

Truth On Fire

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Comfort the Feeble-minded

In the closing words of his first epistle to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul issued a number of admonitions. Among them was the command to "*comfort the feeble-minded*" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). There is a two-fold challenge. First, we must identify who these feeble-minded are. Second, we must understand what it means to minister comfort to these individuals.

The Greek word translated "feeble-minded" is actually a combination of the word *oligos* (meaning "small") and the word *psuche* (meaning "soul"). Thus the word signifies the small-souled Christian, and carries with it the idea of despondency. That is, the feeble-minded saint is one who suffers from a spirit of depression and hopelessness. God's promises have faded from their spiritual radar screen. Confidence and courage have been lost. These are the disheartened, the faint of heart.

Is this a description of you? I believe all of God's children suffer from this condition from time to time. The fiery prophet Elijah found himself in this very state of mind as he sat under the infamous juniper tree, and eventually fled to a cave in mount Horeb for protection from an ungodly national leadership. He saw the nation as mired in Baal worship, corrupt and hopeless, and himself as the last voice for truth. His spirit of dejection manifested itself in self-pity and a desire for death.

How do you deal with the feeble-minded? The Scripture says we ought to comfort them. This word "comfort" means to come alongside with soothing speech. It conveys the idea of firmness mingled with tenderness. The problem with the feeble-minded is that circumstances have obscured reality as it is in Christ. The spirit is despondent without a basis in reality. Comforters are those who understand the fragile spiritual condition of the feeble-minded, and play the role of tenderhearted and truth-centered cheerleader. In Elijah's case, God sent an angel to feed him as he slept under the juniper tree. The angel awoke him, saying, "*Arise, and eat; because the journey is too great for thee*" (1 Kings 19:7). Forty days and nights later, as he lodged in the cave, the Lord Himself spoke to the prophet saying, "*What doest thou here, Elijah?*" (19:9). God reasoned firmly yet tenderly with His prophet. A godly remnant of seven thousand souls remained steadfast in the faith, and there was still work to do. The remedy for Elijah's feeble-mindedness was a fresh expectation of usefulness in service. This resurgence of vision resulted immediately in obedient action, and ultimately in a translation into glory!

Beloved, I offer this word of comfort to the faint of heart. God is sovereign, and still in control! Jesus is Lord, and still at work! He is not finished with any of us! Yes, the journey is too great! However, we have in the Lord Jesus bread sufficient to bring renewed strength and spiritual vitality to those who would meet Him afresh at the foot of the Cross!

The Enemy of Righteousness

We embarked recently upon a study of the enemy of righteousness. The two most common designations given for our foe are Satan and the devil. Perhaps more than any other person, these titles speak volumes about his character and conduct.

Satan means "adversary", and represents one who stands in opposition to the will and purposes of God. He sets himself against all who purpose to live godly in this present world. He is a worthy opponent, and fears no man. Even the apostle Paul acknowledged his ability to "hinder" God-anointed missionary endeavor (I Thessalonians 2:18).

Devil means "slanderer." It is the translation of the Greek *diabolos*, consisting of *dia* ("through"), and *ballo* ("to throw or cast"). He is the diabolical one, hurling slander, accusation and temptation at the people of God. His weapons are designed to rip through the believer like a high-powered rifle round, and inflict damage sufficient to debilitate the spiritual life.

Satan is renowned for his unadulterated malice toward the people of God. His nature is sinister, his tactics masterful. Thus we are compelled to arm ourselves with knowledge for spiritual battle. Paul told the Corinthians, "*We are not ignorant of his devices*" (2 Corinthians 2:11). The word "devices" could legitimately be translated "thought processes." Paul understood the enemy's manner of thinking and how he would impose (if possible) those thought processes upon unwitting or ignorant targets. The context is the unforgiving spirit, which harbors resentment when offended, holds a grudge, and extracts revenge when the opportunity is provided. The plural "devices" suggests a quiver full tactical arrows aimed at distorting the truth, damning the sinner, and devouring the saint. This is why he must be studied.

The Lord Jesus rebuked the tempter saying, "*Get thee hence, Satan*" (Matthew 4:10). He issued a similar rebuke to Peter saying: "*Get thee behind me, Satan*" (Mark 8:33). The first of these came after the third and final temptation in the wilderness. The second came as Jesus was preparing his disciples for his passion and death. In both cases opposition was being offered to the purposes of God. God's plan was to establish His Son as Lord and Christ, King of kings, and Lord of lords.

In order for Jesus to accomplish this, the most powerful of kings would have to be conquered and destroyed. His name is Death! It was the devil who had the power of death. Both Satan and Peter were advocating the establishment of a kingdom that did not include death as a prerequisite. Jesus knew that such a course of action would ultimately render Him a second-rate king. A crown without a redeeming death would have allowed the devil to retain that power, leaving sinners hopelessly lost in his grip.

Comparing these two episodes instructs us that the child of God himself can become Satan's accomplice if he adopts a worldly mindset. Thank God Jesus never flinched or deviated from His purpose!

Giant Killer or Grasshopper?

Are you a giant killer or a grasshopper? This question seldom arises in our consciousness. Only occasionally does it create a blip on our spiritual radar screen. It does, however, carry huge significance for God's people both as individuals and as congregations. Our self-perception is directly linked to our vision of God!

The children of Israel struggled with this very issue. They were at the threshold of entering the land of promise. The Lord had spoken to Moses saying, "*Send thou men, that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel*" (**Numbers 13:2**). Twelve men were sent — one per tribe. The land was already theirs by promise. This search was not ordered as a feasibility study. It was designed to be an evaluation of the land and its occupants. It was inevitable that in sizing up the opposition, God's people would be required to size up their God! So it is with us!

Two of these men — Joshua and Caleb — saw the enemy from God's perspective, and in the context of His promises. They sought to make the case for faith, saying, "*If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us...only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the Lord is with us: fear them not*" (**14:8-9**). They reckoned correctly that this was a matter of obedience, not simply mindset. Failure to adopt God's view of the situation would constitute rebellion.

Ten of those men came back with this report: "*We saw the giants, the sons of Anak...and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight*" (**13:33**). God and His promises were omitted from their calculations. It must be recognized that these men brought back more than a *negative* report. In God's reckoning, it was an *evil* report. Their fear became infectious, and reached epidemic proportions! The fearful wept, murmured and complained, and ultimately turned hostile as they spoke of stoning the only two men willing to believe God!

The bottom line is that Israel had two choices. The first was to embrace the promise, and envision the giants through God's eyes. The second was to allow their perception of reality to trump revelation. For Joshua and Caleb, the revelation was the reality! This is true of every Christian and congregation determined to walk by faith, and not by sight! The result is God's pleasure!

