

# **Truth On Fire**

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## Faith and Its Assets

One of the chief concerns of this life is the management of financial assets. They come in all shapes and sizes—stocks and bonds, IRAs, 401Ks, commodities, real estate, the cash in your wallet, etc. It has been my experience that most individuals exhibit great concern over these assets if there is the slightest hint of a potential devaluation, and therefore take an appropriate course of action to protect the assets.

There is nothing irregular about such concern. The fact is we would consider any man or woman to be delinquent, and perhaps foolish, who allowed their financial assets to deteriorate without taking measures to prevent or cut the losses. Now, if financial assets can generate such concern when placed in jeopardy, how much more should endangerment to our faith assets concern us?

The apostle Peter addressed the readers of his Second Epistle as "*them that have obtained like precious faith with us*" (II Peter 1:1). The verb *obtained* is from the Greek **lanchano**, meaning *to obtain by* (the casting of) *lots*. The idea is that sinners come into the possession of saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ by divine allotment. This coincides with the truth that no man can come to the Son unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). God is the initiator and the source of faith that brings salvation. The point is that our faith, if we indeed possess it, is infinitely valuable and precious simply because of the gracious source from which it was derived.

The faith assets to which we referred are itemized as follows: "*And beside this, giving all diligence, add to you faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity*" (II Peter 1:6-7). *Diligence* signifies an intense and best effort to get something done. *Add* is the Greek **epichoregeo** (Eng., choreography). The idea is that the believer is a spiritual choreographer who is responsible for casting faith in a leading role with a full supporting cast.

The cast members include *virtue* (moral excellence that reflects ethical, verbal, and sexual purity), *knowledge* (the discovery and comprehension of the raw data of written revelation), *temperance* (self-control and governance of the inner passions and desires), *patience* (endurance in the will of God while contending for the prize), *godliness* (God-likeness of life that is the fruit of truth obeyed), *brotherly kindness* (tender affection toward our brethren in Christ), and *charity* (sacrificial love characterized by self-denial). That, my friend, is quite a cast! They represent the caliber of life worthy of *divine power* (1:3) and *the divine nature* (1:4). And any choreographer will tell you that great cast members, both leading and supporting, must be developed through years of rigorous study and practice.

Brethren, the Lord Jesus expects us to expend every effort to put this cast together on the stage of life. It is not the will of God that this precious faith should stand alone, but that it should have assets! Faith assets! May the Lord Jesus instill within us the determination to add them, the wisdom to sustain them, and the willingness to protect them at all costs! Amen!

## The Issue of Neglect

The great debate over the Patient's Bill of Rights resumes this week in Washington. The impetus behind this legislation appears to be the issue of neglect. Congress will be seeking answers to questions like "Should any citizen who needs health care be neglected for any reason?" or "To what degree are doctors, Health Maintenance Organizations and employers liable and culpable in the matter of punitive damages if some form of neglect that further imperils the patient can be proven in a court of law?" It is quite easy to understand why potential victims of neglect are supportive of such a Bill, and why the potential targets of litigation over neglect are less than enthusiastic.

The issue of neglect in a Biblical context is every bit as real and immeasurably more serious. Consider the words of king Hezekiah to the priests and Levites as he took the reigns of national leadership: "*My sons, be not now negligent: for the Lord hath chosen you to stand before him, to serve him, and that ye should minister unto him, and burn incense*" (II Chronicles 29:11). According to Hezekiah, his predecessors had *trespassed*, and *done evil in the eyes of the Lord*. They had *forsaken Him*. They had *turned their faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs* (29:6). What a picture of total abandonment! The result was that *filthiness* (the spiritual and moral defilements of idolatry) had filled the holy place (29:5).

It must be asked, my friend, whether an alternative for true worship exists if the holy place is filthy? Hezekiah knew the answer to that question, and set out immediately to clean house. He also understood the elective purpose of God, and therefore summoned the priesthood to spearhead the spiritual turnaround. As we now see America consumed with filthiness, we must ask ourselves whether it would be possible for this condition to prevail to the extent that it does if the saints who comprise local church memberships were cleansed from *all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God* (II Corinthians 7:1)?

The word *negligent* comes from a Hebrew root that means *to mislead*. In the context, it implies that the priests had defaulted in their role as spiritual leaders, and had misled an entire nation by their corrupt example. The blind were leading the blind, and both had fallen into the ditch. Individuals may be characterized as negligent when they fail (due to an extremely careless or casual attitude) to give the proper attention to things within their realm of responsibility. Such were the priests and Levites!

His command to *be not now negligent*, however, was very instructive for these men. First, it carried an indictment of negligence in times past that led to the present. They were both responsible and accountable! Second, it affirmed that the gifts and calling of God were without repentance. They may have abandoned God for a season, but God had not abandoned them! Third, it demonstrates that the great concern of God for His people is what happens NOW! In other words, there was no need for these men to carry the neglects of the past into their future! They had an opportunity *now*—in the present—to effect a dramatic change in the spiritual condition of their nation!

Brethren, I wonder what it is that we have neglected? Is it prayer? Is it meditation in and upon the Word of God? Is it the evangelization of a lost and dying world? Is it quality time with family? Is it the local church? Is it the tasks enjoined upon us by our employer? Is it personal or sexual purity? If we are experiencing deficiencies in these areas, or any number of others, let us resolve to own up to our neglect with confession and cleansing, to embrace afresh the elective purpose of God who has made us kings and priests, and to implore the Lord Jesus for a renewed sense of diligence and duty that we can carry into our future. Amen!

## The Exceeding Greatness of His Power

The apostle Paul made it a regular habit to pray for the saints and churches that the Lord Jesus had enabled him to establish in the faith. In terms of written revelation, no congregation received more intercessory content than did the church at Ephesus. In his first disclosure, he requested that the eyes of their understanding would be enlightened, in order that they “*may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 1:18-20).

The word *know* is from the Greek **eidon**, which refers to the full mental perception of truth coupled with absolute assurance. His use of the phrase *us-ward who believe* indicates that he had placed both himself and his audience on equal footing before God as believers without regard for gifts or vocation. In his three-fold petition, he desires for them to develop a firm grasp upon the *hope of his calling*, the *riches of his glory*, and the *greatness of his power*. Our focus is the third of these requests.

The power of God as revealed in Scripture is awesome, infinite, and multifaceted as evidenced by several Greek words that were used to convey various aspects of its essence. In the verses before us, the apostle employs three of them. The first reference to *power* is the Greek **dunamis** (Eng., dynamite), which speaks of *inherent* or *potential power* as an unlimited resource. The second is from **kratos** (translated *mighty*), which signifies *manifested power* as an observable display. The subtle distinction between these two words might be crudely illustrated by the explosive potential (*dunamis*) within a stick of dynamite that manifests itself (*kratos*) through a detonation device.

The third instance is the word **hischus** (translated *power*), which suggests the *ability to prevail* due to strength that is both inherent and manifested. In order to infuse his readers with spiritual optimism and courage, Paul sets forth the resurrection of Christ as the ultimate example of power personified! In Paul's mind, it was faith that served as the detonator to unleash resurrection power in the lives of the elect! Does this reminder embolden us to walk daily in humble dependence upon the Lord Jesus?

The apostle Paul was a man who lived what he preached as a basis for preaching it. In other words, he experienced resurrection power! How so? I would submit that resurrection power was lived out in the following scenarios: escaping out of the hands of those who vowed to murder him (Acts 9:23-25, 29-30); extricating himself from the bottom of a rock pile outside the gates of Lystra, and re-entering the city on the same day (Acts 14:19-20); raising a man at the midnight hour who had fallen asleep, and fell to his death, while he was preaching (Acts 20:7-12); rebuking Peter publicly for his hypocrisy (Galatians 2:11-14); predicting by means of a vision the destruction of a ship and the salvation of its crew (Acts 27:22-25); standing and testifying boldly before the most powerful political figures in the world (Acts 24:24-25; 26:1-3); being satisfied with Christ in whatsoever state he found himself (Philippians 4:11-13); granting forgiveness to those who had stabbed him in the back (II Corinthians 2:10-11); laboring in spiritual

travail for the lost (Romans 9:1-3; Galatians 4:19-20); praising God with song in a Philippian jail with a bloodied and shredded back (Acts 16:23-25); and approaching the threshold of death with the confidence that he had fought a good fight, finished his course, and kept the faith (II Timothy 4:6-7)! A biographical sampling such as this, my friend, should instill within each of us the awareness that God's supernatural power works itself out in very practical ways!

