul has been praying for us, even from prison. Isn’t that wonderful! To think that he is remembering us in prayer over here in Colossae. I wonder what he’s praying about?”

... and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ. {Phmn 1:6 RSV}

Philemon says to his wife, “I wonder what he means by ‘the sharing of your faith’; I don’t quite get what he means.” He reads some more:

For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. {Phmn 1:7 RSV}

He says, “My, isn’t that a nice thing for Paul to say. He says he has been refreshed by us, but how many times have we been refreshed by him?” Philemon goes on reading the letter:

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required. {Phmn 1:8 RSV}

Paul is saying, “I could order you to do this. I could be legal about this. I have the authority as an apostle.” Philemon would probably do it, but there would be rebellion inside. But Paul is not going to do that; he goes on:

... yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you – {Phmn 1:9a RSV}

Notice how he changed the expression here? “I appeal to you.” On what basis is he going to appeal?

I, Paul, an ambassador [that ought to appeal to him] and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus – {Phmn 1:9b RSV}

I think the tears probably came to Philemon’s eyes as he read this. Dear old Paul, who had led him to Christ, sitting in that lonely prison writing this letter and saying, “Philemon, old friend, would you do me a favor? I’m appealing to you, even though I could command you. I’d like you to do me this special favor.” You can just hear Philemon’s heart softening as he reads these words. Now he says:

I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment. {Phmn 1:10 RSV}

Startled, Philemon turns to his wife and says, “Dear, do you think Paul has actually led this fellow to Christ? He talks as though he were his spiritual father!” He reads on:

(Formerly he was useless to you [I'll say he was – stealing everything I had and running off like that.], but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) {Phmn 1:11 RSV}

This is a little pun on the name *Onesimus*; the name means “useful, or profitable.” Paul is an eminent humorist, and is not at all ashamed to make a pun in the right place. With a twinkle in his eye, he says, “Onesimus may have been useless to you once, but he is useful now. He is Onesimus now.”

I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. {Phmn 1:12 RSV}

Philemon says, “I don’t understand it. Why on earth does Paul want to send him back to me? After all this fellow has done, even through he has become a Christian, it’s going to be awfully hard for me to forget how he has disgraced my name here in the community.” But Paul writes:

I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, {Phmn 1:13 RSV}

That must have touched Philemon’s heart. Surely he longed to be able to do something for Paul. Paul tells him how, “Onesimus did it in your behalf; he served me.” And then he says,

but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order the your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. {Phmn 1:14 RSV}

Now that is the very heart of grace, isn’t it? It does not force anybody to do anything. Paul says here in Philemon, “I don’t want you to accept him back simply because I said so. And I certainly didn’t want to keep him in Rome without your consent, so I’m sending him back to you.”

Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. {Phmn 1:15-16 RSV}

Philemon’s heart is beginning now to turn towards this black sheep brother of his. He says to his wife, “If Paul found Onesimus so dear to him, maybe we ought to find some way to forgive him for all the things he has done. Maybe the fellow has been changed. Let’s see what else Paul has to say.”

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. {Phmn 1:17 RSV}

“Well,” says Philemon, “this puts quite a different slant on things. I was going to take him back, as long as Paul had sent him like this, but I would have sent him back down to live with the rest of the slaves in the slave quarters. But now Paul says that we are to receive him as we would receive Paul himself!”

Apphia says, “Well, we surely would never send Paul down to the slave house; we’d give him the very best guest room in the house. So if we are going to receive Onesimus as we would receive Paul, we’d better give him the best room.”

So Philemon says, “All right, dear, go get the guest room ready. We’ll bring him in there. But wait a minute! He never paid back the money he took. We’ve got to get that from him.”

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. {Phmn 1:18 RSV}

Isn’t that wonderful? That is grace. You have the doctrine of acceptance and the doctrine of substitution wonderfully portrayed here in this little letter. God receives us in the person of another; we were like Onesimus. In fact, Martin Luther said, “All of us were God’s Onesimus.” We are slaves. We merit nothing. We have done things that are wrong. We stand before a God who is righteous and holy, and yet the Lord Jesus says, “If he has done anything wrong, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I will pay it.” That is what Paul says here.

I, Paul write this with my own hand, I will repay it – to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. {Phmn 1:19-20 RSV}

Now I am sure that it happened that way. I think that Philemon was touched by this wonderful word of grace from the apostle, as he thought of that dear man sitting in the loneliness of his prison writing this letter. He had nothing of himself. He had no money, nothing with which to repay, and yet he wrote, "If he owes you anything, don't worry about it. I'll pay it myself when I come."

I think that was the crowning touch. Philemon's heart just broke and he probably opened his arms to Onesimus and they forgave one another. As they wept on one another's shoulders, the fellowship of the family was restored once again.

Then see what Paul writes at the end:

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. {Phmn 1:21 RSV}

Do you see how far grace carries this matter? If Paul had been writing this on a legal basis, he would have said: "Philemon! As the Holy Apostle of the Holy Church, I command you to receive back this young man and to give him back his job!" That is as far as law could go. And Philemon would probably have had to obey it, or else get into trouble with the church. But grace goes much farther. It not only has restored Onesimus to his place in the household, but it has restored him to his place in the family as well. It breaks down all the

barriers, smoothes out all the friction that has developed, and creates a better situation than ever existed before.

Now Paul closes with some personal references:

At the same time, prepare the guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be granted to you. {Phmn 1:22 RSV}

Here we see that the apostle says he is expecting to be released – but how? "Through your prayers." He says, "You keep praying for me there in Colossae." And we know that God did grant these requests. Paul was released, and he preached the word of God for several years before he was incarcerated for the second time.

Finally, he sends along greetings from some of those who were with him. Epaphras was well known in Colossae; he had founded the church there. But now, as a fellow prisoner with Paul in Rome, he sends greetings. So does Mark, the author of the gospel of Mark, and Aristarchus, one of Paul's disciples. Demas was the young man who forsook Paul, having loved "this present world," {2 Tim 4:10b RSV}. And Luke, also with Paul in Rome, sends greetings to Philemon as well.

Then we have this closing word, which is characteristic of letters written by Paul:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. {Phmn 1:25 RSV}

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HEBREWS: All About Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

Hebrews is one of the three New Testament commentaries on a single Old Testament verse:

the just shall live by his faith {Hab 2:4b KJV}

This is the verse that struck a fire in the heart of Martin Luther, and began the Protestant Reformation 450 years ago. This verse opened the eyes of Augustine, and helped him to become a mighty man of faith, and it is still striking fire in many hearts today. It is expanded and amplified in Romans, Ephesians, and Hebrews. Each of these epistles emphasizes a different aspect of that statement.

- The book of Romans talks about “the just” – the justified – those who have been accepted as righteous in Jesus Christ: *The just shall live by faith.*
- The book of Ephesians emphasized the words “shall live,” and it tells us about life as a justified person – the walk in the Spirit, the life in Jesus, the life of Christ in us: The just *shall live* by faith.
- And finally, the book of Hebrews takes up the last two words, “by faith,” and it shows us how to lay hold of the life by which we are justified.

But I hope you know that faith is derived, not from anything in itself, but from its object. This is a source of great confusion among many Christians. People are always saying to me, “If I only had enough faith, I could do so and so, and such and such,” as though faith were a commodity sold by the pound; as though all you have to do is buy another pound of faith and add it to the store you have now, and you could do great things for God. But the quantity of faith is of very little signifi-

cance. Jesus said so: “If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed” {Matt 17:20b RSV}, you could move mountains. It is not quantity that is important in faith; it is quality; it is what your faith is fastened to. What is the object of your faith? The strength of faith is directly related to the strength of what you believe in:

- What are you believing in?
- Who are you believing in?
- What kind of a person is he?

When Hebrews talks about faith, therefore, it must help us to see the object of faith, because our faith will be strong if we believe and understand that the object of our faith is strong. That is why this is the most Christ-centered book in the New Testament. It focuses on Jesus Christ: therefore, it is one of the greatest books for hours of discouragement, defeat, or depression, because it emphasizes the character and the qualities of Jesus Christ. If we see him as he is, we cannot help but be strong in faith.

There is an old story of a man who had just become a Christian. He was experiencing some of the difficulties that new Christians often have of uncertainty in his faith; he was wondering if he really was a Christian, and was feeling frustrated with his own lack of growth. He felt he had come to the place where he just could not stand any longer; he could not live as a Christian any more. He came into a church service where a pastor was speaking on the verses in Ephesians that tell of Christ being seated at the right hand of the Father, and that we are dead, and our life is hid with Christ in God. He talked about Christ as the head of the body, and said that we are the body, and that Christ as the head is seated at the right hand of the Father. As the truth of this gripped this man’s heart, and he

realized that although he was struggling to swim against the current down here below, his head was seated in victory and triumph already at the right hand of God, he jumped out of his seat, and shouted, "Hallelujah! Who ever heard of anyone drowning with his head high above water!"

That is what Hebrews does to us: It helps us to focus on the One who is already in the place of victory. We are fighting a battle already won, and that is what encourages us. When we walk in the flesh, we are fighting a battle already lost; there is no chance, no hope of victory; but when we walk in the Spirit, the battle is already won.

In the first ten chapters of Hebrews, there is a very simple structure. Jesus Christ is being compared to a number of other leaders and systems and religious values that the people to whom this letter was first written had once felt were important. It is a little like an athletic contest or an elimination match where certain contestants are vying for the championship. One after the other challenges the hero, and one after another is conquered, and the hero emerges triumphant, superior to everyone else. Throughout this letter, Christ is compared with the basic thing that men trust in days of peril and trial. And every one of them is found insufficient – except him!

The first one is **the prophets** of the Old Testament. The letter opens on that theme:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; {Heb 1:1 RSV}

– these impressive writers of the Old Testament: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Habakkuk. All these names that meant so much to the Hebrew mind and heart. These men were well ahead of all the philosophies and philosophers the world has ever known, contemporaries with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and yet their views of reality far outstripped these men. These were great men, the fathers, the prophets – and God spoke to them and through them in the past.

but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. {Heb 1:2a RSV}

Almost with a wave of a hand, the writer dismisses the prophets as having no equality with Jesus Christ. After all, they were just spokesmen,

instruments, but he is the God enthroned as king of the universe, forming the boundaries of history and upholding everything by the word of his power. How can a prophet compare with someone like that? He is much better than they; therefore, the writer argues, anybody who trusted in prophets ought to be interested in listening to Jesus Christ.

The next challengers are **the angels**. In the Greek world in which the New Testament church found itself, angels were regarded as very important beings. Most of the Greek gods and goddesses – Venus, Zeus, Mercury and others – were angels in the eyes of the Greeks. They knew they were not supreme God, but they were regarded as a kind of God, junior-grade, sub-deities, and they treated them as such.

But here the writer takes up the question of which is greater, the angels or the Son. He points out immediately that the Son, the Lord Jesus, is superior to any angel:

For to which angel did God ever say, "Thou art my Son ..."? {Heb 1:5a RSV}

No, he never said that to any angel. The Son is superior to the angels, and furthermore, the angels worshipped him; therefore, they themselves admit that he is superior, and they obey him – this is the argument – so how could you ever compare an angel to the Son of God?

He goes on to point out in Chapters 2 and 3, moreover, that Jesus was the true man; he was the second Adam. He came to fulfill the destiny of human beings – the lost destiny which Adam threw away. This right of mankind to be rulers and kings in the universe is reflected in the eighth Psalm:

**When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou are mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
and dost crown him with glory and honor.
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; {Psa 8:3-6a RSV}**

That is God's design for man, but, in our fallen state, we find it very difficult to fulfill. But Jesus is

there, and the writer says that although we do not yet see man fulfilling his destiny, we see Jesus sitting at the right hand of God – the true man; man as God intended man to be. He is certainly higher than the angels, because God made man ultimately to be higher than the angels. He said of man, “Let us make him in our image.” He did not say that about any angel, but of man.

In the midst of this argument about the angels, the writer of Hebrews gives a warning. There are five warnings through the book of Hebrews, and this is the first one:

- **Do not neglect to listen to this One.** If Jesus is higher than the prophets, and higher than the angels, then we ought to listen to him. If prophets have affected the stream of history as much as they have, and the angels are the invisible agents of God working through all of history, then surely we ought to listen to the Son. Do not neglect to listen! {cf, Heb 2:1-3a RSV}

Now the next challengers who move into the picture are **Moses and Joshua** out of the Old Testament, these great men of God whom God greatly used. The Hebrew people almost idolized them as the supreme examples of men mightily used of God – especially Moses. In Chapter 3, Jesus is compared to Moses, and in Chapter 4, to Joshua.

And what is his argument? Well, it is very simple. Moses was a servant in the house of God; but Jesus is the Son to whom the house belongs, and for whom it is built, so he obviously has superiority.

When I was a boy in Montana I was invited to visit a well known, wealthy ranch, by one of the hired men. As we came up to an imposing ranch house, he did not take me into the house: instead, he took me to the bunkhouse out in back. I asked him what it was like in the ranch house, and he said, “Well, I can’t take you in there; that belongs to the family.” I saw a beautiful palomino horse in the pasture, and I told him how I would love to ride on that horse. And he said, “I’m sorry, you can’t; that belongs to the family.” All day long I was frustrated, because everything I wanted to do, he could not let me do, because he was only a hired man. But later on, I got to know the son of that family, a boy of my own age, and do you know what we did? We rode that palomino horse all over the place, and

we went into the house, and we even went into the kitchen and helped ourselves to food in the refrigerator – anything we wanted – and we made ourselves perfectly at home. A son has greater liberty than a servant.

Moses was just a servant, but Jesus was the master. Moses led the people of God out of Egypt towards the land of Canaan, which was the symbol of the rest of God – the rest which God wants people to learn to live on inside their hearts.

As we will see later on in this letter – and there is a hint of it here in the beginning – the house of God which this writer talks about is man. Moses was but a servant in the symbol of the house of God. Jesus is the Son in the very house itself. Moses led toward a symbol of the rest of God, but Jesus leads into the actual place of rest.

That rest is defined for us here in Chapter 4. It says,

whoever enters God’s rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. {Heb 4:10 RSV}

That is, if you stop depending upon yourself and your self-effort, you have learned to enter into rest, because you start depending upon another – God’s work in you. That is the lost secret of humanity. That is the secret that Adam and Eve lost in the Garden of Eden, and which Jesus Christ came to restore to us. When we learn to operate on that, we learn to be perfectly peaceful, calm, undisturbed by circumstances, trusting, powerful, effective, accomplishing things for Christ’s sake. And that is rest.

Now Joshua could not lead into that rest, says the writer. He tried to, but he could not take the people into real rest. Oh, he took them into the symbol of rest, the land, but he did not take them into real rest. But Jesus can! Therefore, he says,

Let us strive to enter that rest, {Heb 4:11a RSV}

lest like those people in the wilderness, we fall away and lose out on what God has for us.

The second warning is:

- **Do not harden your heart** {Heb 4:7b RSV}, and resist God’s lead. Do not say to yourself, “I’m all right the way I am. I’m doing OK. What do I need with any-

thing further?" No, do not harden your heart. Do not resist what God is saying. You may be satisfied with the way you are now, but it will not last very long. Sooner or later you will find that what you have got now is not enough: therefore, do not harden your heart, but let God lead you into his rest, or you will be in serious trouble.

Now the next challenger to the superiority of Christ is **Aaron, the high priest of Israel**, along with the whole system of priesthood. A great deal of this letter has to do with this subject of priesthood, and it is very important, because priests have great value.

What do you think priests are for? In the Old Testament, the priests had two very important functions – to relieve guilt and to relieve confusion:

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relations to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. {Heb 5:1 RSV}

That is relief of guilt; to lift the load and the burden of sin, and,

He can deal gently with the ignorant and the wayward, {Heb 5:2a RSV}

– those who are confused and miss the path, who do not know where to turn. The modern equivalent of a priest, perhaps, is a psychiatrist; priests did what psychiatrists do today. They tried to relieve the load of guilt and to straighten out people's confused and ignorant approaches to life, and therefore, they were very important.

But now this writer goes on to show that Jesus Christ has a higher priesthood, symbolized by a man named Melchizedek. Melchizedek appears in the Old Testament in a very mysterious way. He steps out of the shadows for a moment and deals with Abraham, and then returns to obscurity and is never heard from again. He is referred to several times in the Old Testament, but he is a figure of mystery until you come to the New Testament, and here in Hebrews, we are helped to see what this strange man signified.