The sad conclusion of this episode is the disqualification and death of those who refused to believe. God continued to care for and feed them for the next forty years during the prolonged death march. But they forfeited His best! Embracing and acting upon God's promises enables the believer to walk with the Lord, and experience His greatness as well as His goodness. So how is it with you? Giant killer or grasshopper?

The Local Church—A Special Entity

Clint Akins is a close friend of mine. He has spent the last 17 years serving as a missionary in the island country of Madagascar. He is one of my heroes! We attended both college and seminary together (Tennessee Temple and Mid-America Baptist). Both of us were privileged to pastor churches during our seminary days. I was reminded recently of an incident that took place in the small Missouri town where Clint ministered.

After a year of knocking on doors, and spreading his God-given grace and compassion throughout the area, a handful of city leaders came to his home one night for a visit. Their purpose was to encourage and enlist him to run for Mayor of the city in an upcoming election. I will never forget His response to these men! With clear and unwavering resolve he said, "Men, I already have the most important job in this town! Why would I want to step down, and run for mayor?" Brethren, this is genuine heavenly perspective!

So what makes the local church such a special entity? Among the revelations of Scripture is the truth of I Timothy 3:15, which defines the house of God as *"the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."* Paul instructed Timothy that the very nature of its Founder is sufficient to govern the behavior of its membership, beginning with its leaders. After all, we are dealing with the Living God!

The title *"living God"* has an enlightening Biblical background! It is found 31 times in Scripture—15 in the Old Testament, and 16 in the New. The first usage is found in Deuteronomy 5. That context has Israel at the foot of Sinai, and God's awesome presence at the summit. The law was dispensed, accompanied by God's audible voice, deafening thunder, and a consuming fire. The nation feared for their lives in the presence of God's manifested glory! In verse 26 they inquired, *"For who is there of all flesh, that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire as we have, and lived?"* After 400 years of exposure to a myriad of lifeless Egyptian deities, the sons of Abraham encountered a living God Who does indeed speak to sinners, and allows them to live! He is a God of glory and greatness who inspires awe in those to whom He reveals Himself. It is significant that *"the living God"* was a title first ascribed to Him by men.

This truth adds insight to the first New Testament usage of that title. In Matthew 16:16, Peter averred, *"Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God."* The knowledge that he had experienced God in the flesh came by revelation from the Father. From his Old Testament background, Peter was essentially saying this: "The living God Who revealed Himself to our forefathers was powerful in presence, thundering in His speech, awe-inspiring in His acts, and compassionate to sinners! You are just like Him! You must be His Son!"

Friends, this is the God of the local church! Is he your God?

Keys to Kingdom Usefulness

In a recent Pastor's Pen article regarding our enemy the devil, reference was made to the disciple Peter as he suffered a rebuke from our Lord. He and his fellow followers had heard the predictions regarding the Lord's death at Jerusalem. The specific text is Matthew 16:21-23. Peter had just confessed that Jesus was the Messiah—the Christ, the son of the living God (16:16). In so doing he received from his Lord a pronouncement of blessing. The revelation Peter had received from the Father had resulted in saving faith. We who have established a relationship with Jesus Christ understand this pattern of grace—a revelation, a reception, and a relationship.

Our text, however, reveals a sobering analysis of Peter's response to those predictions. Our Lord's response to Peter's verbal opposition to His death should stir us to spiritual sobriety. We ourselves, brethren, are capable of the same pitfalls that brought a firm rebuke to Peter from His Lord.

Peter fell short of Christ's expectations in two ways. First, there was a problem with his **mentality**. The word "*savourest*" (v. 23) is the Greek *froneo*, meaning "to mind, to think." Jesus was referring to Peter's mindset, which was dominated by the reason of man rather than the revelation of God. The verb is singular. Peter alone is the object of the rebuke. It is also present tense, indicating an ongoing tendency to be dominated by reason. The voice is active, suggesting that Peter's faulty thinking was not due to outside influences, which a passive voice would have suggested. He has acted on his own. Brethren, in this age of success-oriented religion we must be sure that our mentality about ministry reflects God's mind rather than the mind of this age. The preaching of the Cross is still the power of God!

Secondly, there was a problem with his **utility**. The issue of usefulness in kingdom work should be at the top of our list of life's priorities. Peter's utility factor was at the bottom. It was diminished because his mentality had placed him in an adversarial role. The word "*Satan*" means adversary. The command "*Get thee behind*" is the Greek word *hupago* meaning "to bring under." Jesus was admonishing Peter to bring himself under the authority of his Lord rather than injecting his controls into the situation. The potential is within us all to do the same, with the unsavory prospect of playing an adversarial role.

It was also diminished when he became a ministerial roadblock. The word "*offence*" is *skandalon*, which means a baited snare or trap. The ministry of Christ required a sacrificial death for sinners. Peter had actually become an obstacle to that end.

Our utility, brethren, depends upon our yieldedness to Christ's Lordship and our faithfulness to proclaim a Gospel of blood atonement for sinners. Thankfully, Peter resolved these issues and experienced great usefulness in the kingdom. Let us go and do likewise!

The Primacy of God's Presence

The Lord spoke these words to Moses at a critical juncture in Israel's history: "*My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest*" (Exodus 33:14). A series of devastating plagues, including the death of every first-born male in Egypt, had brought Pharaoh to a place of capitulation in releasing God's people. Israel, by God's direction and under Moses' leadership, found them-selves encamped by the Red Sea between the proverbial rock and hard place.

As the armies of Pharaoh approached, the people accused Moses of leading them into the wilderness to die because of the lack of graves in Egypt. What they failed to realize was that God had planned this close encounter in order to get glory for Himself at Pharaoh's expense. The pillar of the cloud that was before them repositioned itself behind them, and prevented the enemy from advancing. A strong east wind blew all night, and parted the Red Sea waters. Israel moved across on dry ground. The Egyptians were later drawn into God's trap, and drowned in the midst of the sea.

God brought the nation to Sinai, and there gave them His law. Idolatry broke out during Moses' absence. God was prepared to destroy the nation. The intercession of Moses spared them God's immediate judgment. It also meant that Moses would continue to lead, and take full responsibility for, these millions of people as they moved through uncharted waters.

The task was formidable! Consider the challenges! Israel had no standing army, no combat veterans. Yet they were surrounded by a host of nations possessing skilled and fearless warriors. What about infrastructure? We take for granted the resources available to us to obtain food, clothing, and shelter. Israel had no such access. What about waste disposal? What about judicial matters, and the resolution of conflicts? Moses had his hands full with a nation facing potential hardships on every front. Few leaders in history have carried the burdens borne by this man. If Moses had resigned, and God had put up a job posting, would you have applied?