Brethren, the purpose of resurrection power is to produce a life that is godly, not grandiose! The power of God tends toward purity, not popularity! The goal of the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation to every one who believes, is to produce saints, not celebrities! The health-and-wealth gospel of the hour bears little resemblance to that which was lived and preached by our Lord and His apostles. O God, grant unto us-ward who believe the exceeding greatness your power! Amen!

## Master of the Special Effect

A growing number of modern-day filmmakers are seeking to embellish their directorial reputations through the use of special effects wizardry. Movie addicts seem to relish the bigger and better illusion, and signal their approval of these fictitious and artificial offerings by packing out local theatres. Few are cognizant of the fact that the Lord God Almighty is both the Originator and the Master of the special effect!

The major difference, of course, is that God produces that which is factual as opposed to fictional, and is in no way dependent upon an illusion to make His effects special! Unique among the plethora of special effects recorded in Scripture is the dove-like descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Lord Jesus at His baptism. The apostle John went on record saying, "*I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him*" (John 1:32). The other Gospels all reveal that this special event consisted of both audio and visual components as the Father, with audible voice, announced to the by-standers that He was well pleased with His Son. Luke the physician provided additional detail by pointing out that the descent of the Spirit was "*in a bodily shape*" (Luke 3:22).

The significance of this display may be captured, at least in part, by three words or concepts. The first is purity. The Holy Spirit is synonymous with absolute holiness! In the Old Testament system of worship, the dove was considered to be a "clean" animal, or suitable for sacrifice. We also know that a dove in flight is predisposed to look for clean landing places. Noah knew this when he sent forth the dove from the ark. After the dove failed to return from its third mission, Noah was assured that clean habitations were now available for the remnant of humanity.

Furthermore, Jesus told his apostles to be "*wise as serpents, and harmless as doves*" (Matthew 10:16). The word *harmless* indicates *gentleness without any mixture of guile*. We thus conclude from this symbolism that (1) the Spirit of God is pure and gentle, and (2) that which He anoints (or comes to rest upon) is likewise holy and harmless. For these reasons, the modern-day "Anointing" theology is Biblically bankrupt. It depersonalizes the Spirit of God, reducing Him to an influential fog bank that rolls into and out of various locations. It also bids the hearer to receive this anointing by faith (primarily for healing purposes) without regard for sanctity of life. According to Scripture, every born again believer with the promise of eternal life is permanently indwelt by the Anointing (i.e., the Spirit). Anyone who teaches differently is a seducer (I John 3:25-27).

The second is potency. It is the Spirit of God that endues the pure with power! Spirit power marked the entire sojourn of Jesus while on this earth. He was conceived of the Spirit in a virgin's womb; endured forty days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness; received power without measure for three years of preaching, teaching, and healing; was sustained through three dark hours on the cross, during which time He bore our sins in His body on the tree; conquered death after three days in the grave; and was enthroned at the Father's right hand until His enemies become His footstool. The dove-like descent of the Spirit upon Jesus was the assurance that He would arrive at Calvary in the same sinless and harmless manner as he departed from the baptismal waters, and utter in His last breath the triumphant words, "It is finished!"

The third is poverty. The designation of the dove as an acceptable offering provided the means whereby the poorest in Israel could approach God! Jesus said, "*He [God] hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor*" (Luke 4:18). One of the assurances given to John the Baptist regarding the genuineness of Jesus' ministry was that "*to the poor the gospel is preached*" (Luke 7:23). Paul wrote to the Corinthians saying, "*For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be made rich*" (II Corinthians 8:9). The dove signified that the gospel would include the most poverty-stricken of sinful men, and would neither include nor exclude any man from the grace of God on the basis of his material net worth!

Brethren, the special effects displayed at the baptism of Christ preach a marvelous message regarding the holiness of Christ, and the compassion of God toward sinners! I am so thankful for the poverty that Jesus assumed on my behalf, and for the purity and power that enabled Him to provide a full satisfaction for my sins! There can be no doubt! God alone is the Master of the special effect! Glory!

## Graven Upon the Palm of God's Hand

One of the marks of Christian maturity is the ability to distinguish between what is true in the spiritual realm as opposed to what might be perceived as true based upon circumstances. Seasoned saints have learned to anchor themselves upon the sure promises of God when the raging seas of life seem to serve up wave after wave of contrary indicators.

At no time is this resolute attitude more needful than when the believer is enduring God-imposed affliction as a disciplinary measure. Our emotions may suggest that God has abandoned or forgotten us. The truth is that God is eternally committed to those with whom He has entered into a covenant relationship through the blood of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Old Testament prophets often delivered blistering messages that were intertwined with comfort and hope. The prophet Isaiah was no exception. In a word of restoration, he proclaimed: "*Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted. But Zion said, the LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me*" (Isaiah 49:13-16).

All of the typical ingredients are present. Mercy is promised to the afflicted who consider themselves to have been forsaken and forgotten by the Comforter. As a remedy for the false impression engendered by God's discipline, two figures are employed. The first is that of a nursing mother with birth pangs still fresh in her memory, and the subsequent compassion lavished upon her son by natural affection. The LORD instructs them that while it is conceivable that such natural affection might fail, it is inconceivable that His supernatural affection could ever fail, or that He would ever forget His own! Are you encouraged? There's more!

The second is that of the engraver. The LORD said that His people were *graven upon the palms of His hands!* Graven is from a Hebrew root meaning *to hack* (i.e., engrave), and captures the idea of blows being delivered by a hammer to the chiseling tool that engraves the stone. In primitive times, the word became synonymous with the *enactment* of laws that were engraved in stone or metal. Thus the LORD represents Himself as an engraver who has enacted an everlasting and binding covenant with His people! While He opted to engrave the law in tablets of stone, He chose to engrave upon the palms of His own hands the lawbreakers who were the objects of His affection!

I cannot fathom the depth of such grace! Can there be any doubt that the reference here is prophetic? Can you visualize the Roman soldier delivering the blows to the nails that pierced our Lord's hands? Are not those nail-scars reminders of eternal redemption? Are they not the assurance that the redeemed of the Lord shall be saved to the uttermost? O what glory to consider the manner in which the Lord Jesus has made His people such an integral and eternal part of His own Person!

It is of interest that the Scriptures have almost nothing good to say about the palms of men, portraying them in a rather dismal light. The palms of the Philistine god Dagon were cut off as a reminder of his powerlessness against the God of Israel (I Samuel 5:4). The dogs that devoured Jezebel refused to eat her palms as an indictment against the wickedness her hands had perpetrated (II Kings 9:35). At His pre-crucifixion trial, the servants of the high priest (Mark 14:65) and one of the officers (John 18:22) smote Jesus with the palms of their hands as an expression of their contempt for righteousness.

The single exception is found in *the law of the leper* (Leviticus 14:1-32). The priest was required to pour oil into *the palm of his own left hand* (v. 15, 26), dip therein the finger of his right hand, and sprinkle the leper seven times before the Lord for his cleansing. The oil remaining in the left palm was put upon the head of the leper to make atonement for him. Thus the leper was able to obtain from the hand of the priest a cleansing that he was unable to get with his own hand (v. 32). In like manner, the Lord Jesus is our Great High Priest. He alone is able to provide cleansing from the defilements of sin!

Brethren, there is no basis or need to question the compassion of God in times of affliction. The Lord has engraved us in His very own palms, and no set of circumstances can alter that spiritual reality! May the Lord grant us the grace to live and walk before Him in that certainty! Amen!

## Purged with Hyssop

A Penitential Psalm is one that depicts the child of God as agonizing over the aftermath of personal sin, and seeking a restoration to fellowship with God through the pangs of repentance. The fifty-first Psalm is the fourth of seven Penitential Psalms (the others being Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143). According to the editorial notes, the occasion behind Psalm 51 was *when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba*. The inspired record of this event is found in II Samuel 12.

An analysis of Psalm 51 reveals that David approached the throne of grace with nineteen specific petitions, all of which appear to be extensions of the first: *"Have mercy upon me, O God"* (51:1). The capacity of God to handle them *according to the multitude of his tender mercies* appears to be all the incentive David needed to offer them in abundance! What a comfort to know that no amount of self-inflicted misery can exhaust the multitude of tender mercies afforded to us by grace! One aspect of tender mercy of which David was conscious is the ability of God to cleanse the supplicant from sin. Such awareness prompts him to ask: *"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean"* (51:7).