He was a picture of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. His characteristics were those of the priesthood Christ has today:

- First, he was instantly available. The story, recorded in Genesis 14, tells of Abraham meeting the King of Sodom after his defeat of the five kings. Although Abraham did not know it, he was in trouble. The King of Sodom was out to make him a very subtle offer that would derail Abraham in his walk of faith. He could not possibly have detected the subtlety of this offer; but Melchizedek suddenly appeared. He was instantly available.
- Furthermore, because he was a king without father or without mother – this is far as the record goes in the Old Testament – he was a picture of Christ in his eternal relationship – he was permanently available. His service to Abraham at this time was to strengthen him, picturing the way Jesus Christ actually strengthens us. Melchizedek strengthened Abraham by the offering of bread and wine which in the communion service are the symbols of the body and the blood, the life of the Lord Jesus.

That is why Melchizedek appears in this book, to present the picture of Jesus Christ as instantly available to us. This is why the glory of the priesthood of Christ is so intensely superior to anyone else. Your psychiatrist may go on vacation – he might even die – it has been known to happen! But Jesus Christ never dies, and he is never off duty – he is instantly and permanently available, and he actually strengthens you with the impartation of his own life, symbolized by the body and the blood, the bread and the wine.

In connection with this, there is a third warning

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- **The danger of delay:** This is one of the most serious warnings in the book, found in Chapter 6. Although we may have tasted the outward experiences of Christianity, and seem to have much that is real in our Christian life, if we have not pressed on into this place of rest and of trust in Jesus Christ, these external evidences of Christianity are of no value to us. In fact, if that is all we have, a time will come when they will fail us, and then it will be impossible to find the true – that is a terrible warning; if you trust too long in the

untrue, the unreal, the phony, there will come a day of desperation, when you will look for the true, and you will not be able to find it.

The fifth challenger is **the tabernacle and the Law**. Here are more things that people trust in – buildings and self-effort, which is represented by the Law. And the writer now compares Christ to this, and he draws a sharp contrast. He takes the old tabernacle in the wilderness, and he says “that’s just a building, that’s all,” but the real tabernacle is man or woman, a boy, or a girl – it is you! You are the one God’s been aiming at for centuries – not buildings! He is not interested in buildings. That is why I think it is such a desperate error to refer to a building as the house of God.

I like that story of the little boy who was chewing gum in a church building, and a lady said to the pastor, “Look at that boy chewing gum in church. Do you let children chew gum in the house of God?” And he said, “My dear lady; it’s the house of God that’s chewing the gum!” And he is exactly right. So the old tabernacle, or the temple in Jerusalem, or a cathedral, or a church is nothing but a building. The true house of God is you. We are his house. He dwells in us. Christ in you – the hope of glory {Col 1:27b RSV}.

Now, in connection with the tabernacle was the Law, which made its demands upon people: “Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not bow down to idols, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God,” and so forth {cf, Exod 20:2-17} – all the Ten Commandments. And these are wonderful, but they fail, as Paul says in Romans, because of the weakness of the flesh which is not able to meet the demands of the Law. We find ourselves unable to come through with what the Law demands. Even when we try our best, all we can achieve is an outward external obedience, but the heart and the attitude within is frequently wrong, and we know it.

Well, says the writer, the Lord Jesus has a solution to this. His solution is to write the Law on your heart. To put the Spirit of God within you to keep prompting you to love, and love is the fulfilling of the Law. If you yield yourself to love of the Spirit, which is pouring out from within you, you will be automatically and unconsciously fulfilling the Law. He writes his law upon our hearts, he

never leaves us; he deals fully with our guilt during those times when we do fail – he has already solved that problem in the cross – and he provides all the power we need to walk in righteousness if we will take it. Can you beat that? The Law never does that. All it does is demand; it never enables; but Jesus comes in and demands and enables. He who is faithful is he who calls us, who also will do it.

Now, here, we have another warning:

- **Do not deceive yourself.** Do not say you have got all this and try to put up a good front, because that is presuming upon God. If you do that, the writer says there will be nothing left for you but a certain end of evil:

For if we sin deliberately [that is deceitfully, yet deliberately] after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? {Heb 10:26-29 RSV}

Think of it! God has provided for us at infinite cost a way of being righteous before him, strengthened within, kept strong and pure in the midst of all the adverse circumstances around us, and we set it aside and say, “No thank you, Lord, I’ll make it on my own.” Could anything be more insulting to God? And so he warns us not to presume on God’s grace.

Well, that eliminates buildings, and works, and there are no challengers left.

So, in the last section of the letter, he comes to the **means of obtaining all that God has**, which is faith. In Chapter 11 you can learn

- what faith is,
- how it acts,
- how it looks, and
- how to recognize it.

And as you read through that wonderful chapter of the heroes of faith, you find that faith anticipates the future, acts in the present, evaluates the past, dares to move out, and persists to the end – that is what faith is.

The last two chapters tell us how it is produced in our lives, how God goes about making us strong in the faith.

1. First, we are made strong by “looking unto Jesus” {Heb 12:2 KJV}; you cannot read about the Lord Jesus, you cannot live with him and think of what God has revealed about him, and believe these great declarations of his power and his availability and his life without finding your faith strengthened. Isn’t that true? You can look at all these other men of faith – Abraham, David, Moses, Barak, Samson, and a whole host of others – Martin Luther, John Wesley, D. L. Moody – and all they will do is inspire you, but they cannot enable you. But when you look at Jesus, he will not only inspire you, but he will empower you. That is why we are exhorted to look away from these others unto Jesus, the author and the finisher of faith, who will make us strong in the time of weakness.
2. Second, our faith is increased by living constantly in trouble – the disciplines of life. God puts us into problems, because that gives us the opportunity to exercise faith. If you did not have any problems, how could you exercise faith? If you did not have any difficulties how could you ever learn to depend? That is why you can count on trouble. That is encouraging isn’t it? You can count on it!
3. And, finally, we exercise faith – we learn faith by encouraging one another in view of the resources God has given us. Listen to this majestic passage:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the

sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them. [That was the Law given on Mount Sinai.] For they could not endure the order that was given, “if even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” {Heb 12:18-20 RSV}

That is terrifying isn’t it? You have not come to that.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born [the church of God] who are enrolled in heaven, and to a Judge who is God of all, [pagans, Communists, atheists, everybody] and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, [a new arrangement for living, inside you, not outside of you] and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. {Heb 12:22-24 RSV}

Isn’t that wonderful? Doesn’t that encourage your faith?

- And so, in connection with this we have **the last warning:**

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. His voice then shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain.

{Heb 12:25-27 RSV}

I believe we are in those times when everything that can be shaken is going to be shaken. What does this world depend upon? Governments, politics, administration, education, legislation? All

these things are the fundamentals of history – the things men reckoned on, rested on, and counted on to keep human life going – but every one of them is something that can be shaken. We are facing the times when God is going to allow everything to be shaken that can be shaken – that is everything visible. But what cannot be shaken? Well, he tells us:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. {Heb 12:28-29 RSV}

The kingdom of God, the rule of God in our hearts; the right of Jesus Christ to be Lord within us can never be shaken. And that is what is being tested today so that all phony is being exposed. I have never seen a time when more people who are apparently strong, virile Christians have fallen away,

and have renounced the faith in our present day. But the things that cannot be shaken will remain, and that which is based on the phony and the untrue will crumble and fall.

A few verses toward the end sum up this letter and give us the word of encouragement we need in the face of perilous times. It is at once a prayer and a blessing:

Prayer:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. {Heb 13:20-21 RSV}

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JAMES: The Activity Of Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

The New Testament falls into various sections, each dealing with specific themes. A last section, introduced by the book of Hebrews, is concerned with the single theme of faith. The whole thrust of these letters of the New Testament is to explain to us what faith is and how it works, and each letter makes its unique contribution to that theme. James is the second book, then, in this section that deals with faith.

This letter is of unique and peculiar significance to us because it comes from the one who knew more about the Lord Jesus than any other human being – at least as far as the record that is passed on to us is concerned. James, the brother of our Lord, was raised in the same home in Nazareth, grew up with the Lord Jesus, saw him through all those silent years of which we have no record, and joined with his three other brothers – Joseph, Simon, and Judas – in opposition to the Lord Jesus during the early days of his ministry. James was finally converted by the resurrection of the Lord; and the Apostle Paul tells us that after the resurrection, the Lord appeared to James (1 Cor 15:7).

Many of us would give a lot to know what happened during that time when James had looked upon Jesus as nothing more than his brother. He was one who had grave doubts that Jesus was indeed the Son of God as he claimed; once he had regarded him as a madman, and came with his mother and brothers to have him locked up – or at least go home with them, get him out of the public view. But finally, by the resurrection, he was convinced that here indeed was God manifest in the flesh – “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” {John 1:14a RSV}, and James, too, saw “his glory as of the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth,” {John 1:14b KJV}. And so he begins his letter,

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, {Jas 1:1a RSV}

That is a great testimony, isn't it, to the deity of Jesus? That this one who was his half-brother by nature should address him this way: “Our Lord Jesus Christ.” And throughout this letter, there breathes a reverence and a respect for the person of the Lord that is unequaled anywhere in the New Testament.

There has been considerable controversy as to whether James, the brother of Jesus, was the one who wrote the letter, but if you look carefully into its background, you can see that it almost certainly must be the Lord's brother who pens this letter. In the early days after the resurrection, he became the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem, and was regarded by all with reverence and respect even by the Jews – so that he gained the title, “James, the just one.” Tradition tells us, supported by Eusebius, one of the great church fathers and a respected historian, that James was finally martyred for his faith by being pushed off the pinnacle of the temple. The pinnacle was the point in the wall around the temple that jutted out over the Kidron Valley. There is a drop of about a hundred feet from the height of that wall straight down into the valley. (I once stood on that wall, on the pinnacle of the temple, and as I looked down I was reminded that this was the very place where the devil took Jesus and tempted him to jump off the pinnacle of the temple.) Eusebius tells us that in about the year 66 A.D., James the Just, the brother of our Lord, was pushed off this pinnacle by the Jews who had become angered with him for his Christian testimony. Eusebius says that the fall did not kill him, and that he managed to stumble to his

knees to pray for his murderers. So they finished the job by stoning him to death, and he joined the band of martyrs.

Now it is very evident that this letter was written during the early part of the life of the church. It comes out of that period reflected in the book of Acts, and may therefore be the earliest Christian document that we have, written perhaps even before the Gospels of Mark or Matthew.

You cannot read this letter of James without being struck by its likeness to the teaching of Jesus; in fact, if you take the Sermon on the Mount, and the letter of James, and lay them side by side, you'll see more than a dozen exact parallels. So, it is quite evident that this man James listened to the Lord Jesus and heard these messages, even though perhaps he struggled with them at the time. Also, this letter, more than any other letter in the New Testament, is characterized, like the teaching of the Lord himself, by figures of speech taken from nature. You have the waves of the sea, the animal kingdom, the forests, the fish, and others, all drawn from nature, just as the Lord Jesus himself used to do.

The theme of this letter, as I have said, is faith. If you do not have faith, you will receive nothing from God. Without faith, the book of Hebrews tells us, it is impossible to please God {cf, Heb 11:6 RSV}. Faith, therefore, is the channel by which all God's blessings come to us; and, without faith, all that you do is sin. "Whatever does not proceed from faith," says the Apostle Paul, "is sin," {Rom 14:23 RSV}. So all activity that does not stem, nor derive, from faith is sinful activity. If you are not acting out of what you believe, then what you are doing is distasteful and disgusting to God, even though it may be highly applauded by everyone around.

In this letter, then, the Apostle James is telling us several things about faith. In Chapter 1 you have a wonderful answer to the question, "What makes faith grow?" Jesus said that it does not take very much faith to start – if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, just a little bit of it, just enough to get you to act, even though you are filled with doubts in the doing of it, that is enough – that will move mountains, he said.

There are two things, James tells us, that make faith grow:

- The first is trials. This is a wonderful chapter for those who are facing trials. He said,

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness [or patience] have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. {Jas 1:2-4 RSV}

You need trials. And then he goes on to describe how to take trials. Accept them, he says, as from God, and if you lack wisdom about it, ask God to explain to you what is going on. But you have to ask in faith; you have to expect him to do this. And if you are poor, do not let that bother you – that is a trial, but it is a trial that can lead to blessing:

Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. {Jas 1:12 RSV}

As I was thinking about this – about trials – I was mentally contrasting the way these early Christians faced trials with the way we do. I was thinking particularly of the Apostle Paul. You remember that in Second Corinthians he tells us, "Five times I have received ... the forty lashes less one" {2 Cor 11:24 RSV}. On five occasions he was bound at a stake, and the Jews took their leather whip and beat him thirty-nine times across his back. So that when he wrote to the Galatians, he said, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus," {Gal 6:17b RSV}. Three times he was beaten with rods. And "Once," he said, "I was stoned," {2 Cor 11:25b RSV}. And what was his attitude in all this? Well, the wonderful thing about these early Christians is that when they went through trials, they rejoiced – they counted themselves fortunate to be considered worthy to suffer for the name of the Lord. The writer of Hebrews says, "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one," {Heb 10:34b RSV}.

I could not help but contrast that with us. We get all unhappy over finding crabgrass in

the lawn, don't we? Or if we hear that our mother-in-law is coming for a visit, it makes us almost ready to commit suicide. We become disturbed over these little things.

Not long ago, a pastor told me about a woman who came down to see him, and she wanted a divorce from her husband. But when he got to the heart of the matter, he found that she was upset because she had fixed a special luncheon for him, and had done all kinds of special extra work, expecting him to come home, and he had called up at just the last minute and said he could not come home. She was furious! And she wanted a divorce! Now what kind of an attitude is that?

God sends trials, the Scriptures say, because we need them. They teach us lessons which we could never learn otherwise, and if we did not have them, we would be weak, spindly, incomplete Christians, unable to take the great responsibilities that will be placed upon us in the day when we are with the Lord – when we enter into his kingdom and into the fullness of his service.

- Second, the instrument that makes us grow is the word:

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For is any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres, {Jas 1:22-25a RSV}

He reminds us that it is the Word of God that makes our faith grow – expressed in our actions. “Faith comes by hearing,” says the Apostle Paul, “and hearing by the word of God,” {Rom 10:17 KJV}. And I have never seen anybody grow strong in faith who neglected the reading of the Bible. How can we expect to know the great thoughts of God, the deep things of God, the underlying secrets of life, unless we spend time with the book that reveals them? There is no other source. No university in the land moves at all into this realm of unveiling the secrets of life. So, let

your faith grow by rejoicing in trial and by understanding and doing the word.

Now in Chapters 2 and 3, James answers for us the question, “How can faith be recognized?” How is it made visible? How do you see that you have faith, or that someone else has faith? And he suggests three things that are the indication of faith:

1. First, there must be no partiality nor prejudice. If a man is prejudiced against another, because of the color of his skin, or the state of his bank account, and he treats him as though he were unimportant simply because he is not wealthy or the right color, then obviously he has no faith, says James {cf, Jas 2:1-8}:

If a poor man comes into church and you say to him, “You go over there and sit in the corner;” but you bow to the wealthy man and take him down to the front and see that he has a comfortable pew, and turn to the place in the hymn book for him and fawn over him, he says, “don't link that with faith in Jesus Christ,” because the one is canceling out the other.

You cannot manifest faith that way. Faith destroys prejudice.

During a time of particularly severe racial tensions, I was privileged to speak on the subject, “The cause of racial violence” at a State College campus. I pointed out the fact that the major cause of the racial conflict we have in our land is the church of Jesus Christ. Had the church been what it ought to have been, had Christians in both the North and South actually received Negroes and others on the basis of being brothers in Christ Jesus, this whole conflict would long since have disappeared, if indeed it had arisen at all, because the church controls the attitudes of society – not by legislation, not by propaganda, but by simply being what it ought to be. And when the church failed, society failed, and thus prejudice took root deeply in our social life.

2. Second, he said, faith is made visible by actual deeds of mercy. James was eminently practical. Suppose someone shows up at your door, he says, and tells you, “I don't have anything to eat – we're starving over at our house.” And

you say, “Well, brother, I feel for you – let’s say a prayer together.” And you pray for him and say, “Now go your way – the Lord will work everything out.” He says, “You hypocrite! You call that faith? You don’t have any faith at all.”

If your faith does not lead you to share with your destitute brother, there is something desperately wrong with it. You don’t have faith at all, because the faith of Jesus Christ, faith in Jesus Christ, means that you actually have the life of the Lord Jesus. Can you imagine the Lord treating anybody who had a need in that way? Why, he would give him the coat off his back. He would do anything in order to supply the lack and the need of that individual. And can Christian compassion, therefore, shut its heart to the needs of those around, either on an emotional or a physical level? So, if you want your faith to be seen and recognized, it must manifest itself in actual deeds. This is why the Lord Jesus said that in the judgment, he will say, “I was hungry, and thirsty, and imprisoned, destitute and in need, and you did nothing about it,” {cf, Matt 25:41-46}

3. Now James devotes a whole chapter to the third way by which faith can be recognized: a controlled tongue. And what a vivid series of figures he uses to tell us what the tongue is like, “set on fire,” he says, “by hell,” {Jas 3:6b RSV}. You can tame every beast and bird and reptile, but no man by himself can control his tongue. The tongue, he says, is the member of our body most closely linked to our real nature. It shows what is motivating us, and, therefore, what you say is very determinative of what you are. It reveals what you are! And so the Apostle James makes very clear here that if you really claim to be a Christian and to have faith in Jesus Christ, something will be happening to your tongue. Faith will be reducing its sharpness and stopping its caustic bitterness; turning it off, and keeping it from lashing out in sharp reproof and criticism. Not that there is not a place for reproof among Christians, but not in a sharp, caustic, bitter, uncensored way.

Then in Chapter 4 and most of Chapter 5, James answers the question, “What happens when

faith fails?” What if you do not exercise faith? What if you are a Christian, but you do not live by faith, believing continually what the Lord Jesus has said and done? What happens?

1. First, wars and fightings break out, and the direct cause is a lack of prayer. Prayer is an example of faith. Prayer is the most perfect expression of faith, because prayer is the manifestation of dependence upon God. James traces this whole matter of wars, fightings, arguments, and disagreements among us to a lack of prayer. He says,

You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. {Jas 4:2 RSV}

That is the trouble. We fight with each other because we do not ask God for anything. We do not take from him the nature of love and compassion that he offers us. We do not choose to receive from him that sweetness of tongue that will give a soft answer back, but we would rather lash out at one another and fight with one another. So it is a direct result of the lack of faith that wars and fighting break out.

2. Then the next thing is that the love of the world will come in.

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? ... whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. {Jas 4:4 RSV}

And if you stop believing what the Scriptures say, you will find yourself being drawn to the lies and the alluring illusion of the world around. You will start thinking that “things” matter, and that keeping up with the Joneses is the most important part of your life; your money will start going in that direction; your time and thoughts will be invested in those things, and you will soon find yourself drifting into a state of concern only for this life, for the acceptance of others, your peer group, and you will live like this perfectly conformed to the

world. That is a direct result again, of a lack of faith.

3. Then there will be critical judgments. We have already seen something of this, but here he says,

Do not speak evil against one another, brethren. He that speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law ... {Jas 4:11a RSV}

That is, he has forgotten that we are to sit under the judgment of the Word of God, and the man who criticizes another has put himself above the Word of God, saying that he is the judge. Instead of letting the Word judge him, he becomes the judge of someone else.

4. Another result of lack of faith is *presumptuous assurance*:

Come now you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain" ... {Jas 4:13 RSV}

Why? Don't you know that you have no assurance for tomorrow at all, that your life is like a breath of air that is gone just like that? You ought to recognize that only God can permit plans for the future like that and carry them out. In other words, do not get to thinking you own all of life!

A young student once came to me and he said, "I don't need this Christianity. I've got all it takes to live life – I don't need God." I said, "That's strange; tell me, are you running your diaphragm right at this moment?" He said, "What do you mean?" "Well," I said, "Your diaphragm is operating – are you the one who's operating it? Have you commanded it to work?" "Well no," he said, "it takes care of itself." "No," I said, "it doesn't. Nothing takes care of itself; someone's running it. Have you ever thought how much of your body's activities operate quite apart from your will, and what you're dependent upon them for just the very next moment?"

And then I told him the story of my friend who was back in Washington, D.C. during

World War II, and he wanted to go by plane from Washington to New York. It was in the days when you needed a priority for air travel, so he went into the ticket office and said to the girl, "I want to get a ticket for New York." She said, "Do you have a priority?" And he said, "I didn't know you needed one; how do you get it?" And she said, "Well, if you work for the government or for the airlines, I could give you one." And he said, "I don't work for either one of them. But I'll tell you who I do work for – I work for the One who owns the air that your airline flies its planes through!" And she looked at him rather strangely, and said, "Well, I don't think that's good enough to get you a priority." He leaned over, and in his characteristic way, he said, "Did you ever think what would happen if my boss shut off your air for ten minutes?" She said, "Just a minute, I'll see what I can do," and in a moment she was back and gave him the priority, and said, "You can go right aboard." You can't get much higher authority than that!

5. The final thing that James brings in is that fraud and neglect come from forgetfulness:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, ... {Jas 5:1-2a RSV}

... the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; {Jas 5:4a RSV}

What makes a Christian get over-sharp in business practices? What makes him think he can cheat on his income tax? What makes him pull a shady deal in business or line up with a partner who is perhaps willing to slice things pretty thin at times? What makes a Christian do that? He forgets; he does not believe the Word of God any more. He forgets that there is a judge watching, listening, hearing everything, weighing all that he does. He forgets that the Lord Jesus is coming again and that all that men have done in secret will be shouted from the housetops. And so he goes on to encourage those who have thus defrauded to be patient and wait for the coming of the Lord, for

“the Judge is standing at the doors,” {Jas 5:9 RSV}.

And then in the final section in Chapter 5, there is a wonderful picture of early Christian fellowship. It involved four things, this chapter brings out:

- First, honesty – honesty in word, integrity.

Above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, ... {Jas 5:12a RSV}

Be dependable, be trustworthy. One of the characteristics that makes for fellowship among people is that they can count on you. Part of the fruit of the spirit is to be trustworthy.

- Then the second was confession {cf, Jas 5:13-16}. Talk to one another about your problems, he said. Pray for one another; confess your faults to one another, bear one another’s burdens, open up your hearts, take down your facades and your fences, come out from behind your masks, quit trying to pretend to be something you are not, but be what you are! And immediately, the grace of the God of truth, who loves truth, will begin to flow through your group, and it will develop a fellowship that will make the world press their nose to the glass, trying to get in.

I am convinced this is the missing element in society today. We have a lot of Christians who are living in little isolation cells; they do not want to let anybody in at all. They let nobody see what they are like, never admit to failure, never talk about any pressing problems, always screw on a smile when they get

together. You ask them how are things going, “Oh, great!” they say. But they are not great at all, and this kind of hypocrisy must come to an end. James says that God will be in your midst if you take down all these fences and be open and honest with one another.

- And then, prayer is a mighty factor in this fellowship. And he reminds us of Elijah in this verse that has been such a help to me: “The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects,” {Jas 5:16b RSV}. I do not think we Christians have any idea of the power that is committed to us in the ministry of prayer. Power to control the effects of daily life, and to quiet dissension and riot and tumult within so that, as Paul put it, “we may lead a quiet and peaceable life,” {1 Tim 2:2b RSV}.

- Finally, a concern for each other is evident:

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. {Jas 5:19-20 RSV}

What a wonderful glimpse this is into the life of the early church. No wonder these Christians turned the city of Jerusalem upside down. Under the leadership of this man James, the church grew until there was a vast multitude of believers who were just simply setting the city on its ear, they awakened a tide of resistance finally that had to move out and crush this thing lest it turn the whole earth upside down.

That is what God can do in us also, when we live as the book of James suggests.

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The Message of First Peter

by Ray C. Stedman

In the month of July in the year 64 A.D., a great fire broke out in the city of Rome and the entire city was engulfed in flames. Hundreds of public buildings were burned to the ground, hundreds of acres were blackened in the city, and thousands of homes were destroyed, so that there were thousands of the inhabitants of the city left homeless. History has concluded that the Emperor Nero set that fire in order that he might destroy the ramshackle buildings of Rome and give him room to erect some marble palaces and other monuments that he thought would establish his name in history. It was during this time, of course, that the story was born that “Nero fiddled while Rome burned,” but it has since been conclusively proved that the violin was not invented at that time. What he played is hard to tell, but it is pretty clear from some of the contemporary historians that the Emperor was seen looking over the city and enjoying the view while it was burning. There are some who claim that when the fire was put out in one part of the city, suddenly and mysteriously it was lit again, so the historians of that day seem to be almost unanimous in concluding that Nero did burn down the city.

The populace was incensed, they were ready to revolt and overthrow him, so Nero quickly looked around for a scapegoat that he could blame for the fire. There was in Rome a group of people who were just in the right situation to lend themselves to take the blame for the fire. They were called *Christians*. They followed a man named Christ, about whom strange things were said, and they themselves did very strange things. Rumors were flying all around Rome that they were cannibals, because they talked about getting together in their houses, drinking someone's blood and eating his

body. They spoke about “love feasts,” – at which they greeted one another with a holy kiss, and shared their innermost problems with each other. This soon became enlarged into stories of sexual orgies. So they were a people already under deep suspicion. When the Emperor needed a scapegoat, therefore, he started the rumor around Rome that the Christians had burned down the city.

There were a lot of people who refused to believe that, but there were some who did, and in order to enforce it the Emperor began a very serious series of persecutions against the Christians. It was during this time that Christians were dipped in tar and burned as torches to light the gardens of Nero when he threw an outdoor party. They were tied to his chariot and dragged through the streets of Rome until they were dead. They were thrown to the lions; they were tied up in leather bags and thrown into water so that when the leather bags shrank, the Christians were squeezed to death. In a hundred other delicate ways, Nero sought to impress upon them the folly of being Christians.

Now it was during this time of the outbreak of the persecution of Christians in Rome that the Apostle Peter wrote this letter. And he wrote it, most scholars believe, in Rome to “the exiles,” he says, or “the strangers in dispersion:”

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood. {1 Pet 1:1b-2a RSV}

And thus we get this beautiful and wonderful letter – what we call *The First Letter of Peter*.

You will notice that, at the close of this letter, Peter says he wrote it from Babylon. There are some who say he meant the literal Babylon on the Euphrates River, but most scholars seem quite agreed that he was using the term that was common in the Christians of that century to refer to Rome, because all of the licentiousness and idolatry and evil of Babylon had now been transferred to the capital of the Roman Empire. So it is very likely that the Apostle Peter wrote this letter from the city of Rome in about 67 A.D. And he wrote it to Christians, mostly Gentile Christians, who were scattered about in cities in the northeast province of what we now call Asia Minor, or Turkey, and to them this letter came. They were being hounded and persecuted all through the empire because of Nero's proclamation, and so the apostle wrote to encourage them in the face of their difficulties.

This, then, is one of the letters of the New Testament especially helpful to anybody who is going through some difficulty. If you are facing the problem of suffering of any kind, I would urge you to read First Peter. If you are wondering what God is doing in the world of our day and what is going to happen in the face of all the tensions and pressures and possibilities of terror that await us in the future, this is an excellent letter to read because it was written to Christians under similar circumstances.

Peter begins with the greatest fact in the life of any Christian, his relationship to Jesus Christ with the new birth. Peter says:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew ... {1 Pet 1:3a RSV}

That is the greatest thing that ever happens to anyone. When I was a boy I remember Christians giving testimony and very frequently they would say, "The greatest thing that ever happened to me was the day I met Jesus Christ." Well, I was a Christian, but down deep in my heart I did not really believe that it was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. It seemed to be a rather minor incident in my life. I did not have any great experience. I was only 10 years old when I came to know Jesus Christ and though it was a very precious thing to me, yet it did not seem to be a very important thing. There were other decisions that I would have to make a little later on that seemed more im-

portant, like what kind of work was I going to do, who was I going to marry and where would I live – a few things like this. But now as I look back over more than half a century, I can say that unquestionably, beyond a shadow of a doubt, far and above every other decision I ever made, that decision I made as a lad 10 years old was the greatest decision of my life. Everything has been related to that some way or another.

Now Peter goes on to point out here why this is true. He says that there are three things about this decision that are extremely significant, which you can get there and no place else:

- One is *a living hope*. What a word for this hopeless age! Peter says, (Verses 3-5):

... to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, {1 Pet 1:3b-4 RSV}

Did you know you had reservations in heaven already? Now some people say "That is pie in the sky by and by. That is opiate for the masses – you know, to keep us happy while we struggle along down here." That is what Karl Marx told the world. And I suppose it can be looked at that way, in a sense. Yet when you see young people who ought to be filled with a sense of life and living, lying sometimes for hours like zombies, corpses in our public parks because they have nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to live for, you can see what a living hope does. It activates us. It motivates us now. This is a great thing about Christianity. If you take away the hope of another world, another life, you destroy the meaning of this life. So Peter begins there.

- But that is not all. He says that we not only have a living hope, but *a present power*. We are kept by the power, Verse 5:

who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed ... {1 Pet 1:5a RSV}

A present power – a power that sustains us. It grips us when we are in terror or anxiety or

need and strengthens us and comes to us in spite of all the obstacles life throws at us.

- And third, *a rejoicing love*, for he says (Verse 8):

Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. {1 Pet 1:8 RSV}

I hope all of you know what he is talking about here. That kind of quiet joy that fills the heart inside simply because you know Jesus Christ. Not because of anything he does for you, but because he is, and he lives and loves you, and you love him. Even though you cannot see him you love him.

Now Peter goes on to say that all this has been predicted by the Old Testament prophets. This is not something dreamed up nor imagined – something that is cooked up in somebody's fantasmagorical pot. It is not a fable, he says a little later on, but it is the truth predicted, and it was confirmed exactly as it was predicted. It occurred that way and thus we can rest upon it. So in this way he encourages us by the fact that we have this inner witness and this outer testimony. These are the grounds upon which Christian faith always rests, in any age or at any time.

Peter goes on to show us that growing out of this there have to be certain changes in our life as a result. If this is what we are, then what we must somehow do is relate to that, or otherwise it really is not happening to us. All that, he says, and all the New Testament continually says to us is, be what you are. That is all. Just be what you are. Do not be hypocrites. That is being something that you are not. But be what you are.

There are three marks that he sets forth in this letter for these Christians and for us.

1. First he says, “Be holy.” Now what do you think when you hear that word *holy*? Do you think of someone who has been stewed in vinegar? Sour? So pious that he is always mouthing pious sayings and talking about religious things? Is this what *holiness* means to you? Well, obviously you have missed the whole meaning of it if that is what you think.

Do you know how the Old Testament refers to *holiness*? It calls it “the beauty of holiness.” And there is something beautiful about a holy person because *holiness* means “wholeness.” This is a real person. To me the ingredients of wholeness are basically first, single-mindedness. He is a person who has his eye on a goal, on a person whom he follows, and that person is so thoroughly all-important to him that he is not interested in anything that does not relate to that person. That is single-minded, dedicated. There is something attractive about that.

Any time you meet a Marine who takes pride in his outfit you can see the kind of single-mindedness I am talking about. He is proud that he is a Marine, and he walks like it, and he talks like it.

Now there is that same quality about a Christian who understands his Lord. He is holy, in the sense that he is dedicated. And then he is at peace with himself. He is not struggling with anyone, or certainly not within himself. He is at rest. He is adjusted. He does not get upset when everything around him starts crumbling apart. That is what holiness is.

Then he is interested in you. He is outgoing. He is not always thinking about himself and his likes and concerns and his comfort. But he is thinking about yours, and how you are doing. They are a most attractive kind of people to be around. I love holy people. I wish all you were holy. It would be so much fun coming to church!

2. Then Peter says, “Be fearful.” Yes, he does. (Verses 17-19):

And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, {1 Pet 1:17-19a RSV}

What does he mean “fearful”? Well, he means have an honest respect for the kind of

Being God is. Remember whom you are dealing with. You are not dealing with another man who can be fooled by your actions and attitudes. You are dealing with One who knows you more thoroughly than you know yourself, and he is no respecter of persons. You cannot buy his favor. You cannot trick him into treating you differently than he treats anyone else. You cannot become his favorite. God does not act that way. Now if you begin to play fast and loose with him, the results that he says will happen will happen to you just as surely as to anyone else.

Now that kind of a being knows us so well that it kind of frightens you, doesn't it. That is what Peter means. "Conduct yourself with fear," remembering that you are dealing with One you cannot fool. Therefore, be honest, remembering that you have been bought, not with things men use in the market, but with something that no one else could have given, the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

3. And third, as a result of belonging to him, he says, "be priests," Chapter 2, Verse 4:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices ... {1 Pet 2:4-5a RSV}

This, by the way, is the answer to the question that many people ask today. What did Jesus mean when he said to Peter, "Peter, your name is Peter, and upon that rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Now, we know that the word Peter means "rock," and the Catholic Church tells us that Jesus meant that he was going to build his church upon Peter. But Peter says, "No." He was there. He ought to know. He says, "Jesus is the rock," and every believer who comes to Christ is like a stone built upon that rock, that great underlying rock upon which God is erecting the building called the church today. But Jesus is that rock, and you are built up upon him like stones upon the great rock in order that you might be a priesthood, says Peter, in order to offer something unto

God, something that God greatly desires and wants. What is it? What can you give God that he wants that he doesn't have? Think of that. What can you and I, mere human beings in this great universe give to the One who flung the stars out into space – something he very much wants. What is it? Here Peter tells us, (Verse 9):

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. {1 Pet 2:9 RSV}

That is what God wants. He wants you to talk about what he has done for you and tell others what he is like to you. And when you do you offer a sacrifice unto God that is like a sweet-smelling offering and a savor of worship unto him.

Peter now goes on now to deal with the more practical aspects of life. He deals with how they should live their life as citizens. Here these people were living in the Roman Empire, and under this persecution, and yet they had certain obligations. In Chapter 2, Verse 11 and on, he deals with these obligations. He says as citizens submit yourself to the government and the powers that be. Verse 17:

Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear [love] God. Honor the emperor. {1 Pet 2:17 RSV}

What emperor? Nero, who drags Christians around behind his chariot and burns them as living torches in his garden? Honor the emperor? In these days when young people, even sometimes Christian young people, think they have the right to take the law into their own hands, disobey the powers that be, and do so in the name of God, ought to read a passage like that and remember that it was of the very emperor who was causing the heartache among Christians that Peter wrote these words, "Honor the emperor."

Then he talks on about servants.

Servants, be submissive to your masters. [Do not boycott them, or riot against them, or demonstrate.] ... not only to the

kind and gentle but also to the overbearing. For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. {1 Pet 2:18-19 RSV}

And then he reminds them of the example of the Lord Jesus. He says, "That is what he did." Verse 23:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; {1 Pet 2:23a RSV}

He committed himself unto the Lord.

Then he moves from that into the home. Just as the Lord took the unjust treatment that was accorded to him, he says,

Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands. {1 Pet 3:1a RSV}

– even though they are not always right.

Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives. {1 Pet 3:7a RSV}

– even though they sometimes nag you and disturb you and bother you, "bestow honor on them," just as you Christians are to honor this monstrous wretch who sits on the throne of Rome, where Peter says: so you husbands should honor your wives. Verse 8:

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind. {1 Pet 3:8 RSV}

That is the mark of a Christian in society.

Then comes this difficult passage about spirits in prison and baptism now saving you and all these things many have struggled over. But the key to that whole passage in Chapter 3 is Verse 18:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. {1 Pet 3:18a RSV}

That is the key. He did this in order that he might bring us to God. Christ underwent suffering. He came in the flesh. He died in the flesh. He did all this that he might accomplish the great end that he might bring us to God.

Now this reminds Peter of the way the gospel was preached in Noah's day and how the Spirit of

Christ, speaking through Noah, preached to the people of his day in order that he might bring them to God. But they refused, and so the ark came in as a picture of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ to carry them over the floods of judgment and bring them to God. Baptism, which is also a picture relating to the ark, now saves us just as the ark saved Noah. Baptism (not water baptism, and it says so, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but the baptism of the Spirit which puts us into the ark of safety, our Lord Jesus) is that which now saves us as an appeal to God from the clear conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you read the passage in that light, I believe you will have no difficulty with it.

So Peter concludes this matter of suffering, exhorting the Christians to remember that though they walk in honesty and faithfulness to God, not living like the Gentiles do, and all of the biblical writers say this, "You are to no longer live like the Gentiles do but you are to return good for evil." That is the idea. We are not to be concerned about our own satisfaction and our own rights. We are so concerned aren't we, that we get what we have coming. This is the spirit of our age, that we get our rights, that everything we have coming, we receive. But this is not the spirit of a Christian, and we Christians must learn that and begin to operate on that level because until we start acting like Christians, we have no testimony at all before the law. If we start insisting upon our rights, even in little ways, we cancel out what witness we have.

You have perhaps read of the story of the boy who got concerned about all the work he had to do around the house. So one morning he laid beside his mother's breakfast plate a little list of things: for mowing the lawn, \$1.00, for cleaning the room, 50 cents, for vacuuming the rug, 50 cents, and several other things and then he drew a total and put it down there and laid the bill beside his mother's plate. And she read it. She did not say anything. But the next morning he found a list beside his plate. It said: for washing your clothes, no charge; for fixing your meals, no charge; for taking care of your room, no charge, and a list of other things. And then she drew a total and wrote underneath, "No charge. Done out of love." She laid it beside his plate. That day he did everything he had to do in the house without a word of complaint. He got the point.

This is what a Christian is to do. He returns good for evil. And this letter of Peter's is to people who are undergoing real punishment.

The last section deals with life in the body of Christ. It is a wonderfully helpful section that starts with Chapter 4, Verse 7:

The end of all things is at hand: {1 Pet 4:7a RSV}

And if that was applicable to his day, think what it is for today.

... therefore ... {1 Pet 4:7b RSV}

What is the first thing now? What if the Lord came next year? What if we are at the end of the age? "The end of all things is at hand." What is the first thing that ought to be said? Well, Peter says it,

... keep sane and sober for your prayers. Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: {1 Pet 4:7c-10 RSV}

That is his program for the end of the age. It does not look tremendously impressive in the eyes of the world but it is tremendously impressive in the eyes of heaven. And this is what will accomplish the will of God –

... that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. {1 Pet 4:11b RSV}

And then he speaks about the suffering and the way to rejoice – because we share Christ's sufferings –

not to suffer as a wrongdoer but to rejoice in the fact that God is at work.

Peter then speaks of the mutual ministry of the elders to the members, and the members one to another. And he closes his letter (5:10):

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. {1 Pet 5:10 RSV}

Can you ask anything better than that?

To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen. {1 Pet 5:11 RSV}

Well, those are wonderful words, aren't they? – for people living in the close of an age. Let us take them to heart.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this look from the 1st century to us in this 20th century. We pray that these words which were true then and are still equally true today may find a response in our hearts, young and old alike. Lord, help us to remember that we are strangers and exiles. This is not our home, even though we are temporarily assigned here on duty. Help us to be faithful to you and obedient to your Word and responsive to your grace and your love until him whom we have not yet seen but love with a full heart shall welcome us and restore to us more than all we could have ever dreamed of above that which we think has been taken away. We ask in his name, Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman
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2 PETER: In The Face of Falsehood

by Ray C. Stedman

It almost seems that Second Peter was written for us today, in the present hour in which we live. Every word of it is so pertinent, so contemporary, so filled with practical advice for the day in which we find ourselves, that it is at once confirmation of the freshness and the vitality of the Word of God, which never gets out of date. It also suggests that perhaps the cycle has come full turn – that we are now living in days very similar indeed to those in the 1st century, and that the conditions we are facing in our world are almost the same in kind, if not in expanse, as the conditions that were faced then.

There is a considerable difference between Peter's two letters. The first one was full of rejoicing hope in the face of suffering. But the theme of this second letter is that of faithful truth in the face of falsehood; how to detect error, how to live in the midst of deceit, how to distinguish between right and wrong, when wrong is subtly alluring and deceptive.

First, let me give you just a brief outline of the letter. It falls into three chapters, each of which strikes a different note. In the first chapter, the apostle is giving his readers a word of exhortation on what the Christian life is all about. In the second chapter, he gives a word of warning on how to recognize and handle false teachers. And in the third chapter, he gives us a word of certainty about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the facts that underlie our faith. And then he draws a conclusion. It is a very simple outline, isn't it – a very

practical letter, as you might expect coming from such a practical, hard-headed Christian as Peter.

This letter was very likely written from the same place as the first letter, when Peter was a prisoner, perhaps of Nero of Rome. At least, it is evident that he is in great danger, because in this letter he says that he feels the time is drawing near when he is to put off his body – his tent, his habitation – to go and be with the Lord. And he says the Lord himself showed him this, as recorded for us at the close of the Gospel of John. The Lord Jesus had said to Peter that there would come a time when men would bind his hands and lead him where he did not desire to go.

Peter understood this to mean that he was to suffer and die as our Lord died, on a cross. And tradition tells us that Peter was indeed crucified, that he was so humbled by the fact that he was counted worthy to die the same kind of a death that the Lord Jesus did, that he begged his captors to crucify him upside down.

In writing to these Christians in the midst of trouble, he is not in this letter trying to encourage them with how to rejoice in the face of suffering, but rather he is trying to help them to be **true in the face of falsehood**. In this opening chapter, there is a wonderful word in the first verse; the letter is addressed,

to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours ... {2 Pet 1:1b RSV}

Think of that! We have been so tempted to think of these mighty apostles as men of such sterling character and of such abundant faith that they are far above us in their grasp of knowledge and truth, but the apostles themselves never thought of themselves that way. They regarded themselves as nothing but ordinary believers with the same equality of opportunity in faith as any other believer enjoyed.

Years ago, I ran across this expression, and it has been an encouragement to my own heart ever since: “Even the weakest believer holds in his hands all that the mightiest saint ever possessed.” That is the theme of Peter’s opening chapter. Listen to these words:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, {2 Pet 1:3a RSV}

All the necessities both for handling life and for manifesting righteousness, or godliness – godlikeness – in this world are ours. That means that everyone who has genuinely come to Jesus Christ, without exception, has all that it takes to handle all that life can throw at him.

Do you believe that? A lot of people do not; they are always looking for something more – some new experience, some different reaction, some further revelation, some outstanding feeling of some kind – and they think that without these things they can never be the kind of Christian they ought to be. But do you see how flatly Peter denies this? He says, if you come to Christ, you have him; and if you have him, you have all that God is ever going to give you. You have all power and all things that pertain to life and godliness though the knowledge of him.

Now if this is true, then there is no excuse for failure, is there? That means if we have everything in Christ, we only need to know more of him, and we will have all that it takes to solve the problem we may be confronting.

I wish I could drive that home in some practical way. To me, the great thing about being a Christian is that, in Jesus Christ, I really am finding practical answers to every problem that I am confronted with. Now, of course, when you become a Christian you do not automatically know everything in all the books in the world. But you do gain an insight and an understanding, as you grow in the

knowledge of Christ, to handle all of the difficulties, heartaches, and problems, and to understand life and yourself.

His divine power has already granted to us everything we need. But when you first come to know Christ, although you have all that it takes, you have not yet discovered it – you have not yet found all this in terms of experience. There are two channels by which it comes:

First, the promises:

... by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, {2 Pet 1:4a RSV}

These are not just mere glowing words; this is not just so much theological twaddle designed to stir your heart a bit. These are sure and certain guarantees that God has given us, that he will honor with all that he has. His very nature, his very character, his magnificence is at stake in these words; they refer to promises that are sure and certain.

Therefore, the first thing we need to do is to learn what he has promised, which means acquainting ourselves with the Scriptures. That is why it is impossible for you to find fulfillment in your life, and really discover the kind of person God wants you to be, unless you understand the Word of God.

You can take as many courses as you like, and all you will get is the accumulation of man’s knowledge with its mixture of both truth and error, with no ability to distinguish one from the other. That is why even the most educated person who does not know the Bible can make the most grievous and atrocious blunders, and it happens all the time. But if we begin to understand these great and mighty promises, then we will understand what life is all about. That is what they are for, to reveal things as they really are.

Now, notice the effect of relying on these promises:

that you may escape from the corruption that is in the world ... {2 Pet 1:4b RSV}

That sounds inviting, doesn’t it? There is so much corruption around. Corruption means anything that defiles and pollutes and destroys. How will you escape from it unless you have the truth from God? No escape is possible. We would all be caught inextricably in a mesh of lies and deceit

without the truth from God. Corruption is in the world because of passion. Three passions are at the root of all human evil:

- Lust, which means sexual passion, in a wrong sense – which destroys the body;
- Greed, which is materialism; and then
- Ambition, the pride of spirit that seeks popularity and fame and the praise of man.

Those three things are wrecking the lives of men and women all over the earth, and those are the three things which the truth of God particularly delivers us from as we understand and obey it.

Now the second avenue of discovering all of these things that are available to us is found beginning in Verse 5:

For this very reason make every effort [be diligent] to supplement your faith [literally, “to round out” your faith] with virtue [that means, basically, “the courage to face life”], and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness [patience], and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. {2 Pet 1:5-7 RSV}

Now you have all this in Christ, but you need to work at discovering it and applying it in your life. That is what we are all engaged in doing now, trying to apply these in practical terms with the people we live with and work with, and the irritating folks that are always rubbing our fur the wrong way – our in-laws, and our out-laws – no matter who they may be, we are to apply this there. And what is the result?

For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful ... {2 Pet 1:8a RSV}

as a Christian. Do you want a recipe for success as a Christian? Well, there you have it – faith and obedience. The knowledge of the promises of God and the application of them in specific situations – these will keep you from being unfruitful and ineffective.

Furthermore,

whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted; [even though he’s a Christian, he is living just like anybody else, and he has apparently forgotten that] he was cleansed from his old sins. {2 Pet 1:9 RSV}

Even his regeneration has seemingly had little effect upon him.

... be the more zealous [says the apostle] to confirm your call [make it sure] for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. {2 Pet 1:10b-11 RSV}

That means, when it comes time for you to go home, the trumpets will be blowing in glory at your entrance into that kingdom because you have found the secret of successful living.

Peter goes on now to show us the two guarantees that undergird this statement:

- First, the eyewitness account of the apostle himself: He says,

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... {2 Pet 1:16a RSV}

And then he recites an instance: He says, “I was with him on the holy mountain when he was changed before me, and I saw him – I was an eyewitness of that event – and I’m making known to you what I saw, the coming and the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. We were eyewitnesses of his majesty,” {cf, 2 Pet 1:18}

And that is where Christian faith rests – on the eyewitness accounts of men and women who were there and who simply reported what they saw and heard, and what Jesus did.

- Peter goes further to say that this is confirmed by another voice – the voice of the prophets of the Old Testament. These men wrote not by their own inspiration – they did not write their private opinions – but they wrote what they were given by the Spirit of God, and they accurately predicted events that were to follow

centuries afterward. If that is not confirmation of the truth of this thing, what could be?

Two things – eyewitnesses, and prophetic words – underlie our faith.

In the second chapter, Peter gives us a warning against certain **false teachers**. Again, this sounds as though it were written for our own hour:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, ... {2 Pet 2:1a RSV}

What a strange thing that we have reached the stage today when a great denomination is now trembling on the very verge of declaring that there is no such thing as heresy, because actually everything is true, or at least nobody is certain of anything, and therefore, how can you charge anyone with heresy.

But Peter says some will arise in church who “will bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them,” which tells us that these men are not mere atheistic antagonists of Christianity – we have always had those – but these will be men who claim to be Christians, who profess to love the Lord Jesus, who profess to be followers of Christ; yet the things that they teach will deny everything that he stood for. What echoes of some of the voices that are raised in our day!

And many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled. {2 Pet 2:2 RSV}

People will look down on those who believe the Bible as being simple-minded, ignorant folk who have no understanding of the great issues of the day, who are back in the dark ages.

And in their greed they will exploit you with false words; from of old their condemnation has not been idle, and their destruction has not been asleep. {2 Pet 2:3 RSV}

Then he passes to the certainty of the judgment on these men, and he recounts three instances from the past which prove that God knows how to handle a situation like this. Do not be alarmed when false

teachers arise and scoff at your belief. God knows what he is doing, and he will handle them.

- He did not spare the angels when they sinned, but he judged them.
- He did not spare Sodom and Gomorrah when they sinned, but he judged them; and
- He did not spare the ancient world, but he judged it in the flood.

And yet, through all of them, he preserved a remnant of integrity. Therefore, his conclusion is,

... the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment. {2 Pet 2:9 RSV}

Then follows a very vivid description of the characteristics of these false teachers:

1. First, they will be presumptuous; that is, they will be eloquent with impressive words about things having to do with life and death and salvation and other great themes, but they will really be ignorant – they will not know what they are talking about.
2. They are like animals, says Peter, who are “creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed, reviling in matters of which they are ignorant,” {2 Pet 2:12b RSV}. The second characteristic, then, is ignorance; and
3. The third is shamelessness; they will encourage licentiousness and sexual misconduct. They will openly urge people to indulge their lusts freely and shamelessly.
4. The fourth mark is that they will be greedy;

They have hearts trained in greed. {2 Pet 2:14 RSV}

For the sake of money, they will teach almost anything they think people want to hear.

5. And, finally, they are pretentious:

... uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions ... men who have barely escaped from those who live in error. {2 Pet 2:18 RSV}

And then we have this word, most illuminating in our day: They promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. Doesn't that sound like some of today's proponents of drug use, such as the so-called *mind-stretching* hallucinatory drugs? "You will experience an opening of the mind," they say, "and enter into an experience of liberty such as you have never had before." And when people try it, there is indeed a sense of freedom, but with it comes an increasing bondage that destroys. So the apostle concludes with some of the most sobering words in Scripture:

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. {2 Pet 2:20-21 RSV}

Think of this. Men who work with the Scriptures, who have in their hands the Word of God; who study it, and attempt to explain it, who hold the position of teachers of the truth – they themselves deny all they have taught and learned, and become victims of their own delusions.

The final word then, is a note of **certainty**. Do not be discouraged, he says, by this prevailing atmosphere of error. Remember that One is coming who will settle the whole thing. He speaks of the assurance of the coming of the Lord. He says there will be scoffers who will base their arguments against the second coming of Christ on the fact that all things have continued as they were since the beginning of creation.

This is a stable universe, they will say, nothing ever happens out of the ordinary; there can be no intrusion into this universe of a divine power that operates in any way differently than what you can observe around you. But, says Peter, they are

wrong. They have been wrong in the past, they will be wrong in the future.

This is not a stable universe. This universe has been upset terribly in the past, and it will be upset again. The flood is the record of the past and it points to a day in the future when the world will be destroyed again – not by water, but by fire. And in a most unusually descriptive passage here, many of our nuclear scientists who are Christians have seen a description of a nuclear explosion:

But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. {2 Pet 3:7 RSV}

And then skip to Verse 10:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. {2 Pet 3:10 RSV}

Very instructive, isn't it? Now, he says, you need to remember two things about this:

1. Remember that the past has proved what the future will be and the record of the flood is the guarantee that God is going to move as he said he would in the future. And the world that now exists is kept together by the same word as the world that existed before the flood. The one thing that keeps life operating at all is the Word of God, the authority of God. Therefore, all God needs to do is to alter things in our physical universe, and the whole thing begins to fall apart. And Peter says, if you get impatient and wonder about the time, remember this: God does not look on time as you do. A day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day; therefore, what seems to drag on endlessly for us is but a few moments for him.
2. Second, remember that God has a purpose in delaying, for which we ought to be very grateful; once God begins judgment, everyone will be included. He delays his judging hand in order to give us all a chance to think over what

life is all about. That is what the word “repentance” means; it means to think again; to take a good square look at the facts, and act upon that basis. God withholds his hand in order that men might have a chance to think things over and change their ways. Isn’t that wonderful? Aren’t you glad he waited for you?

A man told me some time ago that he was walking with a friend past a church, and on the bulletin board out in front he noticed the subject of the message for next Sunday. It was, “If I Were God,” and it started these men thinking. One of them turned to the other and said, “Do you know what I’d do if I were God? I’d just lean over the battlements of heaven and take a great big breath and blow it out of existence!” Well, we know how he feels, don’t we?

Why does God put up with the insults of men? With the violence, and the cruelty, and the injustice and the darkness, and the deviousness, and the impurity, and the shameless things that go on in our world? Why? Because he is a loving God, and he is not willing that any should perish. He waits and delays, in order that men might have a chance to think things through, and see where it is all going.

The apostle’s conclusion raises a searching question:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be? {2 Pet 3:11a RSV}

Since this is how the world is going to end, what kind of a person ought we to be right now in terms of holiness and godliness, waiting for and (this is almost incredible, isn’t it?) hastening the coming of the day of God.

How do we hasten the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ? How do we bring at last into being what men have hoped and dreamed for for centuries – a world at peace, a world of plenty, a world of blessing and quietness and joy, and unlimited opportunity for all? How do you bring about a world like that? During an election year, every politician promises this, doesn’t he? And we do not know which one to believe, because frankly, down deep, we suspect that they are all phonies – none of them can produce what they promise, because they are not getting at the heart of the problem. But this

word says that we, the people of God, have the ability to hasten the coming of this day.

How is it done, then? Three primary things are suggested in the Scriptures:

1. First, prayer: Remember what the Lord Jesus taught us to pray? “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” {Matt 6:10, Luke 11:2 KJV}. That is a prayer for hastening the day of God.
2. Second, by witnessing: This gospel of the kingdom must be preached to all the nations, and then shall the end come, says the Lord Jesus {cf, Matt 24:14}. So as we share our faith, not in a mechanical way, trying to hammer the truth into people, but in genuine love and compassion, administering to the needs of others, and speaking of a hope that enflames us and engages all our heart, we are hastening the coming of the day of God. And,
3. Third, by obedience: There is a saying among the Jews that if all of Israel would obey the Law fully for one day, the Messiah would come. What God is looking for is men and women who will be obedient, who will be His. The only freedom that men have at all is the freedom either to serve God or to serve the Devil, one or the other. That is the only choice afforded to us. And the freedom that comes from serving the Devil is only a temporary, apparent freedom which soon vanishes in a darkening despair leading to nothingness. But the freedom that the Lord Jesus provides is a growing, enriching freedom that widens out to the fullness of life. It never ends until all things are yours; all things present and things to come; the world and everything else is yours who know Jesus Christ.

Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. {2 Pet 3:14 RSV}

Then in a final P.S., he says that Paul agrees too. Those things which our beloved brother Paul has written, he says, some people twist and distort as they do the other Scriptures {cf, 2 Pet 3:15b-16}, but do not pay any attention to them.

And then he closes with two verses which I feel should be written large across the present lawlessness of our day:

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. {2 Pet 3:17-18 RSV}

Stability is based on knowledge, Peter says – knowledge of all the unchangeable truth as it is in Jesus Christ. Since we have the facts then, we must not allow ourselves to be carried away, deceived, by those who seek to undermine us. In a time of very real attacks on the truth, now as in Peter's time, we must exercise our freedom in Christ and choose to remain faithful and obedient to him.

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1 JOHN: The Fruit of Fellowship with Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

There are two of Jesus' disciples whom I would particularly like to have known in the days of their earthly life. One is Peter, and the other is John. I like these two men. I am especially impressed by the change that fellowship with the Lord Jesus produced in their lives. This is what intrigues me about these two.

Peter, as you know, was erratic, impulsive, brash. As someone has well said, "Whenever Peter enters a scene, it's always with a thud." He seems to have a gift for putting his foot in his mouth – he suffered from hoof-in-mouth disease. Yet the Lord made him a steady, stable, dependable rock, as his name implies. He became a rallying point, a gathering point for the Christians in the days of the persecutions which broke out in the 1st century. It was only because he was with the Lord, and knew the Lord. Most of the change took place after the Lord's death and resurrection, however, so we do not need to feel that it was the personal presence of Jesus that changed these men. He changed them after he died and rose again, just as he can change us.

John was the other one who was dramatically changed by our Lord. He was a young man, the youngest of all the disciples. In fact, many scholars feel that he was a teenager when he first started to follow the Lord. Perhaps he was seventeen or eighteen years of age. Along with his brother, James, he was a hot-headed young man, given to sharp and impulsive utterances with a tendency toward blowing off steam. He was probably a

loudmouth, because Jesus nicknamed him 'Son of Thunder.' That was our Lord's gentle way of labeling John's problem. He just kept the thunder rolling all the time. So our Lord called both James and John "Sons of Thunder," {Mark 3:17}. But John became the apostle of love. He was noted for his gentleness and his graciousness and his goodness. He was called "the virgin." As far as we know, he never married. There is no record that he ever did. But he was called "virgin" primarily because of the purity of his life. He became a man who was characterized by such an outstanding devotion and love for the Lord Jesus, that all his life he was singled out as the apostle of love.

Now it is this John who writes these letters to us. You may know that this first letter of John is possibly the last of the New Testament to be written. It may well have been written after the Gospel of John. It is perhaps, therefore, the last word we have from the apostles. It undoubtedly comes from near the close of the 1st century, perhaps even the year 100 A.D., as some scholars tell us. It was written from the city of Ephesus, where John spent the latter years of his life.

It was possibly written to the Christians in this city of Ephesus, who were facing (as we are) dangers and difficulties of living in a godless, pagan world, given over to the worship of sex and to licentious practices, lovers of human wisdom (as all these Greek cities were) and especially desirous of exalting man and his abilities. Now that sounds very much like our modern western world, doesn't

it? First John was written to people in this kind of situation then, and therefore it has a lot to say to us.

In one of the commentaries of First John, the author says, “The Epistle of First John defies outlining.” For many years, I would have agreed with that statement. I thought John was kind of a rambler. He just wrote on and changed the subject frequently. It did not look as if there was any rhyme or reason to his letter. But as I preached through a series of thirty-five messages on this letter, I began to see its makeup.

John is concerned about one thing, primarily, and that is *authentic Christianity*! I suppose that even as early as the close of the 1st century, some of the dullness and deadness and drabness with which Christianity has sometimes been plagued, had begun to appear. The freshness, the vitality, the newness, the excitement, the drama of the Christian faith had begun to lose its glow and its glamour. John, therefore, is led of God to call people back to the vital things, the things that make for real life. So he is concerned about an authentic Christian manifestation, and authentic Christianity is always made up of the same three elements. The body of this letter of First John is an emphasis upon the three essential things that make Christianity genuinely Christian. They are truth, righteousness, and love. Those three, held in perfect balance, are a sign of genuine Christianity. These become, therefore, the marks that John emphasizes as proof to anyone that he or she is a Christian. The letter gives us a wonderful measuring stick whereby we can test our own lives:

- How are we doing?
- Do we fulfill the qualifications?
- Do we manifest truth, righteousness and love?

There is a prelude that I will discuss in a minute, but beginning at Verse 18 of Chapter 2, and carrying on through Chapter 4, Verse 21, you have his emphasis on these three things: truth, righteousness and love.

But before he begins that, he gives us a prelude, which is really the key to the way truth, righteousness and love can be made manifest in your life. There is a relationship that is necessary. That relationship John terms **fellowship with Christ** – oneness with him, an identification of your life with

Jesus Christ. Now, if you do not have that you cannot produce righteousness, truth and love. It is impossible.

Someone has said that it is possible to search through all the writings of Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Confucius and Buddha, and other great world leaders of moral and ethical thought, to find everything that is written in the New Testament that exhorts man as to what to do. In other words, if all you need is good advice, you do not need the Bible. You can get plenty of good advice from these other religions. But one thing these other leaders do not give you is the how. How! That is what John is talking about.

How do you follow this good advice? You know the Golden Rule is not found only in the New Testament. You find an expression of the Golden Rule, always in a negative form, in other religions: “Do not do to others as you do not want them to do to you.” Ah, but in Christ you find the secret of how! It is by unity with him – union with him, fellowship with the Lord Jesus – he dwelling in you and you dwelling in him. That is what John begins to talk about.

He says from the very beginning that he has a personal experience of this. “I saw him,” he says. “I felt him. I heard him. I touched him. He was a real person; there was nothing phony or sham about him. In the fellowship of his life, I found it possible to begin to love, to walk in truth, in obedient righteousness with God,” {cf, 1 Jn 1:1-2}. That is the heart and key to this letter, as he begins with this note of fellowship with Jesus Christ.

You will notice that all through this letter he emphasizes the fact that Jesus appeared in history. That is the first theme he talks about under the heading of **truth**. The truth about Jesus is that he is God and man. He is both –

- the eternal God, linked with all the great revelations of the Old Testament that mark out the being and character of God,
- and he is man, having come in the flesh, he lived among us, was a man, suffered as a man, died as a man.

All this, so that we might share his life, his divine nature.

Now this was opposed to a philosophy that was very current in John's day. It was what we call *gnosticism*. The nearest thing to it today is Christian Science which is almost pure gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that matter is evil and spirit is good. Therefore, the spirit of man is imprisoned in an evil body; the purpose of this life is to teach us how to somehow rise above the evil of our body and release the spirit from the evil, material body, thus achieving nirvana – or heaven, or whatever you want to call it.

Now, you will notice, that is still very commonly accepted in many places. It is against that idea that John writes, and says, "Now don't follow that" because Jesus has come in truth. The truth about Jesus is that he came as God, became man, and anybody who does not say that about Jesus Christ is a liar.

The problem was that there were many people back in those days who were wonderful. They gave the appearance of being suave and gentle and thoughtful and courteous. They were not out to destroy Christianity; they were out to improve upon it. So they just dropped out, de-emphasized some of the things that the New Testament says about Jesus and emphasized others that agreed with what they wanted to teach. Thus, they attempted to make Christianity intellectually respectable.

This process is still going on today. But John says that if you give way to this, if you succumb to this kind of delusion, you will find that you have been tricked and end up not a Christian at all. You will be following a lie and become a victim of a sham and a delusion. The results of that are terrible.

In the second section, the apostle emphasized **righteousness**. Christianity is not just signing the doctrine or creed. It is not just writing your name under a statement of belief – "We believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his Son, our Lord who suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified, dead, and buried, and on the third day..." and so on. It is not that; it is more than truth; it is also righteousness. It means that your behavior changes. The emphasis of John, as with all the writers of the New Testament, is this: "Look," he says, "if you really have Jesus Christ living in you, you can't be the same person. You cannot go on living in sin, doing wrong things, ly-

ing and stealing, living in sexual immorality. You cannot do it."

You see, these Gnostics were saying, "Look, if spirit is good and matter is evil, and our bodies are matter, then the only thing that counts is the spirit. What you do with your body doesn't make any difference. So if you want to indulge the lusts of it, go ahead. It won't affect your spiritual standing with God." As a result they were turning (as Jude puts it) the grace of God into licentiousness {Jude 1:4 RSV}. People were being taught, Christians were being taught, that they could practice all the immorality of their day, and God would still treat them exactly the same. It would not change their relationship one whit. But John says,

No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. {1 Jn 3:9 RSV}

The two are incompatible. You cannot have the Holy Spirit living in you and live an unholy life. If you live the unholy life and profess to be a Christian, you are a liar, says John. He is very blunt about it.

Yet, there is still a third thing. It is easy for Christians to say today, "Well, yes, this is true. We've got to teach the truth, obey the truth, and believe the truth about Christ. And of course, we've got to stop doing the things the world is doing." That is as far as they go. Have you heard Christians get up and testify along this line? They say, "I used to smoke and drink and dance and go to the movies and play cards and gamble and all these terrible things. But I don't do any of them any more. I believe in the Lord. I've stopped all these things." They leave the impression that it ought to make everyone become a Christian, to see such a tremendous change. But what you discover, soon enough, is that people are not a bit impressed by what you have stopped doing. Not the least bit. Why, worldlings can stop doing these things if they have a good reason. And they do it. If that is the basis of your Christian testimony, you have got nothing more to say than they do. No, the world is not a bit impressed by stopping something.

What does impress them is seeing you do something they cannot do. That is **love**. That is why John says that the third mark of a genuine Christian is that he begins to love – not those that

love him (anybody can do that, is Jesus' remark) – but beginning

- to love those who do not love you,
- to treat kindly those who mistreat you,
- to return good for evil and to pray for those who spitefully use you,
- to welcome and treat kindly those who are against you and are trying to hurt you.

This is the mark, isn't it?

You no longer treat those who have needs around you with callous indifference, but you respond to them and do not shut them out of your life. John says, "If a man comes to your door and says, 'I am hungry, and I don't have anything to wear,' and you have what he needs, and you say to him, 'Well, that's all right brother. We'll pray for you. Go away and be filled and be warmed,' it is ridiculous to say that the love of God dwells in you." It is absurd. How can you say that? If you do not love your brother whom you can see, how can you say that you love God whom you don't see?" {cf, 1 Jn 4:20}. See how practical he gets in these matters?

So he emphasized that fellowship with the Lord Jesus, a oneness, a day-by-day walk with him, opening your heart to his word, letting his light shine upon you – thus letting yourself be changed by the power of Christ – will result in truth about Jesus righteousness in your personal behavior and love toward your brothers, your fellow members of the human race, as well as those fellow members of the church of God.

Then the final result, and the closing note of the letter, is **assurance**. You know things with a knowledge that is unshakable, which nobody can shatter, and no rational arguments will disturb. You know that what God has told you is true. You know that what he has revealed about the world is true. You have a continually growing certainty that underlies your life. As we read in John's closing note:

We know that one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. {1 Jn 5:18 RSV}

That is righteousness. We know, he says, that we are of God, the very nature and being of God – the God who is love – and that the whole world is in the power of the evil one. That is why they cannot love. They talk about it and they want it. They search for it, but they cannot find it – because God is love. We know that we are of God, he says,

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. {1 Jn 5:20 RSV}

What a declaration that is, in an age when everybody is telling us that you cannot know anything for sure, that nobody knows anything for certain. John says that we do. We know. We have been given an understanding.

Here is his final word and it is such an important one. One that I think ought to ring in our ears every day:

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. (1 Jn 5:21)

Why? Well, because the first and great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," {Matt 22:37b RSV}. That is the chief end of man. And idolatry is loving something else as God. What is an idol? It is a substitute God. Your God is

- what you get excited about,
- what you save your money for,
- what you spend it on,

that is your God.

What is important to you, that is your God.

Little children – you who have found the true God – keep yourselves from these secondary idols, these substitute gods that demand your attention. Give yourself, alone, to the One who can fulfill in you all your heart's desires. It is a great word, isn't it? – the word that will lead us safely through all the difficulties along our path.

Prayer:

Our Father, you know the many idols that loom before us each day: the god of pleasure; the god of selfishness; the god Narcissus, who makes us love ourselves, admire ourselves, look to ourselves; the god of love, Venus, how we follow her, Lord, and exalt her when we should not; the god Bacchus, who makes us revel in pleasure as if that were the chief end in life, as if fun were the reason for living. Lord, deliver us from these gods, these false gods, that will

rob us of our faith, of our love for humanity. Make us fall more truly in love with the Lord Jesus who alone is the only true God, who has come to give us an understanding of ourselves and the world around us, and has come to teach us righteousness and how to love with a heart that is self-giving instead of self-serving. These things we ask, Lord, in this 20th century hour, knowing that we are exposed to the same dangers that they were in the 1st century, and so desperately needing your power. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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2 JOHN: The Vital Balance

by Ray C. Stedman

The second letter of John is the only letter in the New Testament that was written to a woman. As we can gather from the letter itself, it was written to a mother with several children, perhaps a widow. It appears that she had written to the Apostle John to ask his opinion about certain problems that had come up.

Back in those days, of course, the New Testament was not available as it is to us. The leaders of the churches were dependent upon certain men, called prophets, who went from place to place, preaching the truth. Evidently some of these men had come to the home of this woman, probably in the city of Ephesus, and they had raised certain doctrinal matters which disturbed her. Not knowing quite what to do, she wrote to the Apostle John and asked for his counsel. This letter is his response to her question. As we go through this, we will see how it also answers many of the questions we have today – especially the question of how to treat people who teach wrong things.

The first six verses present the problem to us and give us John's approach in answering it:

The elder [as John terms himself] to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth, because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us for ever:

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.

I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children following the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. And now I beg you, lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, the we follow

his commandment; this is the commandment, as you have heard from the beginning, that you follow love. {2 Jn 1:1-6 RSV}

Here John is setting the stage for the answer to this lady's problem. He is gathering together two things that must be taken into consideration in facing a problem of this kind. Two outstanding words are used all through the text. What are they? Truth is the first, isn't it? – and love. Truth and love. Notice how he links these two in Verse 3:

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love. {2 Jn 1:3 RSV}

This ought to be the characteristic of Christians.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he says the same thing – that a Christian should learn to speak the truth in love {cf, Eph 4:15 RSV}. The remarkable work of a Christian life is to gather these often opposing things together and keep them in balance.

Now that is our problem as well. Many of us emphasize one at the expense of the other:

- We may emphasize truth and center upon doctrinal matters, insisting that the Scriptures be followed carefully, but at the expense of love. When we do this, we are rigid and cold and judgmental, sometimes even cruel, in the way we say things. Even though what we say is exactly right, we are trying to defend the truth of God at the expense of love.
- On the other hand, there are those of us who make the mistake of emphasizing love at the expense of truth. They feel that we should ac-

cept everyone and everything, being tolerant in all directions.

This second group reminds me of the story Dr. H. A. Ironside used to tell about the man who came to church, and on the way out, as he shook hands with the pastor one Sunday morning, he said to him, "Oh Pastor, I want to tell you what a blessing you've been to me since you've been pastor of this church. Why, when I first started here, I didn't have any regard for God, man or the devil. But since you came, I've learned to love all three."

Now the problem is to keep truth and love in balance. This is what you see so beautifully in the Lord Jesus; he walked in truth and love. He could deal in tenderness with the dissolute sinner, the outcast from society who came to him. And with a blistering word, he could scorch a Pharisee until he turned red with shame, as all the rottenness in that man's inner life was revealed. He spoke the truth and he dealt in love and he kept them in perfect balance.

John says, "When you go to handle a problem of doctrinal error, *emphasize both truth and love.*" A lot of people who read this letter miss these opening words; thus they miss the sanity of balance that pervades the letter.

In the next section, we have the answer to the lady's question:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and antichrist. Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; for he who greets him shares his wicked work. {2 Jn 1:7-11 RSV}

First, you have to recognize the nature of the error. Two things are said here that describe the fundamental types of Christian perversions. There are only two; all Christian error and heresies gather about one or the other of these:

1. There are, first of all, those who are deceived about the person of the Lord Jesus. There is one sign of the true redeemer and savior – he is the one who came from God into the world and became man. The incarnation is an essential doctrine of Christian faith. If you can trace a man's origin from his birth, and you know that he entered this human stream through the normal reproductive faculties, and he claims to be a savior, you can write it off, because he is not God's savior. And if he claims not to believe nor to accept this incarnation of the Lord Jesus, then the man is in error. No matter what else he may say, he is not speaking as the spokesman of God.

All through the New Testament letters, the mighty apostles of our Lord set this incarnation at the center of Christian theology – the Word becoming man. Everything else gathers around that, the person of the Lord Jesus. John says, if a man does not say that, no matter what else he may say, he is a deceiver. Now he may be deceived as well as being a deceiver, but he is an antichrist. He is against the doctrine of Jesus. Therefore, he is to be recognized for what he is – a man who is mistaken and trying to deceive others.

2. There is another type of error, however, that gathers around a misunderstanding or false conception of the teaching of the Lord Jesus:

Any one who goes ahead [literally, goes beyond] and does not abide in the doctrine [the teaching] of Christ does not have God. {2 Jn 1:9 RSV}

That is very revealing. That takes care of all groups that hold that the Bible is not an adequate revelation of God, and that say we need something else. Someone with such a view may be very persuasive and sincere. He may be a very great personality, but this is the test: If he does not abide in the doctrine of Christ, then he is not of God.

There are many people today who say that the teachings of the Scriptures are infantile. Modern man has grown beyond all this and can no longer accept these simplistic teachings of the Bible. The modern mind must find satisfaction in more scientific approaches. It cannot

rest upon these simple things. Do you see that that is another example of exactly what John is talking about here? Someone who goes beyond, departs from the revelation of Jesus, considering it too simple, and tries to add something to the teachings of the Word of God.

Those are the two types of error; now notice what the danger is. What will happen to you if you fall in with this kind of thing?

Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. {2 Jn 1:8 RSV}

What do you lose, as a Christian, if you get involved with cults and heresies and liberal approaches that are so widespread? Will you lose your salvation? Not if you are really born again, of course. That rests upon the work of Christ for you. You are not going to lose your place in heaven, nor your redemption, nor your part in the body of Christ. But you do lose a great deal, as John makes clear. You lose the value of your life spent here; you waste your time. You throw away precious moments and years involved in that which is utterly worthless, and which will be displayed at last as wood, hay and stubble, to be consumed in the fire of God's searching gaze. You will lose your reward, {cf, 1 Cor 3:10-15}.

All through the New Testament, this possibility is brought before us. In the book of Revelation, the Apostle John says something similar: "Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown," (Rev 3:11 RSV). These crowns are symbols of authority and honor which are given to those who have made themselves available to the work of God, to those who have given their bodies as a living sacrifice for God to work through.

If you get involved in something that is grounded upon false teaching, all your efforts are wasted. You are building nothing but an imposing facade. It may look very good, but at the end it will crumble and find no acceptance before God.

What do you do about people like this?

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; for he who greets him shares his wicked work. {2 Jn 1:10-11 RSV}

As we read this, let us remember what John has said about truth and love. It is so easy for us who are concerned about the doctrinal matters of Scripture to forsake the courtesy and charity that is expected of every Christian. We interpret a passage like this to mean that we are to slam the door in the face of anyone who offers us some of these heretical ideas, or that we are to order them out of the house the minute they bring up some kind of heretical teaching. If that were the case, it would be impossible even to have foreign students in our homes. If this is what John means, then when we discover that someone is not a Christian, we are not to let him in the house. We would be very offensive people, wouldn't we? We could never extend our friendship to those of another religion who may be visiting in our country. We would be acting in defense of the truth, but not manifesting anything of the grace of love. Well then, what does he mean?

He means that truth should be uttered in love, and love should be bounded by truth. In other words, we are not to receive these people in such a way as to imply that we are authenticating or accepting their teaching. You see, in those days motels did not exist, and inns were very few and far between. When these teachers traveled, they stayed in private homes. So when they went into a home with false teaching, and the person continued to open his home to them, he would be endorsing their doctrine. But this does not rule out the need for common courtesy, or for a gracious approach to the person, or for the meeting of emergency needs. After all, the parable of the Good Samaritan makes very clear that if someone is in need, it does not make any difference who he is, we are to help him. As long as we can make it clear that we are treating him graciously, thoughtfully, kindly, as a fellow human being, but definitely not endorsing his wrong ideas, then it is perfectly proper for us to have some kind of contact with him – even a degree of friendship. But we are not to share in his wicked work; that is the idea that John sets before us.

Notice how he underscores the importance of this in his closing verses. He says to her.

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete. {2 Jn 1:12 RSV}

It was difficult to write letters in those days. Mails were uncertain, and I suppose the Apostle John, like most of us, found it difficult to sit down and write letters. So he said, "I'm not going to write more, but ... BUT – and this is the reason for the letter – this matter is so important that I have taken the time to write it anyhow. There are a lot of other things I would like to discuss, but certainly I could not wait about this."

Then he extends greetings from the Christian family he is evidently staying with, and thus underscores the need in Christian life for both truth and love.

Let us pray that we may so speak and deal with others that we will manifest the graciousness, the gentleness of Christ. Paul says that if a brother is overtaken in a fault, or if someone has strayed from the truth, the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle and understanding {cf, Gal 6:1-5,

2 Tim 2:24-25}. This is no encouragement, then, to rigidity and narrowness and bigotry, saying hateful and reviling things.

Do you remember the nursery rhyme of the gingham dog and the calico cat? I do not remember just how it went, but I remember how it ended. They ate each other up! I am afraid that is what may happen to some of these Christian groups, so-called, in their approach to one another. Let us not be that way – rigid, judgmental, scorching. We need to display love.

But our love must not be so wide, so tolerant, that it excludes the great fact that Jesus Christ is the only way to God:

- No other one has come.
- No other savior has been sent.
- He alone is the answer to humanity's hopelessness.

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3 JOHN: A Tale Of Three Men

by Ray C. Stedman

Third John gives us an intimate glimpse into the life of the early church. It is a delightful accompaniment to the second letter, which was written to a Christian lady about how to handle the false teachers who were abroad in that day. The third letter of John was written to a Christian man about how to take care of the true teachers who were traveling about ministering the Word of God. There is thus both a contrast and a similarity in these last two letters from the pen of John.

Third John shows us something of the problem of personalities within the church, and three people are mentioned here. There is a man named Gaius, to whom this letter is written; another man named Diotrephes, and a third individual named Demetrius. These three men are like three kinds of Christians found in the church in any age. Like all the letters of the New Testament, this is a very up-to-date and relevant letter.

First, there is the man named **Gaius**: This may be one of the three Gaiuses mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, although Gaius was a common name in New Testament times, as is John. In any case, John evidently knew him, and addresses the letter to him in a warm and friendly way. We can gather from the letter that Gaius was a genial, gracious, generous individual. Three things that John says about him are important to notice:

- First, he was strong of soul; that was what warmed John's heart:

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in health;

**I know that it is well with your soul.
{3 Jn 1:2 RSV}**

That is what the Revised Standard Version has, but I think the Authorized Version is a little more accurate:

... that you may prosper in health just as you prosper in soul. {cf, 3 Jn 1:2b KJV}

That is a wonderful thing to say about someone, isn't it? "I wish you could be as strong in body as you are in spirit."

It would be interesting to apply this test to people today. If your physical appearance reflected your spiritual state, what would you look like? Would you be a robust individual – strong and virile? Or would you be a doddering weakling, barely able to move?

Well, Gaius was the sort of man about whom the Apostle John could say, "I wish your physical life were as strong as your spiritual life."

- Further, he was consistent in his actions:

I greatly rejoiced when some of the brethren arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do follow the truth. {3 Jn 1:3 RSV}

He showed the truth in his life, what impressed John was not that he knew the truth, but that he followed the truth. He lived it. He had a consistent life. He did not preach cream and live skim milk. He walked in the truth.

- And finally, he was generous in his giving:

Beloved, it is a loyal thing you do when you render any service to the brethren, especially to strangers, who have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey as befits God's service. {3 Jn 1:5-6 RSV}

One of the signs that a person has really been genuinely touched by God is that his pocketbook loosens up. His giving becomes generous, gracious, and cheerful, just as God loves. And this man is faithful (loyal) in his giving. This means that he is regular and systematic in his giving. He does not just give when his emotions are moved, but he plans his giving, and he carries it through, faithfully continuing with the work that he has promised.

It is clear, too, that he gave cheerfully, because John says he gave "as befits God's service," i.e., worthily of God. He does not want us to give because we feel we have to, or because somebody is taking a special offering, or to feel that, if we do not, we will be looked down upon by other Christians. And Gaius gives because he delights in giving.

We will come back to Verses 7 and 8 in a moment, but first let us look at this man **Diotrephes**:

I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge my authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, prating against me with evil words. And not content with that, he refuses himself to welcome the brethren, and also stops those who want to welcome them and puts them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. He who does good is of God; he who does evil has not seen God. {3 Jn 1:9-11 RSV}

This is the first example in the New Testament church of a church boss – someone who tries to run the church. He may have been an elder or a deacon or perhaps a pastor, it is difficult to tell. But it was someone who conceived of his role as that of telling everyone else in the church what to do. Now the early church apparently had some kind of a mem-

bership roll, and if Diotrephes did not like somebody, he would scratch his name off the list, and put him out of the church. And John objects to that. John indicates here that Diotrephes was guilty of four particular wrong attitudes and actions:

1. For one thing, John says that this man was guilty of slandering the apostle, "prating [preaching] against me with evil words." He refused the authority of the Apostle John. We know from other letters that the apostles had a unique role in the history of the church. They were to lay the foundations of the church, and were given the authority to settle all questions within the church. It is this apostolic word that is passed along to us in the New Testament, which is why the New Testament is so authoritative to Christians.

So here was a man who not only disregarded the authority of the Apostle John, but he even spoke against him. He said slanderous, evil things against the apostle.

2. Furthermore, he says that Diotrephes is refusing to welcome the brethren who came, when these traveling ministers who went about from place to place, speaking the truth of God, came to this congregation. Diotrephes would have nothing to do with them. He turned them aside and refused to allow them to speak in the church.

3. A third thing is that he also puts people out of the church who would have taken these men in. He indulges in what we would call today "secondary separation." He not only objected to the men who came, but he objected to those who would have received them.

This has been one of the curses of the church ever since. Because of this tendency to refuse fellowship to someone who likes someone you do not like, a wide divisiveness has come into the church, doing injury and harm beyond recall.

4. But of those three offenses, none was as severe as the thing John puts first. The most serious problem Diotrephes had was that he put himself first. He loved to be first, which is a dead give-away that he was acting in the flesh. This is always the philosophy of the flesh – me first!

Me first, and the devil take the hindmost! In doing that, he was robbing the Lord Jesus of his prerogative. It is he who has the right to pre-eminence; he should be first, but here is a man who put himself first, and that is the really serious thing.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of men like Diotrephes in the churches today, and they are always characterized by this attitude. They want to be first. They want part of the glory. They rob God of his inheritance, stealing that which alone belongs to the Almighty.

I remember reading some years ago that Dr. H. E. Robertson, an outstanding leader among the Southern Baptists and a great Greek scholar, once wrote an editorial in the denominational magazine about Diotrephes. Later, the editor reported that twenty-five deacons wrote to cancel their subscriptions, feeling personally attacked.

Now let us see what John's counsel is in this situation. Notice that he does not advise Gaius to organize a split away from the church. Rather, he says,

Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. He who does good is of God; he who does evil has not seen God. {3 Jn 1:11 RSV}

In other words, do not follow these men who want the preeminence. If you see somebody who is always jockeying for position in Christian relationships, always wanting to be in the public eye, do not follow him. He is following his own way and not that of God.

There is, finally, a third generation mentioned here, **Demetrius**, and all we know of him is what John says:

Demetrius has testimony from every one, and from the truth itself [a widely accepted and honored man]; I testify to him too, and you know my testimony is true. {3 Jn 1:12 RSV}

He is speaking here as an apostle with the gift of discernment. Now he says, "I want to underscore what everybody thinks about Demetrius. Here's a man you can trust. He is a man of the truth. He has borne testimony from all that he is to

be trusted." Evidently, Demetrius was the bearer of this letter to Gaius, and was probably one of those missionaries who traveled from place to place. I reserved Verses 7 and 8 until now to comment on Demetrius, because they describe the kind of man of which he was a sample:

For they have set out for his sake and have accepted nothing from the heathen. So we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers in the truth. {3 Jn 1:7-8 RSV}

These words describe the first group of traveling missionaries. As they went from place to place they would enjoy the hospitality of the various churches. They labored as evangelists in that area, reaching out into places where the church had not yet gone, being supported and strengthened by these various churches.

The Apostle John says three things of them. He says first that they have gone out; they have left things behind. They gave up their income and their work, and went out to obey this higher calling. Not everyone goes – that was true in the early church as it is today. There were some, such as Gaius, who were to stay to help support these men. But there were others to whom the Holy Spirit said, "Come, I've called you to a special task." Their motive is given here, too: "... for his sake." Literally, for the name's sake – the name of Jesus.

Back in Old Testament times, the Jews treated the name of God in an unique way. The name of God, *Jehovah*, which appears throughout the Old Testament, was called the "Ineffable Tetragrammaton": *Tetragrammaton* means "four letters," and *ineffable* means "unspeakable, or incommunicable." So whenever they came to these four Hebrew letters for God they did not dare speak them, so holy was the name. Even when the scribe wrote them, he would change the pen away and continue with another one. Scribes also changed their garments before they would write the sacred name, so reverently did they regard the name of God. In the famous passage of Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" {Deut 6:4 RSV}, the name occurs twice, which would have required two changes of clothes and four pens to execute.

In the New Testament, then, the name is that of Jesus. The Apostle Paul says,

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, ... {Phil 2:9-10a RSV} and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {Phil 2:11 RSV}

Concern for his name was the underlying motive for missionary work in the 1st century. It ought to be the underlying motive for missionaries today. It is not the need of people that calls us out to different places in the world to preach the gospel. Need is abundant everywhere. Everyone without Christ is in need. And sometimes the most pathetic cases are not those who have physical needs, but those who have everything materially, but who are wretched in their inner spirit.

I remember when John R. W. Stott, speaking at a conference, said that it was primarily a jealousy for the name of God, a conviction that he should not be denied what is rightfully his, that should be the great motive for missionaries – that the Lord Jesus had died for the sins of men everywhere and that he longs to have from every tribe and nation a people for his name.

Now notice the part that the people who stay home are to have:

So we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers in the truth. {3 Jn 1:8 RSV}

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, after you got to glory, God wrote "FWT" after your name, in addition to whatever other degrees you may have: Fellow Worker in the Truth. What a degree to have!

Now John closes his letter with these very personal words:

I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them. {3 Jn 1:13-15 RSV}

What an intimate little letter. It seems as though it came not only from John, but from the Lord himself. I like to read this letter as if it is reflecting what the Lord Jesus is saying to his own church. He is really saying to us, "There is much that I'd write to you about." He has written a whole book here, and he has much more to tell us about, but he says, "I'd rather not write with pen and ink. But I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face."

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we thank you that your name has lost none of its ancient power to attract and bring us to yourself. We pray that you will strengthen our hearts and encourage us to honor your name here below until we see thee face to face. We ask in your name, Amen.

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JUDE: Contending for the Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

The letter of Jude is a thunderous word from a man who refers to himself in the first verse simply as,

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James. {Jude 1:1a RSV}

That identifies him, for James was very well known as a leader in the early church in Jerusalem, and he was also the author of the Epistle of James which we have in our New Testament. But he was famous not only because he was in himself an outstanding man, but also because he was the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ – the physical half-brother of Jesus. He had grown up in the little town in Nazareth with Jesus himself.

But notice that he says nothing about this relationship in the opening of his letter, instead refers to himself as “a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In that we can see that this man who grew up with the Lord Jesus and his brother James has now learned to see Jesus no longer after the flesh, but, as he truly was, God become man. He now worships him. Jude and James had an unique experience in the Christian church, in becoming the disciples of the One with whom they grew up.

What clear testimony this gives of the deity of the Lord Jesus. If anyone would be in a position to refute the claim of Jesus of being God, it would be the brothers of Jesus. Although they did not come to believe in him until after his resurrection from the dead, nevertheless these letters constitute a seal of confirmation that the claims of the New Testament concerning Jesus Christ are valid, in that they are supported even by those who would have every reason to deny them.

I am struck, too, by the fact that Jude takes the place of second fiddle to his brother James. Often, brothers and sisters of famous personalities are disturbed by being introduced as the brother or sister of so-and-so. But Jude is quite content to say he is the brother of James. He has learned the spiritual secret that God always has a place for every one. If it helps to identify him that way, he is perfectly willing to take that place.

Then he tells us how he came to write the letter:

Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. {Jude 1:3 RSV}

He had started out to write a letter containing certain insights and understandings of the faith. Certainly he was in a position to do this, and had perhaps been pressured by others to write his memoirs and to recount what he had experienced as the brother of the Lord. He had determined to do that when news came to him of an outbreak of some false and very distasteful teaching.

He feels constrained by the Holy Spirit to stop the treatise that he was going to write, and to write a tract instead. The treatise evidently never got written, but the tract is a very valuable addition to the New Testament scripture. So he writes to them to “contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

There are some striking things about that instruction. That says:

1. First, that our faith is not something that anybody has manufactured; it was delivered to us. It is not fabricated, or worked up by a collection of individuals. It is one body of facts that is consistently delivered by authoritative persons, the apostles. It has come to us through them.
2. Furthermore, Jude says that it was once for all delivered. It was only given at one time in the history of the world. It does not need any additions. This little letter, lying as it does at the very back door of the New Testament, is a wonderfully helpful letter to use in answering the claims of the cults, -isms and false doctrines abroad today. It is my judgment that the essence of every false doctrine that has ever been expounded by anyone is answered here in this letter of Jude. For example, the Mormons tell us that the revelation that God gave us did not stop with the New Testament, but that we need new books and new revelations. But you see how clearly Jude answers this when he says, "I want you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." It was given to us through the apostles, at one particular time in history, and it does not need any additions.
3. The third thing is that it needs to be proclaimed, or contended for. Now some think that contending for the faith means to roll the Bible up into a bludgeon with which to beat people over the head. Such people feel that they need to be very contentious in contending for the faith. But this is not what Jude has in mind at all. He is simply talking about the need for proclaiming the truth.

As Charles Spurgeon used to put it: "The truth is like a lion. Whoever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose and it will defend itself." This is the way the Word of God is. If we begin to proclaim it, it will defend itself.

The reason for this counsel, as he goes on to tell us, is that there were certain false teachers who had crept into the church:

For admission has been secretly gained by some who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly persons who per-

vert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. {Jude 1:4 RSV}

What bothered Jude was that this was not an attack from outside the church; these were not pagans. These were people who professed to be Christians. They had arisen within the church and were doing two things:

First, they were changing the grace of God into license to live an immoral, sexually degraded life. They were teaching basically that it did not make any difference what you did with your body as long as your spirit was right. You could indulge the body to the full, since it was no good anyhow; it was the spirit that counted.

Second, they were saying that the grace of God is so broad that God will forgive anything you do; therefore, the more you sin, the more grace, so go to it. This same idea is being promulgated in our own day. People from within the church are saying we have progressed beyond these old-fashioned Biblical ideas against licentiousness and immorality, and that we now have a new morality. It is based on the Christian theme of love. If you love someone, they say, it does not make any difference what you do with them. Love justifies anything. This is an exact duplicate of this 1st century heresy, that called forth such condemnation from the Apostle Jude.

Let us look briefly at how Jude handles this problem. First he points out that God will not ignore this kind of thing; the judgment of this kind of person is certain. That is Jude's theme and he supplies three Biblical examples to support it:

1. To begin with, he reminds the people that when God brought the people out of Egypt, he did a great thing; well over a million people were saved by the power and right hand of God. But they were a mixed multitude, as the Old Testament tells us. While some of them were really believers, others were not. They were all delivered and they were all set free. They all went through the Red Sea and all experienced the miracles of God's fatherly care. But when they came into the wilderness, God began to choose and judge among them. Those who

murmured and complained and rejected his leadership, refusing to enter into the land, he judged. Finally, out of all the multitude that left Egypt, only two men entered into the land – Joshua and Caleb. The rest all perished in the wilderness. Their children entered in, but this was God’s way of saying that he has a way of handling those who refuse to act by faith.

2. In the second example, he reminds us of the angels who did not keep their first position. These angels lived in the very presence of God and ministered before him, serving constantly at his bidding, and yet they followed Satan in his rebellion. They came to earth and became involved with the daughters of men. Thus, they too were reserved for judgment. His point is that even angels are not excluded from judgment, when they fall through pride and lust. And pride and lust characterized these men that Jude was talking about.
3. Third, Jude reminds them of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. These two cities in the plain, down at the southern end of the Dead Sea, had fallen into the practice of homosexuality. So open, so blatant, so widely accepted was the practice, that when the angels visited Lot, the men of the city surrounded his house and ordered Lot to bring those men out so that they might have their way with them. For this, God judged that city.

Jude reminds us that God does not take these things lightly. There is a judgment provided for it. It may be sudden, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. It may be long-delayed as in the case of the angels; or it may come about in the natural course of events, as in the case of those who came out of Egypt. God is not going to ignore it.

Reading further, we see what was wrong with these men:

Yet in like manner these men in their dreamings defile the flesh, reject authority, and revile the glorious ones. {Jude 1: 8 RSV}

Verses 9 through 13 expand upon those three divisions, taking them in reverse order:

1. First, Jude takes the reviling of the glorious ones, and refers to an incident that is not recorded in our Bible. It comes from a book called *The Assumption of Moses* which was familiar to the readers of the 1st century. Many have been troubled by this because they think Jude is referring to a book that has perhaps been lost from the Bible. It has not been lost; we still have it. It, and other so-called “lost books” can be read in any reputable theological seminary library. But they are a mixture of truth and error, and what these New Testament writers sometimes do is refer back to them for some recorded instance that is true, so that what is recorded here is perfectly true, but not everything in *The Assumption of Moses* is.

A little further on in Jude’s letter, there is a quotation from the *Book of Enoch*, another book we do not find in our Bible, but which is also available today. The quotation Jude uses is truth; the entire book from which it was taken is not.

What happened is that when Moses died, Michael, the great archangel, the highest of the angels, had disputed with the devil over the body of Moses. The claim of the devil was twofold; he said he had a right to the body of Moses, first, because Moses was a murderer – he had slain an Egyptian. Second, the devil said the body of Moses belonged to him because it was in the realm of material things over which he was lord. But Michael disputed this. He claimed the body for the Lord, just as the whole of Scripture claims that our bodies are important to God. God has a plan for them as well as for the spirit.

The point he is making here is that even the archangel Michael did not speak directly to Satan when he confronted him face to face, but simply said, “The Lord rebuke you.” Jude’s argument is, if archangels, who have so much power and knowledge of truth, are careful to respect the God-given dignity of a fallen angel, then why should we, mere men, speak contemptuously of the principalities and the powers in high places? It is a thing to think about, isn’t it, when certain people today just sneer at the idea that the Scriptures present the existence of demons or Satan.

2. Now the second matter he takes up is that of rejecting authority:

Woe to them! For they walk in the way of Cain, and abandon themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error, and perish in Korah's rebellion. {Jude 1:11 RSV}

Jude is tracing the way sin, especially rebellion, develops in a life. He personifies rebellion with three Biblical men: Cain, Balaam and Korah:

He speaks of "the way of Cain," which was essentially selfishness. Cain stands forever as the man who thought only of himself, who had no concern or love for his brother, but put him to death. He looked out only for his own welfare, and Jude says that is the first step on the way to ultimate rebellion – selfishness.

The second thing was the "error of Balaam." There are two stories about Balaam in the Old Testament. In one story, a pagan king hired him to curse the children of Israel. As he was riding along on a donkey to do this, the donkey balked because he saw the angel of God blocking the way. Balaam could not see the angel, and finally the donkey had to speak with a human voice in order to rebuke the madness of this prophet, (Num 22:21-35). The thing that leaps out at you in that whole story is the greed of this man, and this is confirmed by the second story. In return for money, Balaam taught the children of Israel how to sin, (Num 31:15). He sent the pagan women among the camp to seduce the men of Israel sexually, as well as to introduce them to the worship of idols, which involved sexual rites. Thus, he became guilty of teaching others to sin. That is the error of Balaam. To teach someone else to sin is far worse than sinning yourself. Jesus said, "it would be better for him [by whom temptations come] if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin," {Luke 17:2 RSV}. That was the error of Balaam.

And the development from selfishness, through teaching someone else to sin, ends finally in the defiant rebellion of Korah: Korah and his group were the ones who said to Moses

and Aaron, "Who do you think you are, making yourselves the leaders of Israel? We are as good as you; we have as much authority as you have in Israel. What makes you think you have the right to speak for God?" {cf, Num 16:3 RSV}. Thus, he openly and blatantly challenged the God-given authority of Moses and Aaron. Do you remember what happened to them? God said, "Look, Korah and your group, you stand over there. Moses and the rest of you, stand over here. I'll show you what is going to happen." Suddenly the ground opened up beneath Korah and his group and they went down alive into the pit {see Num 16:20-35}. This was God's remarkably dramatic way of saying that defiance of God-given authority represents ultimate sin.

3. Jude goes on, and is evidently getting pretty worked up. He now tackles the third matter, "defiling the flesh." He says these people are blemishes on your love feasts, as they boldly caroused together. Now love feasts were potluck suppers. In the early church, the Christians would gather together and bring the food with them to the service on Sunday. After the service, they would all partake together, and they called this a love feast.

What a blessed name! I like potluck suppers, but I do not like the name. I am physically opposed to the first syllable and theologically opposed to the second. But love feast! Now there is a term for you!

Anyhow, these love feasts were wonderful times for fellowship for a while. But then people began to divide into cliques, and some of them kept the chicken for themselves. Others set aside the best pieces of angel food cake, and soon there was division; people began to boldly carouse together, looking after themselves. That is the mark of this kind of a person.

As Jude goes on, we can see his remarkable sense of imagery. It reminds us of James and also of the Lord Jesus in his ability to use all the events and scenes of life around him as illustrations. Listen to all of these, all describing useless people:

...waterless clouds, [promising rain, but never coming through] carried along by

winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, [not only dead in Adam, but dead in that second death – rejecting Christ] uprooted wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved forever. {Jude 1:12b-13 RSV}

Then he quotes Enoch, in that quotation I referred to above. He says that these are exactly the kind of men that were before the flood, and finally, he describes them as,

... grumblers, malcontents, following their own passions, loud-mouthed boasters, flattering people to gain advantage. {Jude 1:16 RSV}

That hurts, doesn't it? Some of us are guilty of some of these things, even though we do not fall into this classification. But now comes the positive, as Jude comes to a close:

... you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; {Jude 1:17 RSV}

They told you this would happen, so what are you going to do about it?

... you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith: {Jude 1:20a RSV}

That means study your Bible; learn what the truth is. He doesn't say to them, "Organize a counter-movement. Try to get these people thrown out of the church." He says to oppose them with the positive; learn the truth. And second:

... pray in the Holy Spirit; {Jude 1:20b RSV}

To pray in the Holy Spirit means to pray according to his teaching, and in his power, depending upon God. Study and learn what prayer is, follow the teaching of the Scripture about it. Obey the Holy Spirit in your prayer life.

Third, he says,

... keep yourselves in the love of God; {Jude 1:21a RSV}

Now some have misunderstood that to mean that it depends on us to stay in the family of God – as if your salvation depended wholly upon us. But what he is saying is, "Look, God's love is just like the sunshine, constantly shining on us. But we can put up parasols and various barriers that shut it off." Jude says we must learn how to keep walking in the experience of the love of God.

When there is no unjudged sin in your life, God's love is constantly able to warm your heart, fill your life. Of course, he loves you whether you are walking in the light or not, but if you walk in the light, you will experience that love. That is what it means to "keep yourselves in the love of God."

Finally:

... wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. {Jude 1:21b RSV}

That refers to the second coming; keep your hope sharp and bright, looking for the intervention again of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now what about others? Jude mentions three things concerning our attitudes and behavior towards other people:

... convince some, who doubt; {Jude 1:22 RSV}

Answer their arguments; reason with them. And next,

save some, by snatching them out of the fire; {Jude 1:23a RSV}

There are some with whom we need to move right in so as to try to bring them back from disaster. And then, finally,

... have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. {Jude 1:23b RSV}

That is a wise word. Be careful. There are some you cannot help yet; you are not experienced enough, or old enough yet. You are not wise enough to help these others. Even the wisest have to handle them with great fear, being very careful not to contract the disease they are trying to cure.

Now, at the end, we have this great benediction which is one of the great words of the New Testament:

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen. {Jude 1:24-25 RSV}

This too falls into three divisions:

“Now to him who is able to keep you from falling” indicates the potential in the Christian life. It does not say “Now to him who does keep you from falling,” because God does not always keep us from falling. He is able to, Jude says, but he does not always do it. We need to fall sometimes; some of us will not learn any other way. If we were not so thick-headed and stubborn, and if we would obey him, he would keep us from falling. In that sense, we never need to fall.

But even when we do fall, he is able “to present us without blemish before the presence of his glory.” The word translated “without blemish,” is the word *anomas*, which means “apart from the law.” He has so completely dealt with us that even our falls have already been handled in Christ. Therefore, after we have learned the painful lesson of it, he is free to wipe it out of the record, and to present us faultless before his glory!

And this will be done, he says, “with rejoicing.” That means we will have had a part in this too. We are also involved in the process, and when we get where we’re going, we can say, “Hallelujah! Thank God, I’ve won!” As Paul says, “I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,” {2 Tim 4:7b-8a RSV}.

Then there is the final recognition of the only God, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. To him be “glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and for ever.” That takes in everything, does it not? From the beginning, through the present to the eternal future, he is the One around whom the universe itself gathers.

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The Revelation of Jesus Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

What is it that makes us want to read the last chapter of a book first? For some reason, many people begin reading the Bible with the book of Revelation, but this is a serious mistake. This book plunges you into a confusing array of dragons and trumpets and vials and seals, with many amazing sights and sounds and visions. A person starting here might well throw the whole Bible away in frustration, unable to make head nor tail of it.

It is very significant that the book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible. And if you have read the rest of the Bible before you come to Revelation, you will be much better equipped to understand the climax of the entire revelation of God to his people.

Nevertheless, the reason many have difficulty in understanding this book lies not only in interpreting the symbols, but also in failing to take note of the suggestions that are given in the first eight verses. If you read these verses carefully and thoughtfully, you will have a tremendous key to this book. They are like certain introductory remarks often found on the title page of a book, and if you read them that way, you will be greatly helped. The title of the book is the first line:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him ... {Rev 1:1a RSV}

Notice that it is not “the revelations,” plural. The book is all about Jesus Christ, and it is his self-revelation: it was given to him by God the Father to reveal to his servants. The purpose of it is in the next line:

... to show to his servants what must soon take place; {Rev 1:1b RSV}

This book was written by the Apostle John when he was a captive on the island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, and it dates from about 95 A.D., toward the close of the 1st century. John was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, he tells us, and he began to see visions – revelations given to him by the Lord Jesus through an angel – of things which must shortly come to pass, so it is clearly a predictive book. Then you have the method by which the book was given in the next phrases, and this is very important:

... and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, {Rev 1:1c RSV}

The words, *he made it known* are a translation of a Greek word which means, “he signified it,” which is the way the King James Version has it. Or, “he sign-ified it.” He made it known by signs, by symbols.

One of the reasons symbols are used in this book is that it is dealing with things in the future, which were beyond the imaginations of men and women of the 1st century. References are made to events that are just now beginning to break in upon the world as awful realities – nuclear warfare, world-wide plagues, biological warfare. How could these be described to a generation who knew nothing about guns or machines?

When we want to try to convey some abstract thought, we often put it in symbolic form. There was a story that made the rounds a few years ago about the governor of Montana who commissioned an artist to paint the thoughts that went through the mind of General Custer at *Custer’s Last Stand*. The artist worked away for weeks and weeks, and

finally, there came the day for the unveiling of this painting. Imagine the governor's surprise when he saw a cow with a halo around its head, standing in the center of the picture, and coming over the hill was a file of Indians with sacks of cotton on their backs. The governor said, "What do you mean by this? What does this portray?" And the artist said, "Well, governor, it should be very clear. These are the thoughts that went through General Custer's mind at the battle. He is thinking, 'Holy cow! Where did all these cotton-pickin' Indians come from, anyhow?'"

Now I mean no irreverence, but this is a very clear description of the need to resort to symbolic language when you are describing something that lies outside the experience of another, which is what we have in the book of the Revelation.

Another helpful thing to understand about these symbols is that every one of them has been taken from someplace else in the Bible. They are not suddenly introduced to us; they are, for the most part, picked up from other parts of Scripture and reused in a consistent manner here in the book of Revelation.

Now the third thing on this "title page" is a special blessing for those who read this book. I think the Holy Spirit knew that it would be difficult for many, and so these words are added,

Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near. {Rev 1:3 RSV}

Have you ever qualified for that blessing? This book is written for that purpose.

Now the time of these events is suggested in the phrase, "the time is near" (Vs 3); that is, the events of this book began shortly after John wrote. Then we have the destination of the book:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: {Rev 1:4a RSV}

The first part of the book is a collection of letters specifically addressed to seven churches that form a rough circle in what is now called Asia Minor. There were more than seven churches in that district, but these seven were selected because they are representative, not only of that day, but also of all churches of any day, and of the whole age of the church, from beginning to end.

Then the author, or authors, of this book is given to us:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. {Rev 1:4b-5a RSV}

There is the triune God: the Father in his eternal sovereignty; the seven spirits, signifying the Holy Spirit in his seven-fold plenitude of power; and Jesus Christ, the faithful and true witness. They are united in giving us this amazing prediction.

Next is the dedication, similar to the dedication found in many books of any age:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. {Rev 1:5b-6 RSV}

Here is the One who by his acts has laid the foundation for all human blessing, and it is to him this book is dedicated.

Then the subject, the general theme of the book, is introduced:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. {Rev 1:7 RSV}

This is a book about the second coming of Jesus Christ; how it will be accomplished, what will happen on earth that will produce these events, and what will be the result after he comes.

And finally, the signature of the book, the personal signature of the author:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. {Rev 1:8 RSV}

Bear in mind that when this was being written the church was being persecuted. This was during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who was one of the most vicious persecutors of the

church, a man who declared himself to be the lord and god of the Roman people. Therefore, these Christians badly needed some encouragement, and here, in effect, is the personal assurance of God, saying, “Don’t worry, I’m the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the A and the Z, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty One.”

One other thing about this first chapter, and then we will look at the book in general. The basic plan of the book is given in Verse 19; John is told:

Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. {Rev 1:19 RSV}

There are three divisions of the book of Revelation: the things John saw, which occupy Chapter 1; the things which are (which existed in his day) – the seven churches, which occupy Chapters 2 and 3; and then, beginning with Chapter 4, there is a long section which deals with things which are “hereafter.”

I believe that means “after the church is gone.” While Chapters 2 and 3 cover the whole present age, the latter part of the book deals with that final culmination of human events referred to in other places in the Bible as ‘the great tribulation,’ or ‘the time of the end,’ or Daniel’s ‘seventieth week’ – a period of seven years in which all that has been happening in the cauldron of human events suddenly sweeps to a startling conclusion. And that conclusion is traced for us here in the book of the Revelation. All the frightening turbulence of our own day is moving toward this event. And all that has been happening for twenty centuries of human history has been moving to produce this one event.

Now we will touch briefly on some of the highlights of this program.

First there were the letters to **the seven churches**: As I mentioned earlier, these churches were representative of individual churches of any given age, and furthermore, they represent a process in the history of the church.

1. The letter to the church in Ephesus, for example, is about a church which is outwardly successful, but was beginning to lose its first love, that underlying motivation that is so necessary for Christians.
2. The next church is the church in Smyrna, which means “crushed,” which exactly describes this church. And persecution would hang over the church during the general period from the 2nd century to the time of Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor of Rome, in 320 A.D.
3. Smyrna is followed by the church in Pergamum, which means “married.” The trouble in this church was that the church had married the world. The two were trying to get along together. There was an infiltration of all the attitudes and value systems of an unbelieving world into the processes of the church. And this well reflects that period in church history from the rise of Constantine, who made Christianity the popular religion of the day, up to the full rise of the papal church in about the 7th century.
4. That is followed by the church in Thyatira. In this church spiritual adultery was going on, and the letter is a very accurate description of what is now called the Dark Ages of the church – the period when the church lost its zeal, its purity, its doctrines, became infiltrated with a great deal of superstition and paganism, and lost most of its power. This dark age lasted from the 7th century to early in the 16th century, and the time of the Reformation.
5. Then there is the church in Sardis, which is a picture of a church which has recovered much of its truth, but seriously lacks in vitality. This is a picture of the period of the Reformation. Although the Reformation churches began in a flaming fire of zeal, they soon died down and whitened to the ashes of a dead orthodoxy.
6. This is followed by the church of Philadelphia, of which the Lord has nothing evil to say, nothing to correct. He commends it because it is true and faithful to the word. It has a little strength, he says, and this pictures the church age of the 19th century, when the church is awakened and thrust out into the far corners of the earth in the great missionary movement of the last century.

7. The last church is the church of Laodicea, the rich church, the church that says, “we don’t need anything from God at all. We’ve got money, influence, power; that’s all we need.” And God says, “You blind fools! Don’t you know you don’t have anything; that you are wretched and poor, pitiable and blind? I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire.” And he pictures himself standing outside the door of the church, knocking for admittance. If, as I have suggested, these letters outline the record of history, then it appears that we are in Laodicean times.

Now beginning at Chapter 4, a change takes place. Notice he says again what is a key word in this book. As he was “in the Spirit” in Chapter 1, so he says here:

At once I was in the Spirit and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! {Rev 4:2 RSV}

The scene shifts now from earth to heaven. Now that does not mean somewhere out in space. In the Bible, heaven is really the realm of the invisibilities – another dimension, if you like, wherein God reigns hidden from our eyes but present among us – a spiritual kingdom which surrounds us on every side, but which we cannot taste or touch or see. And yet it is very real.

This kingdom was opened to John and he saw a throne, the One who sat upon it, and immediately he knew who it was – he did not need to be told. It was the throne of God, and God was in control of all history. What John saw here is a remarkable vision of the powerlessness and the weakness of man, but the greatness and the might of God. John saw a throne, and then he saw a Lamb standing in front of the throne, a Lamb with its throat cut. That may seem a strange symbol for the Son of God, but it is a very apt one – a Lamb that had been slaughtered. And somehow, as John watched, that Lamb turned into a Lion, and John saw that the Lion, who was the Lamb who had been slaughtered, was also the King of all.

He stood before the One seated upon the throne, who held in his hand a little book, a book that is very significant in the book of Revelation; it is the program of God for the establishment of his kingdom on earth. In heaven he rules unchal-

lenged; on earth his will is constantly being challenged by pigmy men who dare to lift their fists against the authority of God. But he is going to change all that, and he is going to do it by the Lamb who is the Lion, who alone has the right to take the book (actually, a scroll) and unfold it.

And as the seven seals of this book are loosened, the scroll unrolls until at last what is written on it is plain to all. John weeps as he first sees the scroll, thinking that no one has the right to open it, but then he sees the Son of Man and he knows that he alone has the right to unfold the scroll that will produce God’s kingdom on earth.

As the scroll unfolds, we see that there are **seven seals**. The number seven appears frequently in this book. We have already seen the seven churches, and now there are the seven seals, each one revealing a new power at work on earth. These are followed by seven trumpets, and then seven vials, or bowls, of the wrath of God. Let us look briefly at how these fit together:

1. In Chapter 6 we read about the beginning of this period of seven years which, the prophet Daniel tells us, is going to be the culmination of history, toward which all the events of our present day are moving. That seven years will be introduced by a worldwide preaching of the gospel (as we learn from our Lord’s talk to the disciples on the Mount of Olives).

In the book of Revelation, the church as a unit is viewed first, followed by historical events concerning the rest of the world. In light of this, I believe the church is caught up to be with the Lord prior to the period of seven years’ tribulation, and that the first event of that age is the worldwide preaching of the gospel, symbolized by the first of these seven seals:

And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. {Rev 6:2 RSV}

White is always the color of divine being, representing purity and holiness. And the bow speaks of conquering; here is the conquering of the gospel. Jesus had predicted this when he said, “This gospel of the kingdom will be

preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come," {Matt 24:14 RSV}.

2. The second seal means war; John said,

And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword. {Rev 6:4 RSV}

Might not that great sword symbolize the terrible power of the nuclear bomb, released upon humanity?

3. This is the second thing to come, John says, followed immediately by the third horseman, symbolizing famine, which is inevitable in the wake of worldwide war.
4. The fourth horseman is calamitous death – death by four means:

And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth. {Rev 6:8 RSV}

Death was on the horse, and Hades followed with the hearse, right behind.

Now what John is seeing in these seven seals are the forces at work in humanity to produce the events of history in these last days. Human power is therefore prominent throughout this time, and we see what God allows to happen by the force and power of human beings.

5. The fifth seal is an expression of the inward power of mankind, the prayers of the martyrs.
6. This is followed by cosmic disturbances, which provide a key to the entire book:

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to

the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. {Rev 6:12-14 RSV}

The earthquake here gives us a clue to understanding this book. The final event previewed here in the sixth seal, is always marked by the great earthquake, hail, and fire. That is the end of the seven-year period, described by Jesus when he said, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven," {Matt. 24:29b RSV}. This will happen just before the return of Jesus Christ with his church back to earth.

7. The seventh seal summarizes the events of the last half of this seven-year period, unfolded in Chapters 10 and 11, where we again encounter the earthquake when the seventh trumpet sounds:

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, loud noises, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail. {Rev 11:19 RSV}

Chapters 12, 13, and 14 introduce to us the great actors in the scene on earth:

First of all, *a woman* who is recognizable as Israel brings forth a manchild, whom history has already informed us is the Son of God. Against him in a great conflict are arrayed the angels of the devil and the great dragon called Satan. As John watches, a beast rises up out of the sea, and John was given to recognize that the beast was a form of human government linked to Rome, the fourth great world kingdom spoken of by Daniel. In some form, the Roman Empire is to exist until the end of time. (If you look at our western world, I think you can see how true that is. Every nation of the western hemisphere was settled by a member nation of the Roman Empire. We are Roman to the core; the whole western world is Roman in its thought, philosophy, and attitude.) Associated with this beast out of the sea is another beast, or religious leader, which rises out of the earth and whom many link with the antichrist.

Chapters 14, 15, and 16 by and large contain the description of *the vials* of the wrath of God, which are exactly the same as those terrible judgments of which Jesus spoke when he said the sun would be darkened, the moon turned to blood, and God's wrath would be poured out upon the earth.

And in the latter part of Chapter 16 and continuing on through Chapters 17 and 18, you find the judgment of the great religious harlot called "mystery Babylon the great." Now, Babylon was the source of ancient idolatry, and it is a picture of what we might call religious godlessness – that which looks godly but in its essence is actually godless; a religion which outwardly commands the power and attention of men, but which inwardly is devoted to trying to exercise political power by use of religious authority. Now if you read this through carefully I think you will see that this mystery Babylon is not any one system, or denomination, but rather an attitude that permeates the entire church. Wherever you find anyone acting religiously, trying thereby to gain political power or authority, you have Babylonianism, and it is found in all churches. As Jesus said, referring to the tares sown among the wheat, "Let both grow together until the harvest," {Matt 13:30a RSV}.

And in Chapter 19 you have *the harvest*, which was predicted in Chapter 14:

Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." {Rev 14:14-15 RSV}

That harvest actually occurs, as described in Chapter 19, when Jesus Christ returns to earth:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is the Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white

horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; {Rev 19:11-15a RSV}

By this time all the nations of the earth have gathered together in that battlefield called Armageddon, in the land of Israel, and it is there that the son of God appears with the armies of heaven. Now at last, all the supernatural forces, which men have long denied, suddenly reveal themselves to human eyes in such a way as to eliminate all the opposition of entrenched evil against the will and authority of God.

The book closes as the Son of God sets up his kingdom on earth, as he had promised. After the judgment of the dead there comes a new heaven and a new earth, and the city of God coming down out of heaven, where God makes his habitation with men. Remember the prayer? "Thy kingdom come, ... on earth as it is in heaven," {Matt 6:10 RSV}.

This city can only be described in negative terms. John saw no temple in it, for it did not need a temple, nor did it need the sun or moon to shine upon it. The light within it was the presence of God himself. And its gates shall never be shut by day or by night; a whole universe is at last cleansed of the rebellion of man, and there is nothing to be feared. All the beautiful dream of the prophets is to be fulfilled, where men shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and never make war anymore.

Finally, we are admonished to wait for the coming, to work for it, to be diligent and faithful and obedient until the Son of God comes. This is a book of extreme optimism. Although it paints a dark, dark picture, it does not stop there; it looks on beyond to the final victory of God, even more sure than tomorrow's sun.

C. S. Lewis has written these significant words:

God is going to invade this earth in force. But what's the good of saying you're on his side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else, something it never entered your head to conceive comes crashing in. Something so beautiful to us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left. This time it will be God without disguise; some-

thing so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love, or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down, when it's become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realize it or not. Now, today, in this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever; we must take it or leave it.

There is a great deal of encouragement in this book. It is a book that will stiffen your back when things are happening in human history that frighten you. It will give you great comfort and encouragement, if you know the Lord of it. But it is also a solemn book, designed to make us understand that the One who is unrolling the scroll is the One

who was once here and died on Calvary's cross, a lamb led to slaughter, so that he might win the right to be King of all the earth.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for telling us the truth, revealing it to us through John. Help us in these days to hold high the vision of this blessed One who is to come into the very world which his hands have made, and in which he once died upon a cross, and claim it for himself. What a day that will be for him when he who once was rejected shall be acknowledged everywhere as the rightful Lord of earth. We thank you in his name. Amen.

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