The Scripture before us reveals God's answer to Moses' chief concern. One thing was needful, and that was an assurance of His abiding presence. Moses had said, "*See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me*" (33:12). Again, "*If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence*" (33:15). The practical and logistical concerns were important. Yet in Moses' mind there was but one overriding necessity! God's manifested and abiding presence among the people!

Moses understood what modern-day religious leaders have apparently failed to learn. It is **the cloud**, not **the crowd**, which makes all the difference! Will you join me in praying that God's presence and power will be the abiding experience of this fellowship? Omit this, and it matters not what else we do!

Is Failure Always Fatal?

Several years ago I wrote this adage in the back of my Bible: "There is nothing fatal about failure, and nothing final about success!" Every spiritual success must be seasoned with appreciation for the grace of God, knowing that today's manna will not suffice for tomorrow. Every spiritual failure can be assigned a cause, and appropriate Biblical measures taken to remedy defeat. I would like to make two points about failure.

First, it may be said that failure is oftentimes unavoidable! In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus offered this admonition to Peter and the disciples: "*What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*" (26:40-41). The scene is the garden of Gethsemane. The Lord is agonizing, and the disciples are sleeping! The verbs "watch" and "pray" are plural and imperative. It is the group as a whole that is admonished. The second verb "pray" is middle voice, signifying that prayer under these trying circumstances was in the disciples' personal and best interest. They would be the direct benefactors of prayerfulness! One hour was not too much to ask, and temptation was the alternative.

The urging of Jesus went unheeded, and at His third return they hear the words, "*Sleep on now*" (26:45). These words are pregnant with significance! What Jesus essentially told these men was that their failure was assured. The opportunity for prayer preparation was gone! Failure was unavoidable! Brethren, God's historical time clock moves on, with us or without us. Windows of opportunity open, and then they close! Our failure to watch and pray makes spiritual failure unavoidable! God graciously grants windows of opportunity for pastors, churches, marriages and nations. Sadly, the opportunities slip away, and Jesus says, "Sleep on now! Failure in spiritual combat is unavoidable!"

Second, it may be said that failure is sometimes unacceptable! Take the example of Jonah, who was commanded by God to proclaim repentance to Nineveh. He fled from the presence of the Lord by paying the fare for a ship to Tarshish. In the midst of the ensuing storm he was "fast asleep" in the sides of the ship (Jonah 1:5). In verse 6 the shipmaster inquires, "*What meanest thou, O sleeper?*"

So here is another sleeper content to allow a window of opportunity to pass him by. But for Jonah failure was unacceptable! Instead of saying, "Sleep on now Jonah! I have another prophet! You've blown it, son!" God releases the hounds of goodness and mercy on His man, and brings the reluctant preacher to the wicked city of Nineveh. God works His pity and compassion in spite of the prophet!

O wonder of wonders, my friend, that God in His sovereign pleasure chooses to use any of us for His purposes and glory! Praise God that our failures are not always fatal!

What Type of Church Member?

Ask ten people to provide their definition of a good church member and you'll receive ten different responses. This disparity of answers is traceable to differing degrees of Biblical understanding. I would expect some responses to sound something like this: "Well preacher, I just don't think that being a member of any church is that important. It sure can't get you to heaven, right?" I agree that church membership is never the foundation upon which God justifies sinners. However, the testimony of Scripture affirms that both identity and involvement with a local body of believers is a fruit of genuine discipleship. So then, is church membership a requirement for salvation? No! Is it an evidence of one's desire to walk with God in holiness and power? Absolutely!

There are three distinct types of church members. The first is the **nominal** member. They take comfort in the fact that they have a membership somewhere. It is often a sentimental thing. It may be a thousand miles and twenty years removed from their current situation, and have no spiritual or practical value whatsoever. This does not matter. This is their membership, and they're sticking to it! They may attend other churches along the way, but have no intent to join.

The second is the **marginal** member. These actually move their membership after relocation. Perhaps they have belonged to the same church for years. They made a profession of faith in Christ, and were baptized into a membership. There exists, however, no evidence of spiritual vitality or growth. They attend church ...sporadically! Sunday morning is usually sufficient to satisfy their need for involvement. They give an occasional financial gift, but tithing is out of the question. They are the first to complain that the church cannot meet its financial objectives or keep a full-time pastor, and the last to realize that they are the main problem. The word "commitment" is a foreign spiritual concept.

The third is the **functional** member. These place a high priority upon the kingdom of God as expressed by the local church. They love truth, and long to hear it proclaimed! They desire to serve, and employ their gifts and talents. They reckon the Lord as creditor number one, and render tithes and offerings to Him faithfully. They understand that a direct relationship exists between local church outreach and the degree of spiritual light and or darkness within their community. In short, they love the things that Jesus loves, and set their priorities accordingly!

I would challenge each of us to make an honest categorical assessment. The bottom line is this. Only the **functional** are reckoned among the **faithful**! I have come to rejoice in my status as a bivocational pastor! Why? It provides an opportunity to minister the truth to a minority of functional members who would otherwise be spiritual and financial victims of the nominal and marginal.

A Disciple Indeed!

Discipleship is a dominant theme in the New Testament. Jesus used the word *disciple* extensively throughout His teaching ministry to identify His followers. The commission He gave the church to *teach all nations* was essentially a command to make disciples. Luke the physician, as he chronicled the early years of the church in the book of Acts, referred to bands of believers as *disciples* on several occasions. The apostle Paul used the word *servants* to describe those who had willingly placed themselves under the authority of Jesus Christ.

The word disciple means "learner, follower." It refers to one who holds another person (as to character, manner of life, and teachings) in such high esteem that they desire to emulate this individual. The teacher thus becomes the mentor, and the disciple seeks to incorporate their philosophy into their own thinking and behavior.

Practical illustrations of this concept abound. Tiger Woods has become the golfing ideal for many of his fellow competitors. His swing mechanics, coupled with his attitude and work ethic, have become the standard for success. Michael Jordan had the same impact. Commercialism capitalized on his hard court success when young people would say; "I want to be like Mike!" Karl Marx, the father of militant communism, continues to wield his influence. The halls of government and universities are full of his devotees, advocating godless humanism and the redistribution of wealth as the keys to building a great society.

This leads us to the fundamental question, "Whose disciple am I?" In the light of eternity and the judgment to come, the wise individual gladly affirms, "I am a disciple of Jesus Christ!" There is no greater Person—He is God in the flesh! There is no greater accomplishment—He became sin for us, Who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him! There is no greater conquest—He conquered death, Hell, and the grave via His resurrection! There is no greater body of teaching—every word that proceeded from His lips was truth! There is no greater love! There is no greater future! There is no greater hope! There is no greater deliverance! There is no greater peace! There is no greater joy! There is none so worthy as the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!

Friend, are you His disciple? Do you esteem His character, conduct and creeds as worthy of pursuit? Are you willing to abandon your self-interests to His? Can you say with the apostle Paul, "*I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day*"? Beloved, *that day* is fast approaching! It's time to cast our lot with Jesus Christ, and leave the ranks of the uncommitted! It is time to be a disciple indeed!

Wanted: Men of Activity!

The Proverbs tell us that when a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him (Proverbs 16:7). The relationship that existed between Pharaoh and Joseph is one of many illustrations of this principle. Joseph's strength of character and resolve for purity ultimately took him from prison to become second in command in Egypt. In this regard, he pictured the Christ to come.

Jesus went to the cross of Calvary as a lamb without blemish and without spot. There he bore our sins in His body on the tree, and endured a suffering worse than Hell itself. He became an inmate of sorts in death's prison house for a period of three days and nights. Death, however, had no claim on this sinless warrior. Divine power released Him from death's grip in glorified fashion. Forty days later He ascended to the Father's right hand, and ever lives to make intercession for those who come unto God by Him.

The favor bestowed upon Joseph continued to manifest itself as the famine in Canaan brought his entire family (esp. his father Jacob and brother Benjamin) into Egypt. Joseph brought five of his brethren to meet Pharaoh. They petitioned him for the land of Goshen where they could maintain their flocks and herds as shepherds. Pharaoh granted their request for Joseph's sake, and went a step further. He authorized Joseph to grant the stewardship of his own cattle to any "*men of activity*" (Genesis 47:6) among Joseph's kin.

The phrase "men of activity" is full of significance. It refers to men who are industrious—hard working and responsible. Joseph himself was a man of activity, and had been given the stewardship of all Pharaoh's possessions. He had already experienced what Pharaoh was now offering to these other brethren. Pharaoh was essentially saying, "Joseph, I will allow those among your kin who share your *character* as men of activity to share your *privileges* as well. I trust your judgment in the matter."

Brethren, our Lord is looking for men of activity to whom He can entrust His riches! His church is in dire straits for men of this caliber. Men of activity are men of vision, engaging themselves in kingdom interests. They consider the stewardship of God's possessions a great privilege and serious responsibility. They are faithful! They honor God with their material and financial substance. They lead their families. They do not need an organized visitation program to evangelize the lost. They are on mission for God! They understand that every advance made in becoming more like the Lord Jesus carries with it additional privileges as a steward. It is the man of activity that experiences God's best!

May our God increase their tribe! Amen!

The Presence of the Lord

David made this inspired assertion at the close of Psalm 16: "*in thy presence is fulness of joy*" (16:11). This axiom was more than a concept with David. It was born of experience. In II Samuel 6, we have the account of the Ark of the Covenant being returned to Israel after David and thirty thousand elite soldiers had smitten the Philistines. The Scriptures tell us that "*David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord on all manner of instruments*" (6:5), that "*David danced before the Lord with all his might*" (6:14), and that "*David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet*" (6:15). Why all the joy and celebration? The Ark, as the centerpiece of tabernacle furniture, signified the return of God's presence, the One Who "*dwelleth between the cherubims*" (6:2).

This was a great day for David. The seat of his reign had recently changed from Hebron to Jerusalem. What better way to establish his throne than to secure God's presence for the kingly tasks ahead! As Moses before him, David esteemed the presence of God as the absolute essential to spiritual success and national prosperity. Read the Psalms, and you'll discover that this "Sweet Singer of Israel" exemplified this principle in his private as well as public life. Oh, what it would mean to God's church today if His people could rediscover this same obsession for His presence, and the fulness of joy that accompanies it.

In contrast to this glorious experience, other Biblical references to God's presence bring a moderating sobriety to the issue. Two come to mind. The first is that of Cain. God had offered him acceptance if he would do that which was right regarding obedience in sacrifice. He spurned the offer, and committed murder. The Lord revisited him, and pronounced a curse. He would be a fugitive (on the run) and a vagabond (drifter) all his life. So Cain "*went out from the presence of the Lord*" (Genesis 4:16). How sad are these words! Here was a lost man who encountered God in one-to-one dialogue, but opted to abandon the Lord's presence in pursuit of his selfish lusts.

The second is Jonah. Tasked by God to preach repentance to wicked Nineveh, he chose rather to flee "*from the presence of the Lord*" (Jonah 1:3). The result was turmoil. Here was a saved man whose selfish disobedience placed an entire crew of sailors in jeopardy. He refused to be comforted in spite of severe chastening and a successful mission. He discovered afresh that "*salvation is of the Lord*" (2:10), but continued to wallow in self-pity, anger and displeasure over the display of God's mercy toward the Ninevites.

Conspicuous in the lives of both men was the absence of joy! This vacuum was directly linked to an aversion for God's presence spawned by self-interest. When God's people fail to enjoy God's presence, there is but one cause!

Keep On Running!

One of the athletic metaphors used frequently by the apostle Paul to describe the Christian life is that of the race. In Hebrews 12:1, we find this exhortation: "*Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.*" We derive our English word "agony" from the Greek word translated "race." It signifies struggle and conflict, and speaks of an arduous trek as opposed to a jog through the park. It has little or no relationship to the modern-day religious huckster who preaches a health-and-wealth gospel from a glittering television studio. It rather depicts the uphill, upstream struggle of true believers seeking to live godly in the midst of a wicked and perverse world.

This race is *set before us*. Jesus Himself was engaged in a race. He revealed on several occasions the exact nature of His race—doing the will of the Father! Beloved, this is our race as well. The servant is not greater than his Lord. Simply stated, the race that is set before us is that of doing the will of God!

How shall we then run? First, we must run circumspectly. That is, we must look around, and be aware of those who are watching us. In my view, the *great cloud of witnesses* represents the world. They are constantly observing the conduct of those who claim to know God. Do you want an accurate assessment of your race progress? Ask an unsaved co-worker, neighbor, or family member. The witness they offer will likely be on target!

Second, we must run patiently. The phrase *with patience* speaks of an abiding under the load, a sticking with the task, a refusal to quit. The verb form of this noun is found in 12:2. It is said that Jesus *endured* the cross. Patience is cultivated through tribulation. The cross of Jesus represented the ultimate hardship! Has your burden exceeded His?

Third, we must run efficiently. This requires laying aside *every weight*. These are the distractions of life that slow us down. These activities are not inherently sinful. They do, however, make it more difficult to get the will of God done. They are the equivalent of football play-action. Misdirection puts the defensive player out of position to make the play. Would you say that you are in position with regard to God's will, or misdirected?

Fourth, we must run courageously. The phrase *the sin which doth so easily beset us* speaks of the specific sin of discouragement. This is why 12:3 tells us to consider the endurance of Jesus, lest our minds become *wearied and faint*. We are beset (well-surrounded) daily with many reasons to abandon the race. Many have succumbed to the sin of discouragement. The courageous are those who consider Christ. They anticipate sharing ultimate victory and joy with their Lord simply because they kept on running!

Our Most Valuable Asset

Shock waves of anxiety recently rattled the financial markets. The erosive effects of a court ruling against Microsoft continue to chisel away at NASDAQ tech stocks. The plunge in Microsoft stock itself has now cost Bill Gates (on paper) an estimated 20 billion dollars. Fears of inflation and higher interest rates swept the market Friday, resulting in a 617-point drop in the Dow Jones Industrial average, the largest single day drop on record. Smart money is now scrambling for safe haven in order to protect financial assets.

Have you considered your spiritual assets? Jesus Christ is "*the same yesterday, today, and forever*" (Hebrews 13:8), as is His inspired and inerrant Word! Its integrity and power are unshakable. It is our most valuable asset!

First, the Word is a revealer. It unfolds to man the person, nature, and work of a righteous and loving God. It is also "*a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*" (Hebrews 4:12). The Scripture says, "*where there is no vision (revelation), the people perish*" (Proverbs 29:18). God's eternal Word, as revelation, is an infinite source of knowledge for the spiritual sojourner.

Second, it is a regenerator. It has the power to impart life to those who believe its message of redemption. Peter informed his audience of readers that they had been "*born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever*" (I Peter 1:23). Paul desired for the Philippians to be "*holding forth the Word of life*" (Philippians 2:16). What other asset do you possess that has this same life-giving power?

Third, it is a cleanser. Jesus said to his disciples, "*Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you*" (**John 15:3**). David provided his own rejoinder when he asked, "*Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy word*" (**Psalms 119:9**). Brethren, it is impossible to walk with God apart from holiness. The word is the cleansing agent provided by our Lord to enable us to walk with Him in sanctification.

Fourth, it is an illuminator. David proclaimed, "*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path*" (**Psalms 119:105**). He further affirmed, "*The entrance of thy words giveth light*" (**130**). God's word illuminates the mind, and dispels the darkness that this world and its god would impose upon us.

Fifth, it is an igniter. The two men to whom Jesus appeared and spoke on the road to Emmaus recounted their experience, saying, "*Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?*" (**Luke 24:32**). Burning hearts are produced by the ingested word! It must be our daily fodder for spiritual fire!

Brethren, while so many contemplate the fragile and temporal nature of monetary assets, let us take time to rejoice in the formidable and eternal nature of God's Word, and recommit ourselves to consuming and living its truth!

God Giveth the Increase!

Have you noticed how rapidly growing church ministries often undergo investigation by church growth experts to determine what mix of ingredients produced that growth? This is especially true of the modern-day Megachurch. These so-called experts identify the methods, and publish their findings. One of the hottest books of the early '70's was "*The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow*" by Elmer Towns. The prospect of replicating such success motivates many pastors in stagnant ministries to buy these books and employ the methodologies. Personally, I find no fault with any pastor wanting to emulate the victories of others for the glory of God! The Scriptures, however, clearly define both the source and the method of genuine church growth.

The apostle Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians: "*Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase*" (I Corinthians 5:5-6). God is the source of all true increase; that is, as God reckons increase. It is the Lord that adds to the church those that are being saved (Acts 2:47).

In the days following the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Ghost, this was a daily occurrence! The increase of God is a matter of sort rather than size, virtue rather than volume, repentance rather than recruitment, and regeneration rather than reformation! The great danger of circumventing these precepts in order to build a crowd is the potential influx of the unregenerate into the membership. This is perhaps the number one problem in the American church today. There is a vast difference between God's increase and a larger crowd!

Paul also said that he and Apollos were *ministers* (servants), human instruments through whom the Lord brought His Gospel. In hearing the Word, the Corinthians believed on the Lord Jesus, and were saved. As servants, God gave Paul and Apollos to the Corinthians. In like manner, God gives planting and watering servants to every believer. We know from II Timothy 2:10 that, in Paul's mind, the words *every man* are equivalent to every *elect* man. In summary, we have here two servant spirits so given to the Lord that He is able to give them to others for the purpose of planting and watering the truth of the Gospel. If you are looking for a God-sanctioned method for increase, you have found it!

Two critical questions arise from this analysis: (1) Is the increase that God gives sufficient for me?, and (2) Am I a servant at heart willing to be given to others by God for the purpose of planting and watering? Blessed are individuals and churches that answer in the affirmative to both queries! Experts and methods are a dime a dozen. God is looking for servants that He can give to others! The servants plant and water. God gives the increase according to His good pleasure! Are you available?

The Sinister Nature of Selfwill

All of us have memories—some bitter, some sweet! The patriarch Jacob was no exception. On his deathbed Jacob recounted perhaps the most disturbing of his memories: the cruelty and slaughter enacted upon Hamor, his son Shechem, and an entire city of recently circumcised men. That incident left a grievous wound in his heart, and an indelible stain upon his mind.

Genesis 33-34 tells us that Jacob had purchased land, built an altar of worship, established a home for his family in Shechem, and cultivated amiable relationships with his neighbors, the Canaanites and Perizzites. The stability he had achieved represented a significant advance upon his days as a fugitive from Esau, and his servitude at the hands of uncle Laban. Jacob had finally begun to realize the fulfillment of God's promise to him years ago at Bethel.

All of these fruits of God's grace were destroyed in a day. His two sons—Simeon and Levi—exacted revenge upon Hamor and his son Shechem, who had defiled their sister Dinah. They conspired to kill with the sword every male in the city, and carried out their plan fiercely and unmercifully. The fear of reprisal from the land's inhabitants caused Jacob to uproot his family, and flee for Bethel under God's direction.

Listen to Jacob's deathbed description of this wicked act as recorded in Genesis 49:6: "and in their selfwill they digged down a wall." What an instructive analysis offered by this 147 year-old man! The essence of their behavior was revealed! It was driven by selfish and impulsive desire without regard for the welfare of others or the disastrous consequences. They were bent on a course of action from which they refused to be deterred. The wall they destroyed was the aforementioned prosperity, stability, and security as a reflection of God's goodness. It was built with blood, sweat, and tears. Jacob, his entire family, and all the inhabitants of the land benefited by this wall that had been erected. These sons did more than break the wall down. They wrecked its foundation! A rebuild was impossible!

Selfwill is a sinister thing! It cost Lucifer his position as an anointed cherub, and secured his eternal damnation in the lake of fire. It is the one sin that sets itself against repentance and surrender to the will of God. It is the sin that damned Cain, and disqualified King Saul. It is the sin that robbed Samson of his power, his ministry, his eyes, and his life. From pulpit to pew, it is the sin that digs down the wall of a church ministry, and frustrates the grace of God.

The remedy for selfwill, and its debilitating effects upon the Lord's church, is repentance wrought by the Spirit of God! The residents of Nineveh would testify to us that a certain kind of repentance is required for both sinners and saints—repentance before it is too late!

Earthen Vessels

The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians that "*we have this treasure in earthen vessels*" (II **Corinthians 4:7**). The earthen vessel was literally a clay pot that might be employed for any number of household purposes—most being rather base or mundane in nature. Is it not amazing that God chose to place His Gospel treasure within such vessels?

I can remember one of my seminary professors, Dr. Tommy Hight, citing these words in one of his favorite admonitions to young pastor-preachers. He would say, "Brethren, in your ministry always remember that God has placed His treasure in earthen vessels, and that sometimes those vessels become mighty earthen!" He was making reference to the people we would pastor as well as to ourselves. In calling attention to this great truth, he sought to instill a sense of personal humility and compassion for people. I am constantly reminded of his wise words, and the earthen nature of these vessels!

Paul also made known God's purpose for implanting such a glorious treasure in such an unlikely place—"that the excellency of the power might be of God, and not of us." God is unlike the average householder in that all of His vessels were both created and purchased by Him. When these earthen vessels appear to excel in the function for which they are employed, it is the owner of the vessel who must be credited for the wise design, the skillful allocation of resources, and the results. How can the earthen vessel claim what rightly belongs to the master of the house?

The fundamental problem in Corinth, which Paul readily addressed in the opening chapter of his first epistle, was that earthen vessels were being exalted as if they actually possessed some inherent ability to produce spiritual fruit. The power of Jesus alone can account for any and all eternal good wrought through His vessels! Jesus Himself said, "*Without me, ye can do nothing*" (John 15:5).

The label *earthen vessel* is cause for humility, which is to be distinguished from low self-esteem. Consider the Master of our spiritual house, and the choice He made regarding us. He foreknew these earthen vessels with all their cracks, blemishes, and rough edges. Yet He set His affection upon them. He determined to save them to the uttermost, and transform them into the very image and likeness of His dear Son.

Brethren, we must always remember that our frailty is God's opportunity to manifest His power and glory! We as God's church are a collection of earthen vessels without regard for talents, gifts and abilities. We must allow this truth to promote humility within, and compassion toward those who are without.

Seeking God Early

The Psalms constitute an unfathomable reservoir of spiritual sustenance for the child of God. Simple utterances have the potential to trigger hours of life-changing meditation. One such example is found in Psalm 63:1, where we find this spontaneous outburst of affirmation from David: "*O GOD, thou art my God; early will I seek thee.*"

The context of this Psalm is I Samuel 23. David's daily agenda was dominated by evading Saul, who sought to kill him. His habitations were the mountains and caves of the wilderness. In all of these perils and trials, the Lord remained the central focus of his life. He longed for God's power and glory to be manifested in his circumstances as well as in the sanctuary (63:2). Men with this kind of desire go a long way with God!

David invokes his Lord by two different names. *GOD* (large case) is the translation of Yahweh or Jehovah. He is the God of covenant, redemption, and Messiah who inhabits eternity and transcends the earthly. *God* (small case) is that of Elohim. He is the Powerful One who condescends to men of low estate, and wields His might in behalf of the weak.

In these two titles, David affirms both the preeminence and the power of his God. In the first usage ("O GOD"), God is his obsession. In the second ("my God"), his possession. How many people do you know who actually possess that with which they are obsessed? Take stock of your own obsessions and possessions! Is God alone at the top of the list? Is having Him enough to satisfy the thirst of your soul?

The number one curse upon the church today is its obsession with everything but God! The indictment brought by Jesus against the church at Ephesus—"*thou hast left thy first love*"—was the systematic erosion of such an obsession. A church doing good things had lost its capacity for the best—a loving obsession for the Lord Jesus Christ!

The words "*early will I seek thee*" represent a godly and practical attitude toward life, a principle that governs daily conduct as an outgrowth of worship. It became part of the woven fabric of David's life, and should likewise become part of ours.

Seeking God early is a guiding mandate! Seek Him early in life before the heart is callused by the effects of sin. Seek Him early in the day before you interact with others. Good days and bad days are usually determined before 7 a.m. in the morning. Seek Him early in the time of crisis before any tendency to manipulate a situation by human machinations robs Him of glory. Seek His mastery early in the time of temptation before sin has an opportunity to master you. Seek Him early before every decision. You will subsequently be rejoicing in His wisdom rather than regretting your oversights.

Brethren, make this simple yet profound expression of David a source of personal meditation this week. Mastery of this one principle—seeking God early—is a significant milestone along the path of discipleship! It is also a recipe for God's power and glory!

"I Shall Not Slide"

Have you discovered that God often encapsulates sets of life-changing principles within single verses of Scripture? They represent critical building blocks, and serve as anchors to the soul. They have a certain standalone quality. That is, if the disciple possessed no truth except that revealed in the one verse, and that truth was embedded in the heart and operative in the life, spiritual growth and steadfastness could occur!

I heard Jim Shaw, missionary to the island country of Haiti, speak of a native convert who had become his most fervent and faithful assistant. His description was as follows: "He does my advance work. He prepares villages for my arrival, and assembles them for a Gospel presentation. The only verse of Scripture he knows is John 3:16. But he believes it!" Brethren, more critical than information is implementation! One truth believed is worth a thousand that are merely understood!

Consider Psalm 26:1. David wrote, "*Judge me, O LORD; for I have walked in mine integrity: I have trusted also in the LORD; therefore I shall not slide.*" My attention is immediately arrested by that last phrase: I shall not slide! The Hebrew word translated *slide* means "to waiver", or "make to shake, slide, or slip." The picture is one of unwavering steadfastness in one's walk with God! It suggests the ability to withstand wicked influences from both internal and external sources. This was David's confident expectation. It should ours as well.

In this one verse, the Psalmist reveals three foundation stones to his confidence. The first is scrutiny. The words *judge me* convey an openness to Divine examination. David invites such scrutiny. He wants to know where he stands with his God at all times! Jesus iterated this same principle to Nicodemus when He said, "*But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God*" (John 3:21). Nothing can be hidden from God, and the doer of truth never seeks to do so. Openness to Divine scrutiny is a key ingredient to stability of life!

The second is integrity. He affirms, "I have walked in mine integrity." The Hebrew root for *integrity* means "completeness." When used in a moral sense (as here), it signifies "innocence." David is saying that his conscience is free of offence before God. His attitudes and actions have been governed by truth. He has done the right thing in his dealings with God and men.

The third is dependency. David said, "I have trusted also in the Lord." An attitude of daily and complete dependence upon the God is fundamental to consistency of life! Paul told the Colossians, "*As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him*" (Colossians 2:6). The Lord Jesus is received by faith, resulting in justification. It is the same dependence upon the indwelling Spirit that produces a sanctified and steadfast life.

Brethren, we must embrace the prospect of an unwavering allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. This one verse contains truth sufficient (if believed) to prevent God's people from sliding. Are these three principles permanently embedded in your life?

God's Faithfulness to Forgive

Is it possible to wear out a verse of Scripture? The obvious answer is a resounding "No!" God's eternal truth is never diminished! This question is rather subjective in nature. It suggests that great truths contained in verses with which we have become very familiar can sometimes lose their impact. One such passage is I John 1:9: "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" The context depicts believers having fellowship with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, while walking in the light of truth. A provision is made for the restoration of broken fellowship due to the darkness of sin.

The Lord issues two great promises in this verse. First, He promises to forgive our sins in response to our confession of them. The word confess means "to speak the same." It implies that the believer agrees with God's view of his or her sin, and approaches Him with words that reflect such agreement. According to Proverbs 28:13, an integral part of confessing sin is forsaking it. Second, He promises to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. This is significant because it calls attention to the infinite holiness of God, and His mercy regarding our frailty and failure. The holiest man or woman is tainted with imperfections that he or she cannot possibly comprehend. This merciful provision of forgiveness through confession extends to our ignorance as well. Brethren, there is much grace here for which we ought to be exceeding grateful!

The foundation upon which forgiveness is granted is the very character of God Himself. He is faithful and just. Faithfulness implies that God is true to His Word, and will always act in agreement with it. There is no variation in Him! He is changeless! He is dependable! God's people can derive much encouragement from His faithfulness to forgive and to cleanse when He is approached with a contrite spirit of confession. Thomas O. Chisholm wrote these words: "Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father, There is no shadow of turning with Thee; Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not; As Thou hast been, Thou forever wilt be." Amen!

God's faithfulness works in tandem with His justice. He is just! This is a legal term signifying that God has extracted the full penalty for our sins! This payment was made on the cross of Calvary, where Jesus was made "*sin for us, Who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him*" (II Corinthians 5:21). Jesus and His precious blood are the full satisfaction for our sins. Justice has been served, and therefore forgiveness can be granted! God's justice teaches us that there is no free ride where sin is concerned!

Brethren, each time we enter our prayer closets, let us reflect upon the Divine justice that laid the groundwork for the forgiveness we seek and the faithfulness we expect! This will ensure that I John 1:9 never gets worn out!

The Lord's Table

The church at Corinth was a labor of love for the apostle Paul. In a vision, the Lord had guaranteed His own abiding presence as well as Paul's personal safety, assuring the apostle that He had "*much people in this city*" (Acts 18:10). Thus he "*continued a year and six months, teaching the Word of God among them*" (18:11). God's promises enabled Paul to hang tough through much turmoil. In his first epistle, however, we find a people rich in spiritual gifts being admonished for their recklessness in spiritual matters. Rich and reckless — a fitting description for many churches in our day!

The list of problems addressed by Paul included the Lord's Supper (11:18-34). The post-Pentecostal church had apparently made this observance ancillary to the fellowship meals they enjoyed together. Paul no doubt instructed the Corinthians in this matter. He may have used the Jerusalem church as a model. The Corinthians, however, had turned this spiritual high-water mark event into an occasion for self-indulgence. An ordinance designed to promote spiritual sobriety had become a cause for notoriety!

Paul's teaching sets forth at least four distinct purposes for the Supper. The first is reflection. He quotes the Lord, saying, "*This do in remembrance of me*" (11:24). The Lord's Supper is an antidote for the forgetfulness that fosters spiritual neglect, and provokes memories of Christ's sacrificial love and suffering for us!

The second is proclamation. Paul added, "*Ye do shew the Lord's death*" (11:26). The word *shew* is the Greek *katangelo*. It combines the word *angelo* (to announce) with the preposition *kata* (down) for intensity. It denotes a dominating declaration, a forceful announcement. The Lord's Supper is a declaration of the Gospel! The bread and the cup proclaim the value of the Lord's atoning death for sinners!

The third is anticipation. The words "*till he come*" (11:26) set before us the reality of His imminent coming! Each observance in His absence reminds us that one day we will worship and fellowship in His presence! The temporal will ultimately yield to the eternal!

The fourth is examination. Paul said, "*But let a man examine himself*" (11:28), and taught that we should "*judge ourselves*" (11:31). The word *examine* means "to put to the test (for the purpose of approving or disapproving)." The word *judge* means "to separate throughout, to discern, and to scrutinize carefully." Together they paint a picture of personal introspection that is both thorough and uncompromising with regard to sin and holiness. The saint who fails at this point eats and drinks unworthily. The consequences for this lack of discernment include physical illness, and perhaps death. The Supper is a serious matter with God!

Brethren, the Lord never prescribed specific time frames for the observance of His Supper. His simple guideline was *as often as ye eat and drink*. May the Lord grant us sanctifying grace as often as we approach His table, and partake!

Support Your Local Pastor!

The apostle Paul wrote these words to Timothy: "*Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture saith, 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn.'* And, '*The laborer is worthy of his reward*" (I Timothy 5:17-18). I received a paper recently entitled *A Laborer Worthy of Honor*, author unknown. The contents are directed toward church members regarding support of their pastor. The excerpts that follow are a combination of tongue-in-cheek humor, harsh reality, and practical suggestions for wise congregations.

"The Perfect Pastor — He is 28 years old, and has 30 years experience. He smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. He makes 15 calls a day to church families, shut-ins, and the hospitalized. He spends all his time evangelizing the unchurched, and he is always in his office when needed. He has a burning desire to work with teenagers, and spends all of his time with the senior citizens. He is wonderfully gentle, always knows just the right thing to say, and (of course) he's handsome. He's very fit, and loves to sample everyone's most fattening dishes at the potluck. He preaches exactly 20 minutes, and sits down. He condemns sin, but never steps on anyone's toes. He works from 8am till 12am, and is also the janitor. He makes \$250 a week, tithes, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a new car, and gives about \$200 a week to the poor. Unfortunately, he burned himself out, and last week moved out to Montana, and took up cattle ranching.

Why Pastors Need Support — 80% believe pastoral ministry has affected their families negatively. 33% say that ministry is outright hazardous to their family. 75% report a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry. 50% feel unable to meet the job demands. 90% feel they were inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands. 70% say they have a lower self-image than when they started in the ministry. 40% report a serious conflict with a church member at least once a month. 70% do not have someone they can call a close friend.

Practical Ways to Support Your Pastor — Go out of your way to encourage him. Write him notes or letters expressing appreciation for work well done. Honor him with an annual Pastor Appreciation Day. Remember him on his birthday. Pay him enough that he can take care of his family. Join him in the Lord's work. Make sure he takes off a day each week. Give him time for personal spiritual renewal. Make sure he gets away for annual vacation. Provide for a sabbatical leave every five years. Whenever possible, give him the benefit of the doubt."

Brethren, it's time for the church to recognize that pastors are not superhuman. They are common men with an uncommon calling! They are on the cutting edge of spiritual warfare! They merit the support of their congregations to the extent they honor God's truth, and feed the sheep! A wise congregation appreciates the service rendered by their pastor, and finds tangible ways to express that appreciation.

The Shepherd's Promise

Many Gospel presentations have been prefaced by these words from Jesus Christ: "*I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly*" (John 10:10b). The promise of life, and that on a higher plateau, is cause for any wise individual to give an ear. The phrase *I am come* introduces His stated purpose, which is one of several in Scripture. In this same context, for example, our Lord said, "*For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind*" (John 9:39). When the Pharisees heard this, they responded with "*Are we blind also?*" (9:40). You can sense their sarcasm! In their self-righteousness they disavowed Christ, and suffered the judgment of eternal blindness. Those who believed on Him out of their sense of need were granted spiritual sight as a gift of grace. In His continuing discourse, Jesus identified those who will receive spiritual sight as His sheep.

The pronoun *they* in this context has specific reference to the sheep. The Scripture declares unequivocally that Jesus tasted death for every man (Hebrews 2:9), and that He is the Saviour of all men, especially believers (I Timothy 4:10). It also affirms that Jesus came to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:25), and to lay down His life for the sheep (John 10:11). The sheep are the special objects of the Shepherd's redemptive love! And believing sheep ought to share the heartbeat of their Shepherd for gathering the sheep that remain lost!

The Lord's purpose regarding the sheep is twofold. First, He came that they might have spiritual life. This is eternal life. It is the very life of God planted within the bosom of every believer by the Spirit of God. It is the antithesis of spiritual death. Men who are dead in trespasses and sins are capable of many monumental achievements, including gracious works of benevolence. These, however, cannot produce spiritual life! The path to life begins by bringing a repentant heart to the Cross of Christ, and dying with Him there! There is no sharing of His life apart from sharing His death. No alternatives exist for resurrection power!

The phrase *more abundantly* is the translation of the Greek *perissos*. It signifies that which is over and above, or beyond measure. In Romans 3:1, it is translated "advantage" with regard to what God gave the Jews over and above what was given to the Gentiles: namely, revelation and promises. The Jews had a distinct advantage! In Mark 6:51, it is rendered "beyond measure" to describe the amazement with which the disciples beheld the immediate cessation of a violent storm. They had seen nothing like it before. Our Lord's display of power exceeded their previous experiences and expectations!

Brethren, the life that Jesus provides for His sheep is dynamic, not static! The more abundant life means that we have great advantages over this world. We can expect Jesus to exceed our expectations on a regular basis! We can stand upon His promises, walk in His power, and watch Him work His wonders as the world gropes in darkness! Is the Shepherd's purpose being fulfilled in you?

All Things Possible with God

In Mark 10:17-27, the Lord Jesus taught his disciples that rich men enter the kingdom with great difficulty. The occasion was the rich young ruler, who had come to Jesus with this question: "*Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?*" The title with which he addressed the Lord brought this immediate response: "*Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.*" Some liberal interpreters cite this text as proof that Jesus disavowed his own Deity. This is clearly not the case. The critical point made by Jesus was whether this man who was willing to call Jesus "Good" was also willing to call Him "God"! This same point remains applicable today!

The Lord provided a list of commandments, to which the rich man replied, "*Master, all these have I observed from my youth up.*" Some have misconstrued our Lord's teaching to mean that eternal life comes through law keeping. Jesus actually employed the law in a lawful manner; that is, as a mirror of God's perfect standard of righteousness. In his reflection, the sinner beholds his moral failure and unrighteous condition. Jesus knew that this man was guilty of covetousness. It was the one stronghold of sin in his heart that prevented repentance and Kingdom entrance.

The Scripture says, "*Jesus beholding him loved him*" (v.20). The word *behold* is *emlepo*, a combination of *blepo* (to look intently) and the prefix *em* (in, internal and emphatic). It is a past participle. The sense is *having looked he loved*. Jesus saw the quagmire of sin that gripped this man's soul. Nothing escaped His internal scrutiny. Loved is *agapao*, meaning "sacrificial love." Does this not epitomize God's love for sinners? Jesus saw every detail of this man's heart, yet determined to sacrifice for him. He also determined to tell Him the truth, even if that truth drove him away. That truth was "*One thing thou lackest!*"

Jesus instructed this man to sell what he had, and give it to the poor, in order to have treasure in heaven. He added, "*Come, take up thy cross, and follow me.*" The rich man "*was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions.*" The Puritan John Trapp said, "They are fools that fear to lose their wealth by giving it, but fear not to lose themselves by keeping it." This rich man may have been eternally lost, but not for lack of love or truth!

Upon the rich man's departure, Jesus spoke of the difficulty of salvation for those who have and trust in riches. The issue was misplaced trust. The words *hardly* and *hard* are the translation of *duskolos*, meaning "difficult to satisfy." It is difficult for any man to find satisfaction in eternal things when his confidence lies in temporal things! Jesus added, "*With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible.*"

The preposition *with* is *para*, meaning "along side of, in the presence of" someone or something. Jesus taught that no rich man is able to cross the bridge of properly placed trust with the help of a mere man. That possibility exists only when God Himself comes alongside to render grace. The inference is that salvation was indeed a possibility for this rich man. A few days later in Jericho, Zacchaeus was also with God in the flesh. The possibility became reality!