The reference to *hyssop* as instrumental in his cleansing is full of significance. Hyssop was a bushy shrub common to both Egypt and Palestine, and often grew in the crevices of walls (I Kings 4:33). The first mention of hyssop is found in Exodus 12:22, where Moses instructed the elders of Israel to *"take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the bason, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the bason."* This was the inaugural Passover in which the Lord, Who would pass through to smite firstborn males among the Egyptians, would see the blood and pass over the door, preventing the destroyer from entering their houses to smite them (12:23).

Additionally, the Lord included hyssop in the ceremonial law regarding the cleansing of lepers (Leviticus 14:4, 5, 49, 51, 52). In both situations, the hyssop was instrumental in the application of blood that would provide a deliverance from the death sentence. In requesting hyssop as an instrument in his cleansing, David knows full well that his personal sin against God is deserving of physical death. He likens his subsequent spiritual condition to a terminal disease every bit as lethal as leprosy, and pleads for tender mercy as the one and only cure! One of the critical needs of the hour is a similar rediscovery of the seriousness of sin among the people of God!

David employs a most interesting word in his *"purge me"* request. *Purge* is from a Hebrew root meaning *to miss*. In certain contexts, it can mean *to cleanse* or *to expiate* (make atonement). It appears to have that meaning here, but this is the only place in the OT where it is translated *purge*. In most instances, it is translated *sin*, signifying a *missing of the mark*.

In the exchange that took place between David and Nathan, David said unto him, *"I have sinned against the Lord."* Nathan responded, *"The Lord hath also put away thy sin; thou shalt not die"* (II Samuel 12:13). I believe it is entirely possible and perhaps probable that David broke down before Nathan, and uttered the words of Psalm 51 somewhere between *"David said unto Nathan"* and *"Nathan said unto David."*

David had a firm grasp upon the underlying realities of the sacrificial system and its ceremonial law. He understood that the final and effectual atonement for sin would involve the Innocent One incurring the sentence of death on behalf of the guilty! In my mind, the words *purge me* meant *miss me by your merciful intervention*, and envisioned the Lord as poised to impose the death sentence, and strike him down.

The promise "*thou shalt not die*" was also God's merciful answer! It came, however, with a price! Nathan added, "*The child...shall surely die*" (12:14), and thus "*the Lord struck the child*" (12:15). It was impossible that his sin should be purged without a punitive measure, and so the innocent one was struck in his stead. The second child born to David and Bathsheba was Solomon, and "*the Lord loved him*" (12:24). So we see that the fierceness of His wrath had paved the way for the freeness of His love!

Brethren, the truth embodied in the prayer "*Purge me with hyssop*" challenges all of us to weigh our personal sin in the light of the Calvary's Cross. Isaac Watts (1674-1748) captured its essence with these familiar words: "*Was it for crimes that I have done He groaned upon the tree? Amazing pity, grace unknown, and love beyond degree! At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light, And the burden of my heart rolled away, It was there by faith I received my sight, And now I am happy all the day!*"

## Puritan Truth Nuggets

One of the greatest repositories of Christian literature was vouchsafed to the church during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by a group of men known as the Puritans. Their collective writings constitute a vast reservoir of theological genius and devotional fervor. As surgeons of the human soul, they shared a consuming passion to communicate the truth of God to mankind.

Like the apostles before them, they gave themselves to the Word of God and prayer. It is said that Samuel Rutherford rose habitually at three in the morning to ensure he had sufficient time in prayer and study of the Scriptures. John Bunyan, the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, is perhaps the most recognized name among them.

The Puritans were distinguished by a strict adherence to Calvinistic theology, a belief in the supreme authority of Scripture, the absolute necessity of preaching the Word as a means of grace, a passionate desire for church purity, a stringent standard of morality, and a commitment to civil liberty. The child of God who spends a little time reading and digesting the literary gems of Puritanism will come to realize that he or she has hit the mother lode.

What follows is a handful of Puritan truth nuggets. I trust they are a blessing to your life.

- "There is more evil in a drop of sin than in a sea of affliction" - Thomas Watson
- "We often learn more of God under the rod that strikes us than under the staff that comforts us" - Stephen Charnock
- "He that will be angry, and not sin, must not be angry but for sin" - John Trapp
- "The assured Christian is more motion than notion, more work than word, more life than lip, more hand than tongue" - Thomas Brooks
- "The Scriptures teach us the best way of living, the noblest way of suffering, and the most comfortable way of dying" - John Flavel
- "God's wounds cure; sin's kisses kill" - William Gurnall
- "They lose nothing who gain Christ" - Samuel Rutherford
- "You are to follow no man further than he follows Christ" - John Collins
- "The weak Christian is willing to live and patient to die; but the strong is patient to live and willing to die" - John Boys
- "Many crowd to get into the church, but make no room for the sermon to get into them" - Thomas Adams
- "A good conscience and a good confidence go together" - Thomas Brooks
- "The devil loves to fish in troubled waters" - John Trapp
- "Can Christ be in thy heart, and thou not know it? Can one king be dethroned and another crowned in thy soul, and thou hear no scuffle?" - William Gurnall

- "Covetousness is dry drunkenness" - Thomas Watson
- "In our first paradise in Eden there was a way to go out but no way to go in again. But as for the heavenly paradise, there is a way to go in, but no way to go out" - Richard Baxter
- "Though Christians be not kept altogether from falling, yet they are kept from falling altogether" - William Secker
- "Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; eternity to the wicked is a night that has no sunrise" - Thomas Watson
- "Unity without verity is no better than conspiracy" - John Trapp
- "The Christian soldier must avoid two evils--he must not faint or yield in the time of fight, and after a victory he must not wax insolent and secure. When he has overcome, he is so to behave himself as though he were presently again to be assaulted. For Satan's temptations, like the waves of the sea, do follow one in the neck of the other" - George Downname

## Will God Turn and Repent?

Do you find it difficult to maintain a spirit of optimism regarding the spiritual future of America? Card-carrying members of the spiritual doom-and-gloom society have been predicting the demise and destruction of America for decades. Admittedly, our nation appears to have a terminal case of sinful rebellion against God that will culminate in our collapse by His sovereign hand! There are, however, two men in Scripture whose unique relationship gives me cause for hope—the prophet Jonah and the king of Nineveh.

These two men shared a common trait—a proper response to the Word of God! The excursion of Jonah *from the presence of the Lord* is Biblical and ecclesiastical legend (Jonah 1:1-3). When the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the first time, he arose and fled unto Tarshish. After the fish vomited him out upon the dry land (2:10), the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying, “*Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.*” So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord (3:1-3).

What was the preaching that the Lord had bidden Jonah to preach? It is captured for us in eight words—“*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown*” (3:4). Where is the exegetical and expository genius? Where is the profound insight? What was the message outline? None of these were factors in the preaching! In paraphrased language that any sixth grader could understand, Jonah said, “In about six weeks from now, God is going to turn this city upside down like a pancake on a hot griddle!” The message was simply the unvarnished truth of God delivered by an obedient preacher! Does this take place in the church you attend? What percentage of pulpits across our nation could be so characterized?

The prophet's obedience resulted in the people of Nineveh believing God. Faith was exercised by *the greatest of them even to the least of them* (3:5). In other words, faith infiltrated every societal class and age group. What became a citywide phenomenon, however, had its beginning in the heart of the king, who heard the word that was preached, and responded appropriately. He *arose from his throne, and laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes* (3:6). His humility touched the lives of his nobles, and together they issued a decree for prayer and fasting.

In the proclamation, the citizens were exhorted to *cry mightily unto God* (3:8). The adverb *mightily* means *with a strength that prevails*. The same Hebrew word is used on two occasions to describe the effect of the Spirit of God as He came *mightily* upon Samson (Judges 14:6; 15:14). In the first instance, he killed a young lion with his bare hands. In the second, he broke the cords that bound him, and slaughtered one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. In other words, he prevailed with the strength of God! Thus the king of Nineveh was advocating more than the mere exercise of prayer! He was calling for an effectual cry unto God, a mustering of inner strength that would prevail with God, and turn away His fierce anger!

The final appeal was expressed in the words, “*Who can tell if God will turn and repent...that we perish not?*” (3:9). Can you feel the sense of urgency and desperation in

this king? What we have before us is perhaps the most powerful political figure in the world faced with catastrophic consequences for both himself and his people if they should fail to prevail with God! In contrast, the church in America appears to lack such spiritual sobriety, being oblivious to the judgment that awaits us if she fails to prevail with God in prayer! Moreover, it is expected that parents will cry mightily unto God for wayward sons and daughters, and pastors for lukewarm and stagnant churches.

Brethren, as long as the spiritual revolution that swept Nineveh remains part of the inspired Biblical record, we must nurture the conviction that God prefers the exercise of pity toward sinful men more so than the extraction of a penalty from them! That conviction holds open the possibility that a nucleus of obedient preachers and political leaders, upon whom the Word of God has had its proper impact, could wield an influence sufficient to precipitate a national repentance, and mercy from God!

The late Leonard Ravenhill remarked, "America may well be certain to reap the judgment of God, but better to have revival followed by judgment than to have judgment without a revival preparation." He was absolutely correct! Therefore we must cry mightily unto God for a manifestation of His mercy! Who can tell if God will turn and repent, that America perish not?

## Builder Beware

Have you considered that every member of the human race is a builder? Every descendant of Adam, without regard for race, riches, or reputation, is in the construction business! All of us, either consciously or unconsciously, are constructing a life, the character of which will determine both our temporal durability and our eternal destiny. The Lord Jesus validated this truth in the parable of Luke 6:46-49. He told of two men who built houses, and drew a vivid contrast between the manner in which they built and the materials used in the construction process. The message of Jesus was clear—builder beware!

Jesus began the parable with a rhetorical question. He asked: “*And why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?*” (6:46). The built-in answer is, “There is no reason under the sun to do so!” Jesus taught that a germ of hypocrisy resides in all whose profession is inconsistent with performance. It is one thing to acknowledge Jesus, but quite another to obey him. The fact that Jesus was and is God in the flesh means that hearing Him without doing that which is heard is a clear violation of the third commandment, which says, “*Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*” (Exodus 20:7). There is no more empty exercise than taking the name of the Lord Jesus upon our lips while trampling his will beneath our feet!

The two men that were the objects of the parable had several things in common. Both men came to Jesus to hear Him. Both men selected building sites close to a stream, which indicates a strategic desire to establish an advantageous position in life and reap the benefits. Both men set out to build, and finished their respective buildings. Both buildings were subjected to the same vehement beatings of the swelling stream in times of inclement weather and flooding. In other words, there was no immunity for either of these builders from the storms of life. But that is where the similarities end! The critical difference, as articulated by the Lord Jesus, was that the one builder heard and did the things heard, and the other builder heard and did not the things that the Lord said. This critical difference made all the difference!

Jesus taught that the successful builder *digged deep* (6:48), indicating a spirit of resoluteness. In other words, he determined that, as long as he was shoveling moveable earth, he would continue to dig until he hit immovable rock! That rock, my friend, is the Lord Jesus Christ! Every foundation built upon His glorious person and eternal truth will last for eternity! It is the Rock-deep builder who sings, “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! On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand!” Is that your testimony? Is your foundation Rock-deep?

Why is it that so many stop short of digging Rock-deep when laying the foundation of their lives? One reason is that they simply tire of digging! The fact is the depth of moveable earth differs with every life, and some individuals are required to excavate more rubble than others before the Rock is found. Others discover the Rock with a relatively small degree of digging. I believe this is one reason Jesus was so adamant

about suffering the children to come unto Him. They have much less moveable earth to excavate before the exercise of faith.

A statistical analysis of the ages at which men and women profess faith in Christ tends to support the idea that the depth of moveable earth increases with age. Another reason is that, to many builders, the superstructure is of greater importance than the infrastructure. Appearance is preferred over endurance, looks over longevity, and fashion over foundation! The eternal consequence of such misjudgment is *great ruin* (6:49).

A third reason is the immoveable nature of the Rock itself. The Rock is the point at which self-effort ends and dependency begins. It is the place where the Rock has His way with you, and you cease to have your way with the earth. Many are willing to offer lip service, but resist total surrender to the will of Christ like they would a thief breaking into their home.

Brethren, the words of Jesus are as relevant now as the day they were spoken. "Builder Beware!" is an adage that still applies. While this world continues to offer men a variety of streams, a host of options, and lots of moveable earth, let us be sure our anchor holds, and grips the solid Rock! That Rock is Jesus! The Rock-deep builder is one who both calls Jesus Lord and does the things that He says!

## “Wilt Thou not Revive Us Again?”

If there is a Biblical passage that captures the heart cry for revival, Psalm 85:6 would be among the strongest candidates for that distinction. The Psalmist asks: “*Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?*” Some believe David wrote this Psalm before he became king of Israel while the Philistines were oppressing the nation. Charles Spurgeon described this Psalm as “the prayer of a patriot for his afflicted country, in which he pleads the Lord’s former mercies, and by faith foresees brighter days.” In like manner, the forces of ungodliness, as modern-day Philistines, are routing America on every side! There is no hope for deliverance outside the mercy of God!

The word *revive* comes from a Hebrew root meaning *to cause to live*. It signifies a restoration to fulness of life from a lethargic state. Its Biblical usage suggests that a need for reviving could manifest itself in contexts of both trouble and triumph. For example, consider the experience of Jacob as recorded in Genesis 45:25-28. His sons had returned from Egypt with news that Joseph was alive, and had become governor over all the land of Egypt (v.26). After hearing their words, Jacob’s heart was troubled, and he *fainted* in unbelief. After seeing the wagons, however, which Joseph had sent to carry him, his *spirit revived* (v.27), and he declared, “*I will go and see him!*” (v.28). A sudden resurgence of hope and vitality had replaced discouragement with determination!

In Judges 15:18-20, we are told that Samson, after slaying a thousand Philistine men, was *sore athirst*. He *called on the Lord*, arguing that a *death by thirst* would be inconsistent with the *great deliverance* that had caused the thirst. In response, the Lord carved out a *hollow place that was in the jaw*, out of which *came water*. Samson drank, *his spirit came again, and he revived* (v.19). Thus we see that spiritual revival is as needful in the lives of those who have triumphed in warfare as it is for those who are disheartened and defeated. I wonder how many pastors are caught up in revival praying because their victorious churches are suffering from spiritual battle fatigue?

Our text enables us to draw several conclusions about genuine revival. First, it comes from God alone! Revival is sent down, not worked up. Second, revival has historical precedent! The word *again* tells us that the Psalmist is asking God to extend His own track record of mercy toward His people! Third, revival pertains to the people of God! The testimony of David affirms that sinners are converted *after* the saints are consecrated (Psalm 51:12-13). Fourth, revival is characterized by rejoicing! The phrase *in thee* tells us that revival is more a matter of focus than feeling! If the presence of joy is an indication that the Lord Jesus is once again the center of our attention, then the absence of joy indicates that our attention has been diverted elsewhere. In a very real sense, revival is the restoration of the proper focus in life!

The primary challenge of the pulpit is to proclaim the truth of God with such fervency and clarity that it radically changes the focus in the pew! Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas visited the synagogue in Iconium, and “*so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed*” (Acts 14:1). Apostolic ‘*so*’ preaching was a God-anointed blend of precept and passion (i.e., Truth on Fire) that riveted the attention of many upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

The response of the unbelieving Jews to *so preaching* was, “*So long preacher!*” (14:2-6). These two diverse reactions teach us that while *so preaching* has the potential to focus a congregation it can just as easily force a resignation! In any case, God-ordained preachers know that the people will feel better only if they focus better! It is a sad reality that many pastor search committees look for a leader who can help church members (and the lost) feel better about themselves rather than looking for a *so-preaching* man of God who can rivet the focus of the church upon the *things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God* (Colossians 3:1).

Brethren, America needs revival! More importantly, the Church needs revival! The former need is dependent upon the latter! The local church is the God-ordained instrument for evangelism and discipleship, and the place where the Lord Jesus desires to manifest His glory! The apostle Paul argued: “*He that spared not His own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him freely give us all things?*” (Romans 8:32). It is that same line of reasoning that prompted David to ask: “*Wilt thou not revive us again?*” It is past time for the Church to make the same argument at the throne of grace!

## The Great Summation

The dictionary defines a summation as a concluding statement containing a summary of principal points, and having special application to a case before a court of law. The prophet Moses, while not a trial lawyer by trade, delivered one of the greatest summations in the history of mankind. His client was the God of Israel, and he was making the case for obedience. In terms of historical context, the Lord had sustained His people through forty years of wilderness wanderings, and was preparing them to enter and possess the Promised Land. The entire summation is recorded in Deuteronomy 28. The time taken to read and meditate upon its contents is time well invested!

The principal points of this summation can be discerned without a degree in rocket science, and take the form of conditional statements. The first is, "*If thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments...all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee*" (28:1-2). The second is, "*If thou shalt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments...all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee*" (28:15).

I understand that believers in Jesus Christ living in the present age are not under the law, but under grace! This truth, however, does not diminish the gravity of obedience, nor discount the calamity of sin and its consequences! Each of us, in a sense, is a jury of one. We are required to evaluate these powerful closing arguments, and render a personal verdict regarding whether we will obey the truth and be overtaken by blessings, or disobey the Word and be overtaken by curses! One or the other overtakes all of us! What is overtaking you these days?

In addition to the principal points, profound observations abound. I offer two. First, the summation consists of sixty-eight verses. Fourteen consist of encouraging words, and fifty-four contain words of warning. The ratio is better than three-to-one in favor of warnings! In His earthly ministry, the preaching and teaching of the Lord Jesus were similarly biased, especially in terms of heaven and hell! The typical church congregation today rejects such bias, preferring to be encouraged rather than warned. I agree that saints who suffer hardships need to be encouraged. In many cases, however, difficult times are the consequence of disobedience, for which the saint should have received prior warning! Preventive measures are always more effective and less costly than corrective measures!

Secondly, the Lord provides an alarming description of the distresses that disobedience can bring into the life of a family. In 28:53-57, reference is made to both men and women who were once *tender and delicate* in spirit before the trek into disobedience began. The Lord warned His people that disobedience had the power to transform sensitive and caring husbands and fathers (as well as wives and mothers) into self-serving individuals who are malicious, calloused, and abusive. If the child of God can remember a time when he or she was more tender and delicate of heart than they are today, that awareness is evidence that sin has had a subtle and debilitating effect upon the soul! The tenderness and delicateness of heart that seems to be such a rare commodity

within the homes and churches of America can only be restored through repentance, cleansing, and renewed obedience to the Word of truth.

Brethren, what shall our verdict be regarding this great summation? Shall we seek the blessings of obedience, or incur the curses of indifference? It is certain that one or the other will overtake us! Is your pastor one who strikes a healthy balance between warning the flock and encouraging them? If so, you are blessed indeed! Pray for him faithfully, that he will continue to fear God alone! And may the Lord grant to all of us a tenderness and delicateness of heart that is characteristic of those who obey Him!

## Will Unity Lead to Purity?

The recent acts of terrorism perpetrated against America have become the source of unspeakable grief, righteous indignation and sober reflection. We watched in stunned bewilderment as networks replayed video footage of two hijacked commercial aircraft slamming into the North and South towers of the World Trade Center, and grimaced at the subsequent collapse of both edifices. The Pentagon has long been the citadel of military intelligence, and a symbol of national invulnerability. However, watching the flames and smoke erupting from this impregnable fortress imposed an eerie and unfamiliar sense of vulnerability upon us all. How should we respond to this horrific attack? What should be our mindset as we move on from here?

First, we must render thanks unto God for His mercy in the midst of the mayhem. Mercy? Yes, mercy! The North tower strike was relatively high, enabling thousands on the first eighty or so floors to evacuate safely before it collapsed. The eighteen minutes that elapsed between strikes provided a window of opportunity for thousands more in the South tower (especially in the upper floors) to extricate themselves from danger. If the first plane had hit lower, and the second had hit sooner, the death toll might have exceeded twenty thousand!

Secondly, we must understand that the proposed execution of vengeance upon terrorist groups is a God-ordained role of government! The Scripture instructs us that *"rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil...for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil"* (Romans 13:3-4). Therefore we should pray for our President and his advisors, that God Almighty might grant them supernatural skill to make war against the terrorists, and exterminate them!

Speaking of vengeance upon evildoers, the murderous atrocities committed against unborn children by abortionists each year to the tune of about one and a half million legalized homicides are every bit as wicked as the terrorist acts sponsored by Osama Bin Laden. America was outraged and appalled last Tuesday over the tragedy that left five thousand precious souls buried under tons of pulverized concrete. On that same day, roughly five thousand innocent babies were butchered, and their body parts discarded in garbage cans! Where is the President willing to make war against their killers?

Thirdly, we should be cautious about the degree of comfort we might derive regarding promises of retribution from our national leadership. The apostle Paul comforted the elect at Rome, asking, *"If God be for us, who can be against us?"* (Romans 8:31). The converse, however, is also true. That is, if God be against us, who can be for us?

Any doubts about the validity of that statement are erased by the experience of Israel in their military assault upon the city of Ai (Joshua 7:1-26). The men of Ai had routed three thousand overconfident Israeli soldiers, killing thirty-six of them. The problem? An Israelite man named Achan trespassed the commandment of God by coveting and stealing a *Babylonish garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold* from Jericho, and hiding them in his tent (7:21). The Lord told Joshua, *"Neither will I be with*

*you any more, except ye destroy the accursed thing from among you" (7:12). After Achan was found to be the culprit, and confessed to his crime, Joshua said to him, "Why hast thou troubled us? The Lord shall trouble thee this day" (7:25). Achan, his entire family, and all his cattle were stoned to death, and burned with fire. In the second assault against Ai, a purified Israel destroyed the city, and killed all twelve thousand of its men. In the first assault, they were unified but defeated. In the second assault, they were purified, and therefore victorious.*

The historical and spiritual lesson of Ai is that, in God's sight, purity is of far greater import than unity! America may be unified, but she is far from purified! How many of our national leaders and citizens do you suppose are kin to Achan? Is there any reason why God should continue to bless America, and be with us as we go to war?

Brethren, I believe each of us should share the sentiments expressed by Billy Graham this last week as he encouraged Americans to seize this moment in our history as an opportunity for repentance and revival! I love America and the freedom she represents! I served in Vietnam, and would gladly take up arms again to defend this land! O Lord, give us in purity what we have gained in unity! God bless the USA!

## Beware of the Bandwagons You Board!

It has always been my nature to be a non-conformist, and to avoid following the crowd. Any report of an activity where "everyone is doing it" automatically raises a red caution flag in my mind. I have jumped on very few bandwagons in my life. I happen to be a proud passenger aboard the current bandwagon of patriotism, but have been reluctant to book passage on the pluralistic religious bandwagon that is attempting to invoke the help of God in our darkest hour.

The true and living God, as revealed in the Scriptures, became a sinless man in order to deliver sinful men from the terrors inflicted by sin and death! The Lord Jesus endured those terrors upon the Cross on behalf of sinners, and offers freedom from the bondage of sin as the greatest freedom! This spiritual freedom is a gift provided to those who by grace believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and His precious blood! Therein is true freedom, and redemptive power! The current movement, however, is an attempt to secure the help of a lesser God against a lesser terror for a lesser freedom!

The revival of religion we are witnessing should not be misconstrued as the work of God, although God will certainly perform genuine redemptive work within its context. Religious affections are a common phenomenon among the unregenerate children of this world, especially in times of peril. The encouraging resurgence of God-consciousness across our nation must be tempered by the truth that God has revealed about Himself, and the way of approach to Him.

For example, we know that Jesus is the God-Man, fully God and fully Man (John 1:1, 14; Colossians 2:9). As a member of the Trinitarian Godhead, He is the one and only Mediator between God and man (I Timothy 2:5). We know that it is impossible to know God apart from His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (John 8:19; 14:6). God cannot be honored by those who do not honor His Son (John 5:23). We know that the power of God unto salvation resides in the Gospel of Christ (Romans 1:16), and that salvation is obtained by grace through faith apart from any works or merit on the part of man (Ephesians 2:8-9). We know that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead renders every other religious system (including Judaism and Islam) obsolete and futile (Acts 17:30-31; I Corinthians 15:17-22).

No man is a Christian, or can call himself a Christian, or can expect to have an audience with God, who denies any of these tenets. They are the cornerstones of God's redemptive will! The present religious fervor will continue to avoid these distinctives apart from a sovereign work of God in our midst! It is that kind of work, my friend, for which we should be praying! I would encourage you to board *that* bandwagon!

One of the profound statements made by the President last Thursday evening was that those who commit murder in the name of Allah are actually blaspheming Allah. His obvious intent was to differentiate between the hypocritical terrorists and the majority of Allah-worshipping Muslims who pursue peace. The point was well made, but also served as a subtle concession by the President to the existence of Allah. The spirit in which that statement was made is the same spirit reflected in the false notion that all religions

essentially seek and worship the same God without regard for the manner of approach or the basis of acceptance.

This erroneous concept is at the core of religious pluralism, and America has become a pluralistic nation. The phrase "In God We Trust" is no longer an exclusive reference to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but an inclusive reference to the God of choice. While such pluralistic faith is non-offensive, it is also non-redemptive, and provides no freedom from sin, the worst bondage of them all!

Brethren, in these post-crisis days, beware of the bandwagons you board! I am an American patriot from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet, as I'm sure all of you are! As the redeemed of the Lord, however, we have another citizenship, a heavenly one, founded upon the truth of Christ. His precious blood has procured for us the way into the holiest place, so that we might experience and enjoy the presence of God! In our dialogue with others, may God grant us the wisdom to speak the truth of Christ in a gracious manner, and provide a redemptive light in the midst of this dark hour!

## Under His Sovereign Control

As America witnesses the unfolding of events in the war against terrorism, the child of God must remember that a sovereign God is choreographing the world stage. Pundits are postulating potential outcomes for every conceivable action taken by the United States against targeted terrorist groups. Experts on terrorism, overt and covert military tactics, espionage and diplomatic relations are flooding television news outlets, weighing in on strategies that may or may not prove to be effective. The overriding truth, however, is that Bible prophecy will become part of the historical record! I believe recent events are full of prophetic implications!

I recall that during my high school days (circa 1963-1965), and continuing for a full decade afterwards, the Bible Conference on Prophecy was the rage. The Soviet Union, compliments of a Cuba's Fidel Castro, had established nuclear strike capability just ninety miles from our southern border. Many Floridians began building personal underground bomb shelters for what appeared to be an unavoidable nuclear holocaust. There were many who interpreted the end-time events signified in the book of Revelation as the result of global nuclear war. Those evangelists who held to a pre-tribulation Rapture of the Church were reminding congregations of the math involved. The reasoning was that, since this development would likely foster the cataclysmic events leading up to the Second Coming of Christ, and since the Rapture would precede the Revelation by a seven-year period of Tribulation, the trumpet could sound at any moment, and the Church caught up to be with the Lord!

I remember several evangelists saying that every major newspaper in the nation had already typeset the headline "Millions Missing!" I have often wondered whether that statement was true or simply sensationalistic hype. Well, the Cold War is over, Russia has been reduced to a third world power, the Berlin Wall no longer exists, and a lot of sermon notes on prophecy have gone through the paper shredder. God's prophetic clock, however, continues to run on its perfect schedule!

The most popular school of thought in those days held that the army of two hundred million horsemen mentioned in Revelation 9:13-17 would come from Communist China. The interpretation gained credence with a scenario that had the United States and Russia engaged in mutual destruction, leaving China as the sole superpower. I more or less bought into that notion until 1975, at which time I heard evangelist Fred Brown argue that this army would likely be a coalition army from united Arab nations—descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham by the bondwoman according to the flesh—in a massive last ditch effort to destroy Israel—descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham by the freewoman according to the promise (Galatians 4:22-23)—in order to establish Jerusalem as the center of the Islamic faith. I have held that same view for the last twenty-six years...and it is more plausible today than it was then.

The most prominent question being asked these days is, "What have we as Americans done to cause the Arab nations to hate us so much?" The answer for bewildered inquirers is rather simple from a Biblical perspective. We have recognized the right of Israel to exist, and to possess a God-given land. We have made of her a friend, and

have committed ourselves to her defense. In the Arab mind, we are the one great obstacle—the Great Satan—that stands between them and Jerusalem. They will applaud any and every effort to destroy us! I have heard many identify the cause as a non-religious jealousy regarding our freedoms, our standard of living, and the liberties we enjoy as a people. Make no mistake! The root cause is religious, and the older Ishmael will continue to mock his younger half-brother (Genesis 21:9)!

Brethren, my take on Biblical prophecy is that America will be reduced to historical irrelevance before the time comes for the two hundred million horsemen to ride. Will we be successful in ridding the world of terrorism? Only a sovereign God has the answer to that question! What I anticipate as a long-term outcome of the war against terrorism is increased solidarity among Arab states. They will use us, and then abuse us. At some point, the coalition will begin to erode into alienation! This much is certain! Anyone trusting in the arm of government will be disappointed! The only Object worthy of our trust in this or any hour is the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone will determine our destiny as a nation! He alone can provide comfort in the midst of chaos, and hope to alleviate our fears! All is under His sovereign control!

## Stirred or Disengaged?

The best of historical reckoning tells us that the apostle Paul, as part of his second missionary journey, entered the city of Athens on a summer day in August, A.D.51. By the first century A.D., Athens had become a provincial city of the Roman Empire. It was important primarily for its schools of philosophy, and served as what might be called a “university town” for upper class Romans. In Paul’s day, it was the center of intellectual preeminence.

Among the names that distinguished its scholastic history were Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, and Pericles. The book of Acts tells us that certain Berean brethren who had believed the Gospel escorted Paul to Athens as a matter of personal safety. There he would await the arrival of Silas and Timothy (Acts 17:12-14). Many traveling evangelists might have seen this as a window of opportunity for a little rest and relaxation, to take in some of the cultural offerings of the city as a respite from spiritual combat. Paul had no such experience!

We are told that *while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry* (17:16). His spirit was stirred in him! I wonder to what degree those six words could be used to account for his extensive evangelistic travels? The verb *stirred* is from the Greek **paroxuno**, a combination of **para** (at the point of, alongside of) and **oxuno** (to provoke, sharpen, or incite to indignation with the ancillary idea of swiftness). The imperfect tense indicates that this inward anger of a righteous sort smoldered within him for some time before he invaded the *synagogue* and the *market* with the truth (17:17). The passive voice signifies that the spiritual warning signals of rampant idolatry literally imposed themselves upon his spirit, and that rather swiftly!

The sensitive heart of this man of God would not allow the wait for his comrades to disengage him from the war to which he was called! The reaction of Paul in this situation is reason enough for the Church to ask herself whether America is any less given to idols than was Athens of old, and whether she is *stirred* by a nation given to idols or *disengaged* from cutting edge combat.

The capacity of Paul to be impacted and provoked internally by the surrounding spiritual climate, and to respond in a manner that sought to inject the liberating light of truth into the prevailing darkness, was a critical ingredient in his missionary travels. Do we share that same capacity to be stirred into evangelistic endeavor?

Wilbur M. Smith offered this assessment of Paul’s motivation for ministry:

“The apostle Paul traveled much greater distances than from Chicago to New York, not in the ease of a train, an automobile, or a plane, but for the most part on foot, and that not on level roads as we know, but through sandy deserts, along fever-ridden coastal plains, swimming icy rivers, set upon by robbers, beaten by his own countrymen, thrown into prison, sometimes left as one dead. But there was more than mere travel with this man, Paul...Paul did not travel for travel’s sake; he traveled to preach—to stir up men, to bring conviction to human hearts, to assault

the strongholds of paganism, to do everything in his power, by the grace of God, for the deliverance of men from the bondage of darkness and serving dead idols, to beholding the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Frankly, my fellow believers and fellow preachers, even when we do travel to preach, what happens in the great cities we visit? Nothing! A morning audience of people already Christians, a delicious dinner, a few kind words, a generous check, and we go on our way.

What does the city know of our coming? Nothing! What does the city care? Nothing! What are our results? So meager as not to be reckoned. But this man Paul, when he went into a city, turned it upside down, riots broke out, men left the temples; the sales of images immediately showed a decrease; he was seized by the populace; he was brought before kings. Through this man paganism was dealt a deathblow" (*Therefore, Stand*, p.247).

Brethren, all of us were stirred to indignation over the recent terrorist assault upon our nation. It is time for more noble and essential stirring! America is a nation teetering on the brink of Divine judgment, and can be pulled back from the precipice only by a purified Church that is stirred to pray for her land, and to propagate the gospel! Would you describe your church as stirred or disengaged? How about you?

## The God Who Grieves

One of the most significant theological wonders revealed in Scripture is that the Sovereign God of creation decreed that he would suffer grief at the hands of His creatures. How can it be that such majesty refused to exercise the prerogative of immunity from pain and suffering? At the very core of the gospel is the truth that God the Creator suffered at the hands of those whom he created.

Since September 11, many have asked the question, "How could God allow such an injustice to happen?" My response to the inquirers is to call attention to the greater injustices endured by the Son of God. Can there be a greater injustice than a just God being wounded by the unjust, and suffering on their behalf? Absolutely not!

It is doubtful whether anyone but Judas heard the jingling of those thirty silver pieces as he walked down the dark Jerusalem streets. But I am convinced that in every clinking sound made with every cowardly step he heard them cry out "Unjust! Innocent Blood! Unjust! Innocent Blood!" as a deafening refrain that would make the collapse of the Trade Center towers pale by comparison! The wonder of wonders, however, is that this greatest of injustices committed against the Just One would serve to provide perfect justice for the sins of the unjust! Inquirers would do well to probe the depths of this mystery before debating injustices of lesser magnitude!

The reader who embarks upon a journey through Scripture will discover early on that God has the capacity to grieve. In Genesis 6, we are told that *the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* (6:5). As the Lord observed the spiritual and moral decline of mankind into wickedness through indiscriminate marriages (6:2), it *grieved him at his heart* (6:6).

*Grieved* is from a Hebrew root meaning *to carve* (*fabricate* or *fashion*). It is used metaphorically here to describe the painful displeasure and vexation carved upon the heart of God by the sinful corruptions of man. God determined that His Spirit would stop striving with man, but in mercy he gave mankind an additional *one hundred and twenty years* before he sent destruction by the Flood (6:3). Is this not a marvelous thing to behold? The Lord is at the apex of grief, and yet chooses to endure additional grief and strife out of His compassion for fallen flesh!

The Lord destroyed that world by water, but the descendants of Shem would prove to be an additional and ongoing source of grief. God delivered the children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt through mighty displays of power. For the next forty years, however, the Lord was *grieved with that generation* as they *erred in their hearts* (Psalm 95:10). They often *provoked Him in the wilderness*, and *grieved Him in the desert* (Psalm 78:40). Perhaps nothing grieves the heart of God more than covenant people becoming calloused and corrupt people!

As the centuries passed, the nation of Israel found itself repeating the cycle of bondage and deliverance. In the fulness of time, God was manifested in the flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. On a particular Sabbath day in the synagogue, he healed a man with a withered hand as the scribes and Pharisees *watched* with critical eyes. Before

instructing the man to stretch forth his hand, Jesus *looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts* (Mark 3:5). Thus Isaiah prophesied that he was *acquainted with grief* (53:3), that *he hath borne our griefs* (53:4), and that *the Lord had put him to grief in making his soul an offering for sin* (53:10).

Two thousand years have passed since the precious blood of Jesus was shed for sinners, and for the griefs caused by them. Yet God continues to grieve. How so? Believers in this age are admonished to *grieve not the Holy Spirit of God* (Ephesians 4:30). Every sin committed by a child of God imposes pain and displeasure upon the One Who sealed us until the day of redemption. Again, the wonder of it all is that the breaking of His heart can never result in the breaking of His seal! Does this truth prompt you to continue in disobedience, or run to the mercy seat for forgiveness in response to God's longsuffering and grace?

Brethren, we have heard much these days about the grieving that has taken place over the September 11 tragedy. There is a greater tragedy for which God is grieving—the spiritual condition of His Church, which is characterized these days by worldliness and powerlessness! Those who share the burden for revival in America are those who have come to share this grief with their God! May their tribe increase.

## A Few of My Favorite One-Liners

My Bible is in desperate need of rebinding. It has been my personal and pulpit companion for twenty-three years and counting. Replacing it is not an option that I have considered. Like most of you, I have jotted down a lot of one-liners on those once empty pages inside the front and back covers. Please allow me to share some of the wisdom that has been gleaned through the years. Many of the sayings may have a familiar ring. Authors have been cited in those cases where they are known. Enjoy!

- "Let a man be made usable, and God will wear him out!" — Vance Havner
- "Only those who see the *invisible* can do the *impossible*"
- "Nothing is too hard for God to do if He can get the right man to do it with" — E. M. Bounds
- "The best way for a Christian to get back *in* the saddle is to get back *under* the authority of Christ"
- "Remember when you have to deal with *difficult* men that you have yourselves the opportunity to become *better* men" — Bishop Lawrence
- "There is nothing *fatal* about failure, and nothing *final* about *success*"
- "Honest preaching must keep it clearly in mind that we who commend Christ to others are more like *Peter* who followed afar off than *John* who lay on his Master's bosom" — Morgan Noyes
- "There is no real *service* done for Christ without an attitude of *servanthood*"
- "Our faith in Christ does not free us from works, but from the false opinions concerning works; that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired through works" — Martin Luther
- "Habit is either the worst of masters or the best of servants"
- "I preached as never sure to preach again; and as a dying man to dying men" — Richard Baxter
- "Learning to pray is better *caught* than taught"
- "God knows our secret sin; it is open scandal in heaven" — Sumner Wemp
- "The backsliding of a child of God is due more to *drift* than to *deliberation*"
- "In the matter of discerning the will of God, remember that Satan *drives*, but God *guides*; Satan *confuses*, but God *clarifies*; Satan produces a sense of *hopelessness*, but God creates *hopefulness*"
- "There is just one thing better than forgiveness, and that is *innocence!*"

- “If the Church of Christ *draws* to herself that which she cannot *assimilate* to herself, her life is at once imperiled, and she thus weakens herself in the increase” — A. J. Gordon (on unregenerate members)
- “We cannot journey far with God unless we are saved from numbers” — James A. Stewart
- “The greatest stains in our human history have been inflicted by those who have given themselves totally to some respectable cause—be it race or class or country or church—and have subordinated everything to that one end” — H. J. Paton

## The Puritans on Prayer

Has America returned to prayer? According to many religious leaders and televangelists, the answer to that question is a resounding "Yes!" I have no inclination to argue whether that assessment of our national prayer posture is true or false. What I do have is an affirmation from Scripture that says, "*Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord; and the people whom He hath chosen for His own inheritance*" (Psalm 33:12).

The primary reference of this pronouncement is the nation of Israel, but its application extends to any nation determined to seek the face of God! It is therefore mandatory that local churches who embrace the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ be on the cutting edge of intercessory prayer!

What follows is a collection of quotes from our Puritan predecessors that have a bearing on prayer. Enjoy...and be encouraged!

- "I had rather stand against the cannons of the wicked than against the prayers of the righteous" — Thomas Lye
- "Pray often; for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan" — John Bunyan
- "God can pick sense out of a confused prayer" — Richard Sibbes
- "God never denied that soul anything that went as far as heaven to ask for it" — John Trapp
- "A praying man can never be very miserable, whatever his condition be, for he has the ear of God; the Spirit within to indite, a Friend in heaven to present, and God Himself to receive his desires as a Father. It is a mercy to pray, even though I never receive the mercy prayed for" — William Bridge
- "A saint is to put forth his faith in prayer, and afterwards follow his prayer with faith" — Vavasor Powell
- "You must distinguish between delays and denials" — Thomas Brooks
- "Is it lawful to pray in a set form of words? Nothing but very great ignorance can make you really doubt it. Hath God anywhere forbid it? You will say that it is enough that he hath not commanded it. I answer, that in general He hath commanded you that all be done to edification; but he hath given to you no particular command or prohibition. No more hath He commanded you to pray in English, French, or Latin; nor to sing psalms in this tune or that; nor after this or that version or translation" — Richard Baxter
- "When thou prayest, rather let thy heart be without words than thy words without heart" — John Bunyan
- "I have been benefited by praying for others; for by making an errand to God for them I have gotten something for myself" — Samuel Rutherford

- “The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel” — Thomas Watson
- “Prayer will make a man cease from sin, or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer” — John Bunyan
- “Prayer is nothing but the promise reversed, or God’s Word formed into an argument, and retorted by faith upon God again” — William Gurnall
- “You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed” — John Bunyan
- “God hath engaged to answer the prayers of His people, and ‘fulfill the desires of those that fear Him.’ But it proves a long voyage sometimes before the praying saint hath the return of his adventure. There comes oft a long and sharp winter between the sowing-time of prayer, and the reaping. He hears us indeed as soon as we pray, but we oft do not hear of Him so soon. Prayers are not long in their journey to heaven, but long a coming thence in a full answer” — William Gurnall

## The Need for Samson-Like Desperation!

One of the encouraging aspects of Scripture is the balance of truth incorporated within biographical records. The book of Genesis, for example, portrays Abraham's nephew Lot as a man governed by observation more than revelation, resulting in a pattern of poor decision-making that left him morally and materially impoverished. The book of II Peter, however, reveals that Lot was a *just man whose righteous soul was vexed daily with the filthy conversation [lifestyle] of the wicked (2:7-8)*. The glorious reality is that the garment of imputed righteousness given to Lot by a sovereign God in response to his faith was in no wise tarnished or diminished by bad choices!

The same kind of balance is provided for us regarding Samson. Alexander Maclaren refers to him as "a strange champion for Jehovah" who exhibited "no moral elevation or religious fervor." He was a man of strong yet uncontrolled passions with a bent toward vanity and self-indulgence! The supernatural strength afforded to him by the Spirit of the Lord appears to have been confined to the physical realm. The book of Judges makes it difficult to find in Samson any commendable character traits apart from his Nazarite vows. The book of Hebrews, however, includes him in the gallery of the faithful, who *through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, and waxed valiant in fight (11:32-34)*. Such a balanced presentation enables the believer to draw valuable spiritual lessons from this unconventional warrior!

The ministry of Samson appears to have migrated through five distinct phases. The first was dedication. Prior to his birth, the angel of the Lord appeared to his father Manoah with the promise of a son from his barren wife (Judges 13:2-5). He was dedicated as a *Nazarite unto God from the womb to the day of his death (13:7)*. His mother named him Samson, meaning *like the sun*. His birth represented a brighter future for Israel, which was now on the cusp of deliverance from the Philistines. So *"the child grew, and the Lord blessed him"* (13:24). Dedication is a marvelous virtue, and is always the forerunner of favor from God!

The second phase was demonstration, inasmuch as *the Spirit of the Lord began to move him at times in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol (13:25)*. Demonstrations of power continued over the course of twenty years, and became commonplace for this one-man wrecking crew (14:6; 14:19; 15:14; 15:20). I can imagine that Samson became the key topic of conversation at many dinner tables. He was no doubt a national hero adored by adults and adolescents alike.

The transition into phase three was probably missed by the masses, but it was nonetheless real. This was dereliction! The willful neglect of his vows coupled with vanity and sexual lust led him to disclose to seductive Delilah the secret of his supernatural strength. The result was the infamous haircut in Hell's barbershop, and the loss of his *seven locks (16:17-19)*. Sadder still is the fact that *he knew not that the Lord had departed from him (16:20)*. Dereliction always leads to seduction. The fruit of seduction is always a powerless life!

Phase four, which was devastation, followed quickly on its heels! The former champion of God and Israel was now grinding in the Philistine prison house with empty eye sockets, and *bound with fetters of brass* (16:21). Samson was the epitome of personal devastation! He had given the enemies of the Lord an occasion to blaspheme (16:23-24). It was in the prison house that he realized, perhaps for the first time, the seriousness of his vows! It was here, however, that *the hair of his head began to grow again* (16:22). There is indeed blessedness in the blindness that restores to a believer the condition for power with God!

At the provocation of the Philistines, Samson entered phase five, which was desperation. In the words "*only this once*" we hear the desperate cry of one who had formerly known and lost the anointing of God (16:28). He had come to the realization that death under a fresh anointing was far better than life without it! The Lord apparently agreed, and granted his request!

Brethren, I am firmly convinced that the security agencies of our government were asleep at the switch on September 11. The more important issue is: Where was the Church? Was she grinding in the prison house of self-indulgence and broken vows? Many Americans are having a difficult time comprehending the willingness of Islamic terrorists to die for their religious cause. They are unaccustomed to such fervor and desperation. Could this be due in part to the fact that true believers in this age have provided no such example? It is high time for the Church to exhibit a Samson-like desperation for the anointing of God!

## Knowing and Doing the Will of God

The matter of security, both personal and national, is a dominant theme in America at this hour. The media is serving up on a daily basis a steady diet of news items related to security issues. President Bush has installed a Director of Homeland Security. A staggering economy has millions worried about job security. This last week we heard about an additional two thousand National Guardsmen assigned to beef up airport security. The freefall of major market averages since September 11 has threatened the financial security of many. There is no doubt that security is foremost on the minds of Americans.

It is times like these that prompt the disciple of Jesus Christ to reflect afresh upon the source of their security. Practical wisdom, on the one hand, dictates that prudent security measures are taken by every believer to insulate themselves from personal risk and potential threats. Kingdom principles, on the other hand, require that we trust in the Lord with all our hearts, and lean not unto our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). In the final analysis, there is only one place where the child of God may find genuine security and peace of mind. The safe haven of which we speak is simply this—the knowing and doing of the will of God!

The life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ exemplified this truth. The Scriptures reveal that, on several occasions, the religious leadership conspired and targeted Him for assassination. He repeatedly eluded their grasp, slipping through sinister entrapments and angry mobs as though clothed in heavenly Teflon.

What was it that made Him untouchable, and put Him beyond the reach of His foes? Jesus summed it up in six words—“*Mine hour is not yet come*” (John 2:4). In other words, he continued to be about His Father's business without regard for the external environment. The sacred business for which He was sent would culminate in His agonizing death for sinners (including His assassins) on the Cross of Calvary. The immunity of heaven was His until that hour! The security that Jesus enjoyed was wrapped up in knowing and doing His Father's will!

Jesus taught this truth to His disciples, but it was a difficult lesson for them to learn. The Sea of Galilee was the venue—twice! After a night of fishing that yielded zero results, Jesus issued a command for the men to *launch out into the deep*, and let down their nets for a draught (Luke 5:4). They enclosed a *great multitude of fishes*, and the nets were filled to the point of breaking (5:6).

Up until that time in their lives, those nets represented security—a livelihood, a source of income. Jesus taught them (and was just as surely teaching us) that security is never sacrificed for service! Jesus was calling upon them to leave their nets, and follow Him. He had placed those nets outside of His will for their lives, and removed from them the security that the disciples had formerly attached. The net they would now cast was the Gospel net, and therein was their security!

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, Peter decided once again to go fishing (John 21:3). This course of action appears to have been a return to the former nets as a matter

of security. Once again the results were negative, and once again the Lord illustrated by Divine power that those nets were useful only to the degree that they accommodated His will (3:6). By the way, the same may be said for all of America's high-tech weaponry in the effort to secure freedom. They will be useful in the war against terrorism *only* to the extent that God is pleased to prosper them.

The history of the early Church, as recorded in the book of Acts, confirms that Peter never again returned to those nets after the power of Pentecost fell on him and his brethren. Do you suppose the problem with those who feel that security is somehow sacrificed for service is that they have never experienced the same Holy Ghost power in service?

Brethren, the security nets we seek outside the scope of God's will are nets that provide no security at all! Admittedly, they are often difficult to abandon. In these days of security consciousness, it might be a good idea to take an inventory of those nets in our lives that we reckon as security, and determine whether or not they align themselves with the will of God. If the life of Jesus of Nazareth is any indicator, there can be no greater security for the child of God than serving in the will of God with the power of God!

## Our Exceeding Great Reward

The reward is twenty-five million dollars! The condition for collecting it is the delivery of Usama bin Laden to the United States—dead or alive! Thus far that amount has been insufficient to produce a defector within the loyal inner circle of al Queda. Perhaps the terrors inflicted by B-52 carpet bombings and lethal “daisy cutters” will persuade at least one individual that his life, and more cash than he can imagine, are of greater value than commitment to a perverted and disintegrating form of religious fanaticism. Some psychological experts suggest that it’s just a matter of time before Usama bin Laden is betrayed, and the reward is claimed.

Rewards are intended to spark interest and tweak motivation! Whether they take the form of tangible or intangible assets, they are always set forth as incentives to take action. The matter of rewards also happens to be an entirely proper subject for spiritual discussion. Jesus taught the multitudes that they should *rejoice, and be exceeding glad* when *reviled* of men, *persecuted*, and *falsely accused* for His sake, because *great* would be their *reward in heaven* (Matthew 6:11-12). Paul taught the Corinthians that *every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor* (I Corinthians 3:8), and reminded a young, full-time pastor that *the laborer is worthy of his reward* (I Timothy 5:18). He instructed the church at Rome that justification of the *ungodly before God* is a *reward reckoned of grace*, inasmuch as *faith is counted for righteousness* (Romans 4:4-5). The whole point of Hebrews 11 appears to be that God is *a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him* as an expression of their *faith* (11:6). God has clearly portrayed Himself as One Who desires to interact with men on His sovereign terms with the clear intent to richly reward those who yield themselves to those terms! Do any of us need a greater motivation for seeking the Lord?

I would like to call to the witness stand an Old Testament patriarch for his expert testimony in the matter of reward. My first question is: “Abram, would you please tell the jury what the Lord revealed to you in a vision after you met with Melchizedek, king of Salem, and offered tithes of all to the most-high God?” (Genesis 14:18-20).

He responds: “Yes, certainly! As you know, my nephew Lot had been taken captive by *four kings with five* led by Chedorlaomer (14:9). When the word came, I pursued their troops with *three hundred and eighteen* of my own *trained servants* (14:14). By the grace of God, we overcame a significantly superior force, and rescued my nephew. I understand that some years later Moses referred to this successful rescue mission as *the slaughter of Chedorlaomer, and of the kings that were with him, at the valley of Shaveh* (14:17). Well, you can imagine my gratitