

Truth On Fire

The Pastor's Pen Archives—1999

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A No-Risk Proposition for Tithers

Malachi, the last prophetic voice that Israel would hear prior to the coming of Christ, asked a rather amazing and penetrating question of his nation. The inquiry, as recorded in Malachi 3:8, goes like this: "*Will a man rob God?*" In my mind, there are two issues to consider. The first is motivation. Is it conceivable that a man would consciously withhold from God that which is rightfully His? The second is one of possibility. Since God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, and has sovereign ownership rights to every molecule in His universe, is it even possible to consider that man could wrest anything from Him?

In strictly human and logical terms, the robbery of God is patently impossible. But God had said through His prophet: "*Yet ye have robbed me.*" Perhaps the aforementioned possibility issue was the reasoning of the nation, inasmuch as they replied: "*Wherein have we robbed thee?*" They expressed bewilderment as to how this was possible. The answer was immediately forthcoming: "*In tithes and offerings.*"

We must understand that the tithe principle predates the tithing instructions contained in the Law of Moses. In Genesis, when Abraham returned from the rescue of his nephew Lot, he gave tithes to Melchizedek, priest of the most high God and king of Salem, who had blessed him (Genesis 14:20). Abraham made reference to "*the most high God*" as the "*possessor of heaven and earth*" (14:22). These tithes were an expression of Abraham's thankfulness to God for his providential blessing as well as an acknowledgement of God's ownership of all that he possessed. These two motivations—thankfulness and acknowledgement—should characterize our giving in response to the grace given us in Jesus Christ.

Malachi further declared that the nation's robbery of God had brought a curse upon them (3:9). The prophet Haggai also confronted this sin when the Temple (which was in the process of being rebuilt) was being neglected for the people's personal security and comfort. He said: "*Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag full of holes*" (1:6). This is what a child of God can expect in the financial and material realms when he robs God through selfishness and lack of gratitude.

But Malachi's prophecy was not totally negative. In fact, God is always more positive than negative, and issued a promise for those who would "*prove*" (put to the test) the Lord of hosts (3:10). The Lord said He would open the windows of heaven, and "*pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.*"

The Lord issued a no-risk proposition to tithers. Have you made a tithing commitment to the Lord Jesus for the support of His work? And more to the point, is it possible to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a thief at the same time?

The Necessity of Vision

I have had a particular verse of Scripture on my mind the last few weeks. Like so many Bible verses, it is more often quoted than believed. I find myself going back to favorite portions of the Bible from time to time, and measuring myself against them. I ask myself, "To what degree is my life conforming to this truth that I discovered 25 years ago?" At times the answer finds me wanting! The next question is, "What am I going to do about it?" The answer to this query is critical inasmuch as it determines how far I go with God!

The truth at issue is Proverbs 29:18--"*Where there is no vision, the people perish; but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.*" The word "*vision*" means revelation. The Hebrew root means "a sight." What is in view, however, is mental (not physical) sight. It speaks of the mental apprehension of truth that enlightens the mind and governs the conduct. Vision cuts through the clutter of life! Vision clarifies! Vision motivates! Vision brings the will of God into focus, and makes it a priority of life!

The absence of vision is costly! Where there is no vision "*the people perish.*" The Hebrew word for "perish" means to cast off restraint. The "people" are God's people, but in principle refers to any people without the governing influence of God's truth upon their lives. Such was the condition of Israel prior to Samuel when "*the Word of God was precious (rare) in those days; and there was no open vision (revelation).*" The lack of a prophetic voice left the people without the governing power of truth, and every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Absence of vision obscures the will of God, and frustrates the life. It renders the Christian aimless and powerless in his or her spiritual walk.

Vision is the fuel of discipleship. Our journey with God can be measured in terms of our mental grasp of truth, and the degree to which it brings us into conformity to the will of God. It is more than church attendance, tithing, and religious duty. It is a daily ingestion of truth that instructs the mind, cleanses the heart, and translates into godly attitudes and actions.

Vision means everything to a disciple and his church. As our verse says, "*He that keepeth the law, happy is he.*" No church is any stronger than the collective vision of its members. What are we going to do about it?

Nothing Is Too Hard for the Lord

In a recent Sunday evening service we looked at the question: "*Is there anything too hard for the Lord?*" (Genesis 18:14). This was the inquiry posed by the Lord to Abraham and Sarah, who had been promised a son in their old age. God reminded them that it was no stretch of His ability to perform what He had promised against all earthly odds.

This concept surfaced again in Jeremiah 32. Here it had to do with judgment to come upon the nation of Israel. Jeremiah was preaching captivity and destruction at the hands of Babylon's king Nebuchadnezzar. God's description of the ruin was that of absolute devastation. Yet a promise of restoration and hope was offered by the Lord in 32:15: "*Houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land.*"

Upon hearing this promise, and in reflection upon God's unlimited ability to turn hopeless situations into triumph, Jeremiah broke into spontaneous prayer. That prayer is recorded in 32:16-25, in which the prophet says, "*and there is nothing too hard for thee*" (32:17). God responded to Jeremiah by once again affirming His power both to bring the rebellious to their knees, and to restore the chastened nation to their former glory! In 32:27, the Lord asked, "*Is there anything too hard for me?*"

The lesson from these passages is clear. God is sovereign! Nothing stands in His way when He determines to act. Yet there are two observations that intrigue me about this situation with the prophet Jeremiah. First, he is shut up in king Zedekiah's prison when these revelations come. Secondly, he is challenged to seek even more profound revelations (33:3) while still in prison. The Lord said, "*Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.*"

I conclude from his situation that God often chooses difficult circumstances to reveal great truths about Himself, and His will for us. Yet the disclosure is never complete. There are always additional great and mighty things to learn, to understand, to grasp. The next time you hear someone remark how the church is struggling, how people are struggling, or how tough this or that situation is, just remember Jeremiah, and consider that perhaps an opportunity is at hand for a great and mighty work of God!

The Path to Understanding

This last Wednesday evening we began a study of the prayer offered by Daniel in 9:1-23. Central to our study was the Biblical concept of "understanding." There are three (3) Hebrew words most often used in the Old Testament for understanding. All three come from the same root. The first means "to separate (mentally) and distinguish." It speaks of the ability to discern or discriminate (in the good sense of the word) between bad and good, and between good and best. The second refers to "argumentative intelligence." In addition to discernment, it connotes the ability to defend (on a Biblical basis) the views one takes, and the decisions one makes. The third speaks of "circumspection." This is the ability to discern the nature of events taking place around you, and act with spiritual intelligence. Understanding is absolutely critical to our motivation, our priorities, our decision-making abilities, and our life direction. That's why Solomon said: "*Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting get understanding*" (Proverbs 4:7).

How did Daniel get his understanding? First, Daniel said he understood *by books* (9:2). He was studying Jeremiah's prophecy (25:11-12) regarding the seventy years of Jerusalem's desolation. Reckoning dates and records caused him to understand that those years were nearly completed. God was about to intervene in history, and turn the captivity of His people. As a result of knowing the mind and intent of God, Daniel set his face to pray earnestly for, and in concert with, the will of God.

Secondly, Daniel also connected turning from iniquities with understanding God's truth (9:13). The former must accompany the latter. Daniel was burdened about Israel repeating the failures of the past. Thus he confessed his own sin, and the sin of his people. It was time for a fresh start, and a clean slate, with God!

Thirdly, Daniel was also given skill and understanding (9:22) by the archangel Gabriel, the heavenly emissary dispatched in response to his petition. Spiritual enlightenment and understanding are gifts from God, and come down from above. Heaven's help in the pursuit of truth and understanding is available to the humble of heart.

Daniel set his face toward God in prayer. He understood by Scripture the intent and purpose of God. He identified and deplored iniquity as the major roadblock to spiritual understanding. He received a touch from the heavenly messenger to further assist him in his quest for truth. May the Lord Jesus enable us as a church to go and do likewise!

Forgiveness and Life

God fashioned man in His own image and likeness on the sixth and final day of Creation. He was the pinnacle of God's handiwork. In his innocent state he enjoyed unfettered freedom and fellowship with God. One restriction (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) was placed upon the man and his mate. This one prohibition became the focal point of the first temptation. The indulgence of the first couple cost them their innocence.

According to Romans 5:12, the entire human race sinned with Adam. Spiritual (and ultimately physical) death passed upon all men as a result. Therefore Cain, the first child, his brother Abel, and every other baby born into this world until the present hour, came into this world "*dead in trespasses and sins*" (Ephesians 2:1).

Sin is man's greatest enemy, and spiritual birth (rebirth) his greatest need. This is why our Lord's dialogue with Nicodemus is so critical to the issue of salvation. Here was a man immersed in religion, and the law of God. His morality and ethics were sound. He discerned that Israel had a miracle-working man of God on its hands, and that talk of the "kingdom" should be taken seriously. Jesus referred to him as "a master" (literally "the" master) of Israel, but lamented the fact that he knew nothing about things pertaining to the new birth. Nicodemus was spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, notwithstanding a long list of notable achievements.

Forgiveness and life! These two precious commodities are the crux of salvation. Nicodemus lacked both! His religion had not secured his redemption! His expertise in the law had not produced an experience of life! Finally, under cover of night and a curiosity wrought of the Spirit, he sought out the One Who had the authority to grant both forgiveness and life in abundance.

How do you stand on these two matters? Can you say with assurance that both are yours in Christ? Do you know that you know that Christ is yours, and you are His? What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his own soul? Without forgiveness and life, the soul is lost! If you have any doubts about the eternal state of your soul, seek the Lord Jesus while He may be found!

The True Source of Motivation

One of the great challenges faced by every pastor and Christian leader is that of motivating God's people. God's Word directs us to pray, to assemble ourselves regularly with the saints, to give tithes and offerings in financial support of God's work, to employ our spiritual gifts in His service, and to evangelize the lost. But how do you "get" people to do these things?

When Biblical marching orders become optional, and the spirit of convenience prevails, the church becomes ripe for decline. Many see this as a reflection of pastoral leadership, and grow restless for a change. Bewildered pastors also struggle with this issue, and wonder whether true spiritual motivation is possible. They may question their own motivation. They may conclude this is not possible in their particular church pasture, and so begin to look for a "greener pasture" where people are better motivated. The evidence, however, suggests that pastoral rotations seldom solve motivational problems.

There is an entire industry out there in Christendom which markets programs designed to keep Christians "interested" in the church. Prime targets are churches with attendance numbers and offerings in a state of stagnancy or decline, which often subscribe to these innovations. Southern Baptists have a program for everything. Many SBC churches evaluate their pastors strictly by the degree to which they subscribe to these programs. The bottom line, however, remains the same. Most Baptists prefer convenience to commitment, and appear to be immune to motivational programs.

What is the answer? The love of Christ! His love for us, and our reciprocation of that love! The apostle Paul made this statement to the Corinthians: *"For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again"* (2 Cor. 5:14-15). The word "constraineth" means to hold together. The Cross of Jesus Christ, and what it accomplished for sinners, was the secret to Paul's motivation, and that of his co-workers. It was the motivation for unselfish and enthusiastic service!

No pastor or program can provide this kind of motivation to any church! God's people capture this on an individual basis, and are driven by the significance of the Cross. This zeal and vision is wrought internally by the Spirit in response to the preached and obeyed Word! This is God's plan "A" for motivating His people! There is no plan "B"!

I determined long ago that, if preaching the truth to God's people was insufficient to produce motivation and faithfulness, I would never resort to a plan "B", whatever that might be.

One last thought. What's driving you these days?

Columbine Tragedy: The Real Answer

Columbine. I had never heard this word before last Tuesday. It is now etched in my mind along with other dark images, such as Waco. Too bad! The columbine is a graceful plant that grows wild in Europe, Asia, and North America. Gardeners use it as a border plant because of its vivid color. The wild columbine produces red and yellow flowers. The Rocky Mountain columbine bears blue and white flowers, and is the state flower of Colorado. Bees and hummingbirds love the columbine for its large amounts of nectar. They are in full bloom from April to July.

Columbine High School was named for this brilliant flower, perhaps with the intent that the character of its students would reflect the flower's attributes. Now there is a debate whether students should or could be sent back to this building again. What irony!

Students interviewed in the aftermath of the bloodletting described the perpetrators as part of the "Trenchcoat Mafia". This sinister title led me to expect rough looking characters with solemn faces. When the pictures of the suspects were finally shown, they looked like typical All-American teens that attended Church every Sunday, and Youth Camp every summer. Once again America is baffled. What went wrong, and how could such heinous acts be planned and executed by those so young?

Expect social experts and the media to focus upon external influences in their analysis of this atrocity. In our study of I John, we pointed out how Gnostic concepts have been adopted by both cults and society. One of these portrays man as basically good, and his environment as evil (the main source of his problems). This is the mindset of liberal humanists who dominate our government, our media, and our universities. These two teens will likely be viewed as victims themselves, who finally retaliated against years of ridicule and rejection by their peers.

The Christian understands that the issue is internal. It is the will of man that is evil, not his environment. Jesus said: *"For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, and evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things com from within, and defile the man"* (Mark 7:21-23). This tragedy was spawned by evil in human hearts, including those of the suspects, the students who mocked them, and the parents who neglected them. Shall we include fundamental churches that never made an effort to reach them? There is, after all, only one remedy for sin in the heart...the blood of Christ!

Let's End the Speculation

WWJD? Perhaps you have seen these four letters in prominent display on a wristband, a bracelet, a necklace, a lapel button, a Bible cover, a bumper sticker, a belt buckle, a ring, a coffee cup, or perhaps a "Witness Wear" T-shirt. Most (if not all) of us recognize this acronym as representing the question, "What Would Jesus Do?" Its design is to provoke the spiritual thought processes in any given situation as to how the Lord Jesus Christ would respond if faced with the same set of circumstances.

This issue is often raised in counseling sessions where a Christian is struggling with God's will for his or her life. It is also a valid approach to everyday decision-making. I believe it is legitimate to ask this question, so long as the one asking it searches the Scriptures to find the definitive answer, and ends all speculation.

The potential problem with all such devices and testimonials is that they become nothing more than religious fads. They convey an appearance of spirituality and good intent on the surface, but are seldom reflective of true spiritual reality. In other words, the individual who asks WWJD cannot put his or her finger on any verse of Scripture, and say with certainty, "This is what ought to be done! This is the answer to the question!" It is simply spiritual enough to ask the symbolic question without obtaining the substantive answer.

My thinking on this matter was provoked recently by an evangelistic newsletter received from Dr. Bill Chapman, a fellow preacher and former pastor. He challenged the speculation of WWJD with the absolute certainty of WDJD? That is, "What DID Jesus Do?" He cited three examples of what Jesus did (no speculation, no debate, no opinions, no discussion) which bear directly upon Church life today. Jesus:

- CLEANSED the Temple (Luke 19:45-48);
- PRAYED (not PLAYED) all Night (Luke 6:12-13); and
- SPEWED out of His mouth a Lukewarm Church (Revelation 3:15-16).

These are things that Jesus did!

The merchandisers of religion in America are making big bucks with WWJD, playing upon the sentimentalities of those who claim to be Christian. It seems to me that the more fruitful exercise for the disciple of Christ would be to discover from Scripture what Jesus did do, and order his or her life accordingly.

A Tribute to Mother

Mothers Day is always a very special time of year. It is on this day that we celebrate one of the fundamental building blocks of society. The critical role of mothers, and the vital importance of motherhood, cannot be overstated. I know it would be impossible to place a value upon the godly influence of my mother upon my life.

Years ago I came across a small article entitled, "Tribute to Mother." I would like to share that tribute:

"Honor the dear old mother. Time has scattered the snowy flakes on her brow, plowed deep furrows on her cheek; but is she not beautiful now? The lips are thin and shrunken, but these are the lips that have kissed many a hot tear from the childish cheeks, and the sweetest lips in the world. The eye is dim, yet it glows with soft radiance of holy love, which can never fade. Ah, yes; she is the dear old mother. The sands of life have nearly run out, but, feeble as she is, she will go farther and reach down lower for you than anyone else on earth.

You cannot walk in a midnight haunt where she cannot see you; you cannot enter a prison whose bars will keep her out; you cannot mount a scaffold too high for her to reach that she may kiss and bless you in evidence of her deathless love. When the world shall despise and forsake you, when it leaves you by the wayside to die unnoticed, the dear old mother will gather you up in her feeble arms and carry you home, and tell you all of your virtues, until you almost forget that your soul is disfigured by vices. Love her tenderly; cheer her declining years with tender devotion."

Take a little time today to express gratitude to the Lord for your mother. If possible, give her a warm embrace, a kiss on the cheek, and let her know that you love her, and appreciate all that she has done in your behalf.

Truth and Relationships

Josh McDowell is one of the most respected Christian leaders of our time. Perhaps his most popular book is "Evidence That Demands A Verdict"; a comprehensive volume that challenges the opponents of Jesus Christ and His Gospel, and provides incontrovertible answers to their objections. He has authored a sequel to this popular work (Volume 2) as well as other books and publications. The target audiences of most of his writings are youth and teens, who are often torn between truth and peer pressure, and whose inquiring minds are prone to challenge the status quo. No one in America has a greater burden for youth and teenagers than does Josh McDowell. This is his passion.

I caught him on a religious TV program recently, and heard him make two astounding observations about young people, derived from decades of ministry with teens. They had to do with the critical linkage that must exist between God's truth and the relationship to their parents, in order for them truly to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

His first statement was: "Truth without relationship results in rebellion." The absolutes of God's truth must be ministered in the context of a strong relationship with parents. Building parent-child relationships takes time and effort. Unfortunately, too many parents are too busy giving their children everything but themselves, and marvel that they display total indifference to the church, which is the pillar and ground of the truth. This principle applies as well to a personal relationship with God. Teens who are regularly exposed to the truth without establishing a relationship with God through Jesus Christ will ultimately rebel against the church.

The second statement was "Relationship without truth results in resentment." Youth long for absolutes, and the Word of God provides them. When youth are deprived of those absolutes, despite a good relationship, the result will be a spirit of resentment because the parent failed to provide that which was most needful for a life foundation.

The bottom line is that teens need the truth of God ministered in the context of meaningful, loving relationship with both God and parents. The omission of either [or both] of these two ingredients leaves the child severely encumbered in his or her spiritual development, and will ultimately lead to rebellion, resentment, or both. Teens who drop out of church, or become ambivalent toward truth, are relationship-starved, and will likely look for love in all the wrong places, and in too many faces.

Oak Avenue Baptist Church: Relationship Builders! That has a nice ring to it! Beloved, I am convinced that this is what we must become in order to minister the truth effectively, and to grow as a church.

The Cycle of Church Growth

I came across a thought-provoking poem recently that is worth repeating. Its clear intent is to teach the power of evangelistic influence, and to encourage God's people in the matter of church growth...the right kind of church growth! Here's the poem, with a prayer that it will bless and encourage you.

"10 Little Christians standing in line, 1 disliked the preacher, then there were 9.
9 little Christians stayed up very late, 1 overslept Sunday, then there were 8.
8 little Christians on their way to Heaven, 1 took the low road and then there were 7.
7 little Christians chirping like chicks, 1 disliked the music, then there were 6.
6 little Christians seemed very much alive, 1 lost his interest, then there were 5.
5 little Christians pulling for Heaven's Shore, 1 stopped to rest, then there were 4.
4 little Christians each busy as a bee, 1 got his feelings hurt, then there were 3.
3 little Christians knew not what to do, 1 joined the sporty crowd, then there were 2.
2 little Christians our rhyme is done, differed with each other, then there was 1.
1 little Christian can't do much 'tis true, brought his friend to bible study, then there were 2.
2 earnest Christians, each won one more, that doubled the number, then there were 4.
4 sincere Christians worked early and late, each won another, then there were 8.
8 splendid Christians if they doubled as before, in just so many Sundays, we'd have 1,024.
In this little jingle there is a lesson true, you belong either to the building, or to the wrecking crew!"
--Anon--

The great truth communicated here is that numbers themselves are not nearly as significant as what those same numbers are doing to advance the Kingdom. This would be a good time for all of us to ask ourselves this question: "What contribution am I making?"

The Irrelevancy of Preachers in Modern Culture

A few weeks ago I shared some insights from Josh McDowell about truth and relationships with regard to youth, parents, and the church. I would like to take this opportunity to relate another profound insight shared by Josh during this same TV segment. It has to do with the subjective approach to the study of Scripture, which has negatively impacted the church.

In making his point, Josh began with this statement: "I would say that roughly half of the Bible preachers in America today are culturally irrelevant to their congregations." That is, the pulpit has lost its influence upon the pew! God's men are preaching, but the people are indifferent to the message. He further pointed out that the "me" culture of our day, and its effect on how we study the Scriptures, was a major contributing factor.

The goal of true Bible study is the discovery of truth. Every effort is made to determine exactly what the inspired writer meant to say by examining the historical context, word meanings and usage, grammar, and other related Scriptures. Having established the clear intent of the writer, and thus the mind of God, the truth discovered can be declared with authority, and applied to the life. This is true Bible study. This is how disciples are made!

The dangerous alternative to discovering the truth is creating it! This is a subtle phenomenon that has infiltrated modern-day churches. It takes place when God's people gather together, a passage is read, and the leader asks, "What does this mean to you?" The matter is then open for discussion. The objective process of diligent study, discovery, and exposition is tabled in favor of the more subjective method of opinion. Each individual thus determines for themselves what the truth is, and what is relevant. One opinion is as good as another. There is no need for a teacher of doctrine, only a facilitator of discussion.

This method is fast becoming the modus operandi among Baptists. One of the largest SBC churches in Florida is currently replacing long-time teachers with facilitators. Biblical discussion is a healthy exercise, as long as it involves the application of discovered truth. An extraction of subjective opinion, without the discipline of discovery, puts the truth up for grabs.

This is why, according to Josh McDowell, Biblical preaching in our culture is in serious trouble. "Thus saith the Lord!" leaves little room for "I feel that God is saying..." In many cases the pew believes that its opinion is as viable as that of the pulpit. It is this subjective mind-set that renders the preacher of objective truth irrelevant, both culturally and practically, in our present society.

Separation of God and State

The national issue of school prayer focused upon Jacksonville recently. A group of persistent students, backed by a handful of school board members, convinced a federal court that prayer offered to God in a public setting apart from faculty influence was not unconstitutional. The proponents of school prayer rejoiced, while the opponents stewed. We may never win the war on this issue, but it's nice to win a battle or two.

I wrote a letter this week to the Florida Times-Union editorial staff, prompted by this statement from another writer: "Student-led prayers at graduation are clearly unconstitutional." My written response to this display of ignorance is included below:

"I continue to be amazed at the redactive treatment of the Constitution by armchair scholars. Indicative of the ineptitude associated with this practice are statements like 'student-led prayers are clearly unconstitutional.' All but the disingenuous understand that the 'separation of church and state' principle was intended to prevent government from legislating a national religion, thus protecting the citizen's right to worship freely. It was not designed to remove or disassociate God from public life. In other words, there is a vast difference between the separation of church and state, and the separation of God and state. The two issues are not synonymous.

Furthermore, there is another collection of documents upon whose tenets much of the Constitution was framed. I am referring to the 66 books of Scripture, also known as the Bible. When Jesus prayed to His Father, as recorded in John Chapter 17, He said, '*Thy Word is truth.*' That is all the validation I need to adopt the same mindset.

In I John 2:22-23, the Scripture deals with the separation of Father and Son. The Bible teaches that any attempt to deny either the Father or the Son, and their unique redemptive relationship, is antichristian. Therefore the only true God is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are inseparable! Opponents of school prayer are in a Catch 22. If it is unconstitutional to invoke the name of God or His Son at public assemblies, such as school graduations, it follows that the Constitution is also antichristian in its orientation. Does anyone really want to defend the proposition that the framers of the Constitution were antichristian in their orientation, desiring to separate God from the affairs of state?"

May God bless America...again...and deliver us from such paganistic and idiotic thinking!

Vowing Vows and Cutting Deals

These words of Jacob are recorded in Genesis 28:20-22: "If God be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee." These words constituted a vow on Jacob's part to do certain things if God did certain things.

We dealt with this passage last Wednesday evening, and drew the following conclusions:

- (1) There is a difference between vowing a vow, and cutting a deal. Sinners who attempt to cut deals with God do so out of rebellion, and a reluctance to submit to His Lordship. They place conditions upon the Lord with no expectation that He will perform them. A vow, on the other hand, is a promise based upon a promise. In his dream Jacob had been promised protection [including basic provisions], land, and God's abiding presence. The conditions he placed upon God were none other than what God had placed upon Himself. Vows are meant to prove the Lord and His promises, whereas deals tempt Him, and provoke Him to anger.
- (2) All things work together for good to those whom God loves without regard for their love for Him. God had set his love and affection upon Jacob, and was pursuing Him with Divine passion. It would be years before He would become Jacob's God. But God's purpose according to election would ultimately be fulfilled in him. Has it been fulfilled in you? The task of evangelism is nothing more than sowing and reaping in the lives of the Jacob's whom God is pursuing. Salvation is much more than accepting Christ. It is being made acceptable to God by the merits of Christ! Thus the Scripture says, "*But as many as received Him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God*" (John 1:12). Jacob is a classic example of a loving God in pursuit of an unloving sinner.
- (3) If you follow a man's money, you will find his God! Jacob understood the tithing principle, but had not yet been compliant. Why? Simply stated, Jehovah was not his God! Jacob knew that the installation of God upon the throne of his heart would include God's ownership of his money, and the faithful stewardship of his finances. He also reckoned correctly that every material possession that would come to him was a gift from God. Financial struggles incurred by smaller churches are often the result of unregenerate Jacobs in the membership who serve another god.

Today would be good time to reflect upon God's mercy and your money!

The Influence of a Father

I came across a true story recently that demonstrates the power and influence that fathers can have upon children, both theirs and others. I trust it will inspire all of us to lead our children by example as well as precept. Here is the story.

His name was Fleming, and he was a poor Scottish farmer. One day, while trying to eke out a living for his family, he heard a cry for help coming from a nearby bog. He dropped his tools and ran to the bog. There, mired to his waist in black muck, was a terrified boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Farmer Fleming saved the lad from what could have been a slow and terrifying death.

The next day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman's sparse surroundings. An elegantly dressed nobleman stepped out and introduced himself as the father of the boy Farmer Fleming had saved. "I want to repay you," said the nobleman. "You saved my son's life." "No, I can't accept payment for what I did," the Scottish farmer replied, waving off the offer.

At that moment, the farmer's own son came to the door of the family hovel. "Is that your son?" the nobleman asked. "Yes," the farmer replied proudly. "I'll make you a deal. Let me take him and give him a good education. If the lad is anything like his father, he'll grow to be a man you can be proud of." And that he did.

In time, Farmer Fleming's son graduated from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London, and went on to become known throughout the world as the noted Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin. Years afterward, the nobleman's son was stricken with pneumonia. What saved him? Penicillin. The name of the nobleman? Lord Randolph Churchill. His son's name? Sir Winston Churchill.

The father who invests in the lives of his children is a wise man. What more valuable investment is there?

Tomorrow

Tomorrow! That word has such a nice ring to it! It rolls off our tongues with such ease and pretension of sincerity. It is, after all, only a day away. It holds so much promise! It is pregnant with good intentions! No day is held in such high esteem by the procrastinator as tomorrow.

Tomorrow is the day we begin that much needed diet and exercise program. Tomorrow is the day we stop eating junk food, the day we install a regimen of dietary discipline and aerobic activity. Tomorrow we'll start burning that fat! Tomorrow I'll fix this or that around the house. Tomorrow I'll write that much needed letter, make that important phone call, speak that word of encouragement.

Tomorrow I'll share the Gospel with my lost friend. Tomorrow I'll begin waking a half-hour earlier to spend time with God and His Word at the beginning of each day. Tomorrow I'll begin that Bible reading program that will take me through the Scriptures in a year. Tomorrow I'll become a tither. Tomorrow I will forsake lust, and shake that bad habit!

Sound familiar? It should! We all have employed this tool of rationalism to justify today's laziness and indecision, and to sedate our conscience when good intentions fail to materialize. I suppose we will always love tomorrow for those reasons.

What saith the Scriptures about tomorrow? Jesus said: "*Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof*" (Matthew 6:34). Jesus was teaching His disciples to beware of building too much expectation into tomorrow with regard to life's concerns. He taught that the true focus of one's life should be today's spiritual combat, today's moral challenges, and today's wrestling with evil.

Jesus is not opposed to planning and strategizing. After all, He is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. What Jesus warned about was a misplaced focus upon what shall be to the neglect of what is. The immediate context flows from 6:33: "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness.*" Today's priority is kingdom righteousness. The evil that opposes such an agenda is sufficient unto the day: that is, it is all you can handle.

Spiritual victories are not won with the good intentions of prognosticators and procrastinators. They are obtained by those who strap on the armor of God today! These engage in spiritual combat today! They are focused upon today! They get things done today! They believe that today is the day of salvation. May God grant this same grace to us all!

The Paradox of America

The independence that America has enjoyed by virtue of Divine Providence has governed the course of history for the last two centuries. No nation in history has enjoyed more of the bounty of God's goodness. We are the world's political leader, technological frontrunner, and military superpower. We have also become its moral cesspool. According to recent polls, most Americans believe we as a nation are headed in the wrong moral and spiritual direction.

This is indeed a paradox. America, for all her external greatness, is exhibiting the danger signs of inner weakness. Included below are some comments by an unknown author that capture this paradox perfectly.

"The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings, but shorter tempers; wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints; we spend more, but have less; we buy more, but enjoy it less. We have bigger houses and smaller families; more conveniences, but less time; we have more degrees, but less sense; more knowledge, but less judgment; more experts, but more problems; more medicine, but less wellness. We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often. We learned how to make a living, but not a life. We've added years to life, not life to years. We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor. We've conquered outer space, but not inner space; we've cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul; we've split the atom, but not our prejudice; we have higher incomes, but lower morals; we've become long on quantity, but short on quality.

"These are the times of tall men, and short character; steep profits, and shallow relationships. These are the times of world peace, but domestic warfare; more leisure, but less fun; more kinds of food, but less nutrition. These are the days of two incomes, but more divorce; of fancier houses, but broken homes. It is a time when there is much in the show window and nothing in the stockroom. A time when technology can bring this letter to you, and a time when you can choose either to make a difference or just hit delete."

Never has the need been greater for an old-fashioned revival, and a move of the Spirit of God across our land. Every child of God should be asking this question of themselves: "If revival does not begin with me, where then shall it begin?" God bless America...again!

Ideal Pastor for the Modern Church

When churches fail to meet preconceived growth expectations, pastors are often deemed the main obstacle. Sometimes this is the case. However, the following fictitious pastor search committee report exposes what is likely to be the real problem. Its humor is laced with reality.

PASTOR SEARCH COMMITTEE REPORT

"In our search for a suitable pastor, the following scratch sheet was developed for your perusal. Of the candidates investigated by the committee, only one was found to have the necessary qualifications. The list contains the names of the candidates and comments on each, should you be interested in investigating them further for future pastoral placements.

NOAH: He has 120 years of preaching experience, but no converts. **MOSES:** He stutters; and his former congregation says he loses his temper over trivial things. **ABRAHAM:** He took off to Egypt during hard times. We heard that he got into trouble with the authorities and then tried to lie his way out. **DAVID:** He is an unacceptable moral character. He might have been considered for minister of music had he not 'fallen.' **SOLOMON:** He has a reputation for wisdom but fails to practice what he preaches. **ELIJAH:** He proved to be inconsistent, and is known to fold under pressure. **HOSEA:** His family life is in a shambles. Divorced, and remarried to a prostitute. **JEREMIAH:** He is too emotional, alarmist; some say a real 'pain in the neck.' **AMOS:** Comes from a farming background. Better off picking figs. **JOHN:** He says he is a Baptist but lacks tact and dresses like a hippie. Would not feel comfortable at a church potluck supper. **PETER:** Has a bad temper, and was heard to have even denied Christ publicly. **PAUL:** We found him to lack tact. He is too harsh, his appearance is contemptible, and he preaches too long. **TIMOTHY:** He has potential, but is much too young for the position. **JESUS:** He tends to offend church members with his preaching, especially Bible scholars. He is also too controversial. He even offended the search committee with his pointed questions. **JUDAS:** He seemed to be very practical, cooperative, good with money, cares for the poor, and dresses well. We all agreed that he is just the man we are looking for to fill the vacancy as our Senior Pastor.

Thank you for all you have done in assisting us with our pastoral search."

Beloved, the sentiments expressed by this imaginary committee capture the sad reality of our times. There are a significant number of Baptist churches that Jesus Himself could not pastor successfully.

Discernment

Discernment is a profound Biblical concept! Both the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul heralded its value and marveled at its absence. It is, however, much more than a virtue. It is a weapon, an essential spiritual tool. It allows the child of God to sift through life's rubble, and come away with the Prize. It enables the Christian on the sea of life to cut through this world's wicked fog banks, and find safe harbor in the haven of rest. It arms God's soldiers with the ability to spot enemy ploys, and avoid spiritual killing zones. It is discrimination in the true and good sense of the word. The possessor is enabled to separate the chaff from the wheat.

Discernment is a virtue that can be prominent in one aspect of life, and woefully lacking in another. In Matthew 16:1-4, for example, Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees inasmuch as they were able to forecast today's weather by yesterday's sunset or the morning's sunrise, but were oblivious to the significance of the times in which they lived. They stood face to face with the Embodiment of Heaven's Glory, and saw in Him nothing more than a devil.

Jesus went on to identify the two-fold cause of their dullness. First, He said they were a wicked and adulterous generation. They were guilty of spiritual unfaithfulness to the God of Israel, and, as the prospective bride, actually mocked the Bridegroom and His offer of matrimony. Secondly, they were sign seekers who esteemed temporal events above eternal truth. Jesus refused to grant them any sign other than that of the prophet Jonah. This, of course, was His resurrection from the dead, which is enough cause for any discerning man, woman, or young person to bow the knee before Him, and say with Thomas, "My Lord, and my God!"

Beloved, this world has not advanced from Jesus' day in terms of discernment. It still suffers from the same malignancy. It appears that the religious are still the most flagrant offenders. This should not surprise us! The god of this world, the author of religion without repentance, still blinds the minds of those who refuse to believe.

How then is discernment attained? Hebrews 5:14 tells us it comes by chewing on the meat of the Word. It is a mark of "full age", or spiritual maturity. It comes "by reason of use"; that is, knowing and doing the truth. Obedience as a pattern of life exercises the spiritual senses to discern (separate, distinguish or discriminate between) both good and evil. This is more than knowing the difference between right and wrong. It is a platform from which the believer pursues the good with abandon, and steers clear of the evil.

May the God of truth grant to all of us a renewed hunger for His Word, and a healthy dose of discernment by reason of use!

A Prayer Primer for the Saints

This prayer of Jacob is recorded for us in Genesis 32:9-12: "And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee: I am not worthy of the least of thy mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands. Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children. And thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude."

In our Wednesday evening study we examined this prayer which Jacob offered upon hearing the news that Esau was on his way. Both of these men had changed over the course of twenty years. But Jacob still envisioned Esau as the same angry and vindictive brother. Fear and dread gripped his heart. Finding himself between a rock and a hard place, he broke into supplication. Theologians differ on whether or not Jacob was a saved man at this point in his life. But his petition is worthy of any saint. Here are five reasons why this prayer is a primer for God's people.

- (1) He calls God to account for His promises. Effectual prayer, as one Puritan has said, is nothing more than turning the promises of God back on Himself. Jacob reminds the Lord of His Word, and that he is following Divine instructions. God delights to show Himself faithful to those who hold steadfastly to His promises.
- (2) He takes a humble posture before God. He is not worthy of the least of God's mercies. He knows this, and so confesses it openly before God. His deliverance depends on mercy! There is no better posture from which to make an appeal to the God of heaven!
- (3) He remembers from whence he came. He crossed the Jordan heading north to the land of Laban with nothing but a staff in hand, and now returns with abundance. The child of God must always remember the spiritual poverty from which grace has lifted him.
- (4) He acknowledges his need. He is looking outside of himself. This is the kind of perspective that makes for intercessory power! There is no spirit of independence in this prayer!
- (5) He asks for deliverance. The desperate heart does not beat around the bush. Dire circumstances demand specific solutions. The desperate and humble cry for salvation that mingles itself with Divine promises is a prayer that gets heard...and answered!

May the Lord Jesus so order your prayer life and mine!

The Price of Pentecost

This last Wednesday evening we shared some thoughts about the day of Pentecost. It represents perhaps the most glorious day for the Church of Jesus Christ as the Holy Spirit was poured out upon its 120 members. However, the spiritual atmosphere present on that day is a rare commodity in our time. We hunger for that type of grace once more, but must remember that three years of blood, sweat, and tears laid the foundation for the outpouring.

Consider these factors:

- (1) Three years of dynamic preaching and miraculous ministry had cultivated the entire area. Much seed had been sown prior to the harvest of those three thousand souls.
- (2) Jesus had spent three valuable years pouring Himself into the Twelve He had chosen. They constantly struggled with faith, and displays of the supernatural. In spiritual terms, they were more dull than deep. No shepherd ever took a flock farther than Jesus took these twelve men, one of whom was a devil.
- (3) This group had suffered heart-rending disappointment during the passion and death of our Lord. It took forty days of resurrection appearances to assuage their grief, and resolve their doubts. It is a Scriptural principle that bitter disappointment often precedes fresh vision and power.
- (4) They were eyewitnesses to His ascension into glory, which was accompanied by the promise that He would return in like fashion as they had seen Him go.
- (5) In accordance with Jesus' instructions, they tarried in Jerusalem waiting for the promise of the Father; that is, the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:14, we are told that "*these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren.*" What could ten-day prayer meetings accomplish today for the cause of Christ?

The point is this! Impacting this sinful world with the glory and power of heaven's realm requires a significant spiritual investment, one that few are willing to make. We long for the power of Pentecost, but suffer a sort of "sticker shock" when confronted with the price tag.

One of the great sins of the Church today is that she has no such power. Her greater sin is that she is content to live without it! Make no mistake! The church whose membership is governed by convenience and apathy shall never experience it!

For a Season

One of the most instructive phrases in God's Word is "for a season." It suggests that which is temporary or short-lived. It signifies that which does not endure the test of time. It is employed in Scripture several times in ways that challenge our thinking. Here are three.

In John 5:35, Jesus reminded the religious leaders in Israel of their initial response to John. He said, "*And ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light.*" The message, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, and make His paths straight!" ceased to be so popular when once the Jews realized how straight those paths were. And so it is today! Discipleship is not an easy road! Reason without resolve will eventually lead the uncommitted to seek for alternatives to Christ. One of the flies in the ointment of pastoral ministry is the "willing for a season" crowd. They frustrate everyone around them with their unfaithfulness. Even our Lord's enemies were excited about Him until they counted the cost.

Concerning Moses, the writer of Hebrews said: "*Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season*" [Hebrews 11:25]. The son of Pharaoh's daughter refused the privileges of royalty, and the enjoyment of sinful pleasures that such a status would have afforded him. Those pleasures were short-lived. God's providence saw to it that Moses learned eternal values at his true mother's knee. This godly perspective was not lost on Moses, who made a wise (not popular) choice to abandon the temporal nature of sin and its trappings. We also live in the midst of a dying world whose members are enslaved to the short-lived pleasures of sin. A Moses mentality will prevent us from going and doing likewise.

Concerning the temptation of our Lord, Luke tells us: "*when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from Him for a season*" [Luke 4:13]. Major league baseball great Yogi Berra has been credited with the statement, "It ain't over till it's over!" The reason why we hear it quoted so often is because it's true. It was especially true of our Lord, whose trials and tribulations were not over until He cried, "*It is finished*" on the Cross. The Satanic assault after His baptism and Spirit-anointing for ministry was only the beginning. We can expect the same treatment that our Lord received. Spiritual war consists of many battles and engagements with the enemy. Today's victory is for a season. A defeated devil will return in due season, and will be packing.

The disciple who arms himself with "for a season" truth is well equipped to do spiritual battle, and to discern spiritual reality.

Which Church Would You Join?

Chapters two and three of Revelation contain messages by Jesus Himself to seven local churches located in Asia Minor within a fifty-mile radius of each other. The Lord issued appropriate commendations and rebukes to each congregation, and followed up His admonitions with a command to repent. The only church that needed no repentance was the church at Smyrna, the suffering church. Jesus pronounced this church spiritually rich in the midst of devastating poverty. He revealed Himself as the dead and risen Lord, and promised crowns of life, and immunity from the second death, to the faithful who overcame.

By the way, it is doubtful that this church could afford to pay the salary of a full-time pastor. He was probably bivocational, and persecution may have cost him his job. Nevertheless, the analysis of Jesus destroys the myth that there is a direct relationship between Holy Ghost power and the size of the offerings.

These messages also contain a prophetic element. Many see the seven churches of the Revelation as representing seven kinds (types) of churches that would characterize the church age. In addition, the seven churches are seen as representing seven distinct and successive periods of the Church age beginning at the first century and ending at His Coming. In this interpretive view, the last period is the Laodicean. No doubt we are in that period!

The word *Laodicea* is a combination of two words. The first is **laos**, meaning *people*. The second is **dike**, meaning *right or justice*. Together they signify *a people's justice, or rights of a people*. The Laodicean church age is one in which the people determine what is right and just, and likewise defend their personal rights.

The fundamental issue is one of authority, and who calls the shots. The New Testament model is a Christocracy, where the Lord Jesus calls the shots. His pastors and or elders are called to proclaim His authoritative Word, and to provide spiritual leadership under His authority. The Laodicean church is a democracy, where the people constitute the final authority, and call the shots. I was made aware of a church situation recently where the members retained the services of legal counsel to help them oust their pastor. Why? He was calling too many shots. Please pray for the new pastor. When the honeymoon is over, they will no doubt put him on a leash to ensure that the shots that count are theirs.

In contrast to the poverty-stricken, God-anointed church at Smyrna is the cash-rich, spiritually impoverished church at Laodicea. Its lukewarmness made Jesus sick to His stomach. The invitation offered in Revelation 3:20--"*Behold, I stand at the door, and knock*"--indicates that a significant portion of its membership was still unregenerate, dead in trespasses and sins. Do you suppose their pastor was full-time?

Which of these two churches would you join? What does it say about a church when the absence of cash flow raises more red flags than the absence of Holy Ghost power?

The Engrafted Word

In James 1:21, the inspired writer gave this admonition to us: "*And receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.*" It must also be mentioned that James, in connection with this command and as a prerequisite to it, commanded the abandonment of "*all filthiness* " (moral defilement caused by the commission of sin in body and/or spirit).

There are three (3) distinct issues that present themselves to us here.

- (1) Our attitude toward the Word. The word "*meekness*" suggests to us humbleness of mind and submissiveness of spirit. The word was used of horses that had been broken, or domesticated. Meek individuals are those who have recognized the ultimate authority of the Jesus Christ, and have placed themselves under His authority. Meekness therefore is an absolute essential for spiritual growth inasmuch as the Word is the authoritative voice of God. When meekness speaks, it says, "This Word shall govern me!"
- (2) Our relationship to the Word. The word "*engrafted*" speaks of that which has been implanted in the heart, and has put down roots. The implanted (or engrafted) seed is the Word of God. In Matthew 13 Jesus told a parable about this seed, and the soils upon which the seed was sown. Concerning the seed which fell "*into stony places*" (13:20), it is said, "*He had not root in himself*" (13:21). This lack of root produces a short-term positive result that turns into long-term failure when tribulation or persecutions arise. Our relationship to the Word, and whether it is engrafted (puts down roots in our hearts), is fundamental to our relationship with God.
- (3) Our benefit from the Word. James says that the engrafted Word "*is able to save your souls*". While this is certainly true in the initial receipt of the word of the Gospel (resulting in justification), the salvation in view here is that of sanctification (the ongoing pursuit of holiness and spiritual conquest). This is exactly what Paul meant when he said to Timothy, "*Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee*" (I Timothy 4:16). Timothy the preacher, and all who have followed in his steps, are to be examples of full salvation. This is only possible when the doctrine of the Word is engrafted.

Beloved, there is no substitute for preaching the Word. It is God's authoritative voice for the meek. It is the implanting, or engrafting, of this Word that produces spiritual victory in Christ. The justification of the lost, and the sanctification of the saved, both depend upon its proclamation and exposition. The degree to which the Word is implanted within us is the true measure of our walk with God.

A Little Reviving

One of the most soul-stirring and instructive intercessory prayers recorded in Scripture is found in Ezra 9:5-15. The Jews had been granted deliverance from Babylonian captivity through God's gracious providence and mercy. Ezra was a key spiritual figure after their return to the land. He taught the truth of God, and provided critical guidance regarding the observance of God's law. We are told that "*Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments*" (Ezra 7:10). Men of this caliber are absolutely critical to kingdom advancement. Yet they always seem to be in short supply.

Ezra's prayer was precipitated by a report received from the princes of the land. They informed Ezra that the people of God had not separated themselves from the people of the land, but rather had mingled themselves with the unholy seed. They were engaged in the practice of intermarriage, and had begun to assimilate many pagan customs and abominations. Ezra said he "*sat down astonished*" (9:3) upon hearing this report. He was dumbfounded! How could those so recently escaped from captivity suffer such a short-term memory loss and abrupt departure from the truth of God? Sound familiar?

In his prayer of confession, and intercession for the nation, Ezra twice used a very significant word to describe what God had done for His people. It was the word "*reviving*" (9:8, 9). In the first usage he said "*that our God may...give us a little reviving in our bondage*", and in the second "*to give us a reviving.*" God had literally brought the nation back to life by moving the heart of a Persian king. The memories of God's intervention had already dimmed for many. This sin against God's goodness is what grieved Ezra. It also grieved "*every one who trembled at the words of the God of Israel*" (9:4). May God help us to respond in like manner when guilty of the same indifference.

The prayer expressed by Ezra places a direct link between revival and bondage. That's revival in a nutshell—a fresh experience of God's power resulting in freedom from bondage; that is, from the sin which so easily besets us. It is a resurgence of eternal life in the bosom of the believer. It is a renewed hunger for God Himself! It is grace ministered to the saint for the purpose of rebuilding his spiritual city and its walls for the glory of God. The Jews had turned this grace into an opportunity for self-indulgence.

I am intrigued by Ezra's reference to this exodus from Babylon as "*a little reviving.*" This helps to put the matter of revival in perspective. Some feel that a genuine revival will be a massive display of God's power among the saved that spreads to the lost. Perhaps it will be. However, I am perfectly willing to experience a little reviving from the hand of God with a view to something greater! How about you?

Less Than Our Sins Deserve

Our thoughts last week found their source in Ezra 9:5-15, as they shall again this week. There are a number of instructive observations that present themselves to us in the praying of this godly man. I encourage you invest some time reading through this prayer, and meditating on its contents.

We previously called attention to Ezra's reaction to the news of God's people mingling themselves with the ungodly, and joining in affinity with them. He sat astonished! However, this was not the whole of his reaction. The Bible says that, prior to dropping to the ground dumbfounded, he rent his garment and mantle, and plucked off the hair from his head and beard. In the twentieth century American church, this overt display would be deemed an overreaction of hysterical proportions. Could it be that Ezra's conduct was totally in line with godly sorrow and repentance? Is it also possible that the modern-day church, with fallow ground at its core, is virtually incapable of such brokenness before God?

In his closing words, Ezra voiced several significant truths. He said, "*Our God has punished us less than our sins deserve*" (9:13). Keep in mind that seventy years of bondage and servitude was the price they had paid for prior iniquities. That, says Ezra, was not sufficient punishment. This is one of the wonders of grace. Punishment and chastening always contain a measure of mercy in the mix. This is also one of the wonders of Calvary. The punishment borne by the Lord Jesus was exactly what our iniquities deserved! God, who spared us sinners the full measure of His wrath for our iniquities, laid upon His Son those same iniquities and the full measure of His wrath in our stead.

He also said: "*Behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this*" (9:15). If and when a child of God begins to live with this consciousness, he is on the way to pleasing his or her Lord. This is the very thing that David forgot in his attempts to cover up his adultery and murder. In his prayer of confession and contrition, as recorded in Psalm 51, he said: "*Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight*" (51:4).

Beloved, our sins are always before God. David could not escape a day of reckoning any more than these tribes that had escaped their captivity. God knows all, and ultimately exposes all! Those who desire to stand before Him, and experience His favor and blessing, must come to account for their sin.

We must also remember that Ezra's intercession was for a nation. It was the entire nation that stood in jeopardy. Ezra's praying made a difference, and turned the tide of apathy. The church in this hour desperately needs men and women who will react with Ezra-like sensitivity to the spiritual dullness of a Laodicean Church. America cannot stand before God without them!

Justice and Righteousness

Our focus this week remains the praying of Ezra for the mingled remnant that had escaped captivity. The entire incident as recorded in Chapters 9-10 provides an example of the seriousness of sin, and how to deal with disobedience. Here is another observation.

In closing his prayer, Ezra said: "*O Lord God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day*" (9:15). The word *righteous*, when applied to a sovereign God, signifies absolute moral rectitude and personal integrity with regard to both character and conduct. It includes the administration of perfect justice. The Lord God **is** right, and always **does** right!

In dealing with His people, however, the execution of God's justice is always tempered by His promises. That is why Ezra could affirm God's righteousness. His holiness demanded the extraction of a full penalty for their disobedience. It also required that He honor His promises. The gap between these two necessities was filled with mercy, as it is for us. Ezra's affirmation recognized that great truth. Thus Jeremiah could say: "*It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not*" (Lamentations 3:22).

The apostle John, writing under inspiration from the other side of Calvary, set forth this same truth in full blossom. He said: "*And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world*" (1 John 2:1b-2). The man in view is the born again man. The advocate who pleads our cause is Jesus Christ, the righteous. Because He is the propitiation [absolute and full satisfaction for the requirements of Divine justice] for our sins, He argues His case to the Father on our behalf for mercy and forgiveness. It is great cause for rejoicing that the Father always rules in His favor, and we are the undeserving benefactors. He has never lost a case!

According to John, this same benefit is available to the whole world. This is "*the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:22-23). The word "all" is used three times here. The first and third "all" are clearly universal in their scope. That is, the same group that sinned, and fell short of God's glory, stands to benefit from God's righteousness in Christ. The second usage clearly restricts the recipients of that righteousness. This group is defined as "them that believe." The righteousness of God assures us that these shall remain escaped.

Friend, have you been the beneficiary of the righteousness of God? Have you truly believed in Jesus Christ? Can you say with the songwriter, "My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' Name"?

The Primacy of Love

I would like to share a little story I heard recently. It is, of course, fictional in nature, but teaches a valuable lesson about the priorities of life. Here's the story:

A woman came out of her house and saw 3 old men with long white beards sitting in her front yard. She did not recognize them. She said, "I don't think I know you, but you must be hungry. Please come in and have something to eat." "Is the man of the house home?" they asked. "No", she said. "He's out." "Then we cannot come in", they replied.

In the evening when her husband came home, she told him what had happened. Go tell them I am home, and invite them in. The woman went out and invited the men in. "We don't go into a house together", they replied. "Why is that?," she wanted to know. One of the old men explained: "His name is Wealth" (pointing to one of his friends). Pointing to another one, "He is Success, and I am Love". Then he added, "Now go in and discuss with your husband which one of us you want in your home."

The woman went in and told her husband what was said. Her husband was overjoyed. "How nice", he said! "Since that is the case, let us invite Wealth. Let him come and fill our home with wealth". His wife disagreed. "My dear, why don't we invite Success?" Their daughter-in-law was listening from the other corner of the house. She jumped in with her own suggestion: "Would it not be better to invite Love. Our home will be filled with love." "Let us heed our daughter-in-law's advice," said the husband to his wife. "Go out and invite Love to be our guest."

The woman went out and asked the 3 old men, "Which one of you is Love? Please come in and be our guest." Love got up and started walking toward the house. The other 2 also got up and followed him. Surprised, the lady asked Wealth and Success: "I only invited Love, why are you coming in?" The old men replied together: "If you had invited Wealth or Success the other two of us would've stayed out. But since you invited Love, wherever he goes, we go with him. Wherever there is Love there is also Wealth and Success!"

This story may sound a little simplistic, but it serves as a good reminder to us all that Biblical priorities matter. The apostle Paul said, "*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal*" (I Corinthians 13:1). In a world where men define themselves by their possessions and accomplishments, God's people must not allow themselves to be conformed to it.

Stir Up the Gift of God

In the first chapter of II Timothy, Paul issued to Timothy, his son in the faith, several admonitions aimed at keeping the young preacher's ministry on track. These included stirring up the gift of God which was within him (1:6), being unashamed of the Gospel (1:8), being a partaker of the afflictions of the Gospel (1:8), holding fast the form of sound words (1:13), and keeping that good thing which was committed unto him (1:14). These words of exhortation are applicable to all of God's people. Adherence to them will accomplish in us the same steadfastness of life that Paul desired for Timothy.

Our focus here is the stirring up of the gift of God. The word "*stir*" means to fan the flame. The implication is that of spiritual maintenance. The initial zeal and enthusiasm characteristic of newly imparted gifts is not on cruise control. The many hardships and disappointments incurred in the service of God tend to diminish our fervor. Paul knew that Timothy would encounter a multitude of tough challenges which had the potential to cool him down. Thus he urged upon him this metaphor of stoking the smoldering coals.

The equivalent concept in political terms is "fire in the belly." It is an accepted notion that candidates who lack or lose this fire, this passion which mingles itself with their political principles and platform, and drives them on, will wane under the rigors of a campaign. Many would be candidates have decided not to run, stating "I just don't have the fire in the belly!"

Timothy's gifts for ministry, and ours as well, are of far greater import than those of the politician. Whereas he or she might endure the strains of travel, speech writing, fund raising, and a few hot potato questions from reporters, the child of God wrestles not against flesh and blood. Our conflict is at a higher level. It is against the principalities and powers of an unseen evil world where Satan is enthroned. The stakes are eternal, not temporal! The consequences of failure are far more weighty and costly!

The strategic value of Timothy's ministry at Ephesus in Gospel terms was incalculable. This made Timothy a prime target. If Satan could cool down the preacher, the church would likely follow. By the time the apostle John wrote Revelation, this had apparently happened. According to Jesus, that church had lost its first love, and stood to lose their candlestick (power and influence) if they did not repent.

Pastors and churches who fail to fan the flames of their spiritual giftedness, and who lack the inner spiritual passion necessary to engage the enemy, are of little value in the kingdom. Preachers without pulpit fire are guilty of aiding and abetting the forces of evil. Congregations whose pastors fan the flame, but respond with indifference, are likewise a stumbling block to a lost and dying world.

Beloved, we must stir up the gift of God!

Unashamed of the Gospel

Our thoughts continue from the first chapter of II Timothy. Paul had issued to Timothy several admonitions aimed at keeping the young preacher's ministry on track. These included stirring up the gift of God which was within him (1:6), being unashamed of the Gospel (1:8), being a partaker of the afflictions of the Gospel (1:8), holding fast the form of sound words (1:13), and keeping that good thing which was committed unto him (1:14). Again, these words of exhortation are as applicable to us as they were to the young preacher.

Our focus here is the second of the five charges given—"*Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord*" (1:8). The word *therefore* refers back to that which God has given to all of His elect—the spirit of power, of love, and of a sound mind. In issuing this second charge, Paul reminds Timothy of the heavenly resources implanted within the bosom of every saint. The Holy Spirit, in taking up residence in the believer, brings these resources with Him. They are therefore available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to every child of God. Power, love, and soundness of mind flow from this Divine reservoir. Thus the expectation for Timothy (and for all of us as well) was for him to be unashamed of the testimony of Christ.

The testimony of Christ is that He laid down His life for the sheep. He suffered death at the hands of unrighteous men in order that sinners for whom He died might find forgiveness and life through Him. His resurrection is the assurance that His death was indeed substitutionary in nature, and rendered a complete satisfaction Godward for the transgressions of His holy law. His ascension to the Father's right hand enthroned Him as the Judge of all men, and as the Advocate for the elect. Thus Paul could ask: "*Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth*" (Romans 8:33). Would you agree that this is history's grandest testimony? How is it possible for the recipient of God's grace in Christ to shy away from sharing this testimony?

The word *ashamed* carries with it these two ideas—embarrassment and disappointment. The former is the by-product of fear, and the latter the fruit of failure. The remedy for both fear and failure is boldness and power wrought by the Holy Ghost. The apostle Paul himself said: "*For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek*" (Romans 1:16). Again, "*For the Scripture saith, Whosoever believeth in Him shall not be ashamed*" (Romans 10:11).

Beloved, the Gospel we preach is the power of God unto salvation! It provides for neither embarrassment nor disappointment. Being ashamed of the testimony of Christ is not an option!

Partaker of Gospel Afflictions

We continue to examine the admonitions given by Paul to Timothy in the first chapter of II Timothy. These imperatives, if obeyed, would constitute a firm foundation for his ministry. These included stirring up the gift of God (1:6), being unashamed of the Gospel (1:8), being a partaker of the afflictions of the Gospel (1:8), holding fast the form of sound words (1:13), and keeping that good thing which was committed unto him (1:14). Again, these words apply to us all.

Our focus here is the third of the five charges given—"*Be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God*" (1:8). In this verse there are two complimentary commands given. The first is "*Be not thou therefore ashamed.*" The second is "*Be thou partaker of the afflictions.*" These two realities are inseparable. Boldness for Jesus that fears neither embarrassment nor disappointment always yields a measure of affliction when exercised in the context of an evil world.

Later in this epistle Paul will expand on this concept—"*Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution*" (3:12). Likewise Jesus told his brethren, "*The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil*" (John 7:7). He would also affirm this truth to his disciples on the eve of His arrest and trial—"*If the world hate you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you*" (John 15:18-19). This coin clearly has two sides. Affliction always accompanies the unashamed!

The word *affliction* signifies a conflict imposed upon us from an outside source. It may impact us in various ways, shapes, and forms without regard for its magnitude. For example, Paul wrote these words to the Philippians while suffering imprisonment for the gospel—"*For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake; having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me*" (Philippians 1:29-30). The same conflict! They were not suffering to the same extent as Paul, but the same principle was in operation.

The word *partaker* suggests the analogy of eating food at mealtime. Do you remember your mother preparing meals when you were a child? I can remember my favorite foods as well as those that did not suit my palate. The words, "*Eat it, it's good for you!*" still linger in my memory. In a very real way Paul is encouraging Timothy to partake of all that God puts on his plate.

What is God putting on your plate these days? One thing is certain. He never serves up sanctifying power without including some conflict on the side. We must be partakers of the entire spiritual meal served up by our Lord!

The Destruction of the Foundations

David asked this profound question in Psalm 11:3: "*If the foundations be destroyed, what shall the righteous do?*" Make no mistake! The forces of evil are systematically destroying the foundations of America. I recently wrote a letter to the Florida Times-Union on this matter. It reads as follows:

"Perhaps no nation has more for which to be thankful than does America. For the last four centuries she has been the conspicuous benefactor of God's bounty. The tradition we call Thanksgiving was born of gratitude for that goodness. Our history has been distinguished by its myriad of milestones, and tainted by its failures. Two great bastions of American virtue were pummeled while the millennial sun was setting on the last half of the twentieth century. The first was moral, the second civil.

"The first of these casualties was the sanctity of life. Litigants for humanistic liberalism convinced the courts that a woman's right to destroy embryonic life at any stage of development was of greater import than the unborn child's right to a full term, and life outside the womb. The Supreme Court had a golden window of opportunity to declare to the rest of the world that we would not relinquish the moral high ground to any group of self-serving crusaders, but would ever defend the lives of all, whether born or unborn. Unfortunately, the ruling of *Roe v. Wade* finally legalized the moral scourge of abortion. This method of executing unwanted innocents was allowed to masquerade as a reproductive right. God's prenatal handiwork was deemed a nonviable tissue mass. Pro-choice wombs became potential death traps. The righteous indignation of protesters (this does not include bombers of abortion clinics) with moral equilibrium still in tact was labeled as another brand of right-wing extremism. Thus the sanctity of life incurred immeasurable harm, and continues to do so until this present hour.

"The second causality has been the sanctity of law. The Clinton presidency has done for the sanctity of law what the Supreme Court did for the sanctity of life. It has charted its course by polls, and has governed according. It seems the great challenge of this administration has been "What violation of existing law can we get away with today?" Our president's [Bill Clinton] brazen contempt for the rule of law, evidenced by his personal conduct and predisposition toward deception, is astounding. What is more amazing is the degree to which members of his own administration have defended him, and how Congress (both Republicans and Democrats) reasoned that holding him fully accountable, and upholding the rule of law, was secondary to maintaining the stability of the economy and financial markets. Janet Reno, our chief law enforcement officer, has turned more than one deaf ear to the evidentiary findings of congressional committees regarding alleged violations of other laws. What ultimately makes this flagrant disregard for the law possible is the apathy of the American public at large.

Thanksgiving to God is always in order when speaking of America. Blessings abound on every hand! The harsh reality, however, is that America is burning like Rome of old, and too many people are fiddling!"

Search Me, O God

Dr. J. Edwin Orr (1912 – 1987) was a noted authority on the history of revival and spiritual awakening. He was a perennial lecturer on personal spiritual renewal, and had a unique ministry with students on numerous college campuses. He authored a number of books dealing with revival history and the spiritual life. Two of those volumes—*The Second Evangelical Awakening* and *Full Surrender*—are in my personal library. They are invaluable.

My wife Barbara and I had the distinct privilege of spending a few hours with this man of God back in the early 1970's. Dr. Orr was visiting our church in Miami. The associate pastor invited us to join them after the service for a time of fellowship. I will always cherish those few hours. I suppose what impressed me most about this man was his tremendous breadth of knowledge and wisdom, and the genuine humility with which he shared it. In retrospect, I came to understand that he was a lot like Jesus His Lord.

Years later I discovered that he had written the lyrics of one of my favorite songs — *Search Me, O God*. Those words have come to my mind often this last week. I now share them with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart today; Try me, O Savior, know my thoughts, I pray.

See if there be some wicked way in me; Cleanse me from every sin and set me free.

I praise You, Lord, for cleansing me from sin; Fulfill Your Word and make me pure within.

Fill me with fire where once I burned with shame; Grant my desire to magnify Your Name.

Lord, take my life, for I would live for You; Fill my poor heart with Your great love so true.

Take all my will, my passion, self, and pride; I now surrender; Lord, in me abide.

O Holy Spirit, revival comes from You; Send a revival, my own heart renew. Your Word declares You will supply our need; For blessings now, O Lord, I humbly plead.

May our Lord Jesus place this same desire within each one of us. This prayer, offered to God with sincerity and brokenness, could trigger a transformation in someone's life this week. That's how God sends revival to churches—one saint at a time. He is no respecter of persons. Will it begin with you?

Reflections on Revival

Last Sunday evening I shared my personal expectations for our revival meeting with Brother Dannie Williams. They were (1) A renewed sense of God's greatness and glory, (2) An awareness of God's displeasure in those areas of my life where I fail Him, and (3) A dose of spiritual encouragement based on the fact that Jesus is worthy! I can honestly say that all of those expectations were met! Those who came faithfully each night were rewarded with true spiritual food from a genuine man of God.

On Sunday evening we heard a message from I Chronicles 4:9-10 about Jabez, and the godly ambition expressed by this man in his pray to God. He prayed: "*Oh, that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me!*" The Scripture says: "*God granted him that which he requested.*" We were challenged to take up that petition as our own. We were reminded that God cannot be out-dreamed or over-asked, and that He can make more out of us than we can make of ourselves. No man who serves an infinite God should settle for an average life.

On Monday evening we heard a message from Matthew 18:21-35 regarding the sin of unforgiveness in the life of one that had been forgiven. We all have sin debts that are like checks drawn against ourselves. There is a payday coming when God will cash those checks! Those sin debts can be forgiven in the Person of Christ, and through His precious blood. A true grasp the magnitude of our sin against God, and the degree to which we have been forgiven, is the foundation upon which we can offer forgiveness to those who sin against us.

A salvation message from Isaiah 55:1-7 was delivered on Tuesday evening. We were told that the soul thirsty for God, a heart coming to the waters of salvation for a spiritual drink, was likened to a bag of money—the currency of repentance and faith to which God would respond! God issues gentleman-like invitations to sinners. Apart from these invitations, sinful men are unable to respond. Thus sinners should come when they can!

The message on Wednesday began in Romans 3:18: "*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*" This is the bottom line explanation for the pervasive evils of our day. It applies to both the saved and the lost. Men sin against God with indifference due to a lack of godly and reverential respect. They have no fear of God, or for the consequences of their actions. The Bible says that judgment must begin at the house of God. How can any church operating with a fear deficiency expect sinners to bow their knee to the Christ they claim to serve?

The Significance of Christmas

We have come to that time again when the focus of the Christian world is upon the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is right that we should do so! Against the backdrop of carnal commercialism that has come to characterize Christmas for a lost and dying world, God's people should take this opportunity to ponder the significance of God manifested in the flesh, and focus our thoughts upon the wonder of it all! We should seize the opportunity for worship! Have you considered lately where any of us would be without Him?

The question is often asked, "What is the most significant event in human history?" My response to that question has always been the death that Jesus suffered on the Cross, both as a satisfaction for Divine justice and as a substitution for sinners. I have not changed my view on that issue. Perhaps that question is too narrow in its scope, forcing us to exclude from the answer other events just as significant! Specifically, how would the Cross be possible without the Incarnation of Christ? How would we know that the death of Jesus was a full satisfaction of Divine justice for our sins without the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead? The answers to these questions are rather obvious, are they not? The Cross of Jesus Christ, as the central redemptive act of God, is not a standalone event!

Christmas is the time that we celebrate the invasion of God into human history, the manifestation of God in the flesh! The body that was first formed in the womb of Mary by the Holy Ghost, laid in a manger, nailed to an old rugged cross, laid in the tomb, and resurrected in glorified fashion, is the same body in which He rules from the Father's right hand! This same Jesus shall return in like manner as the disciples saw Him go!

Christmas represents the means whereby God provided for sinners a way of salvation and deliverance from their sins. Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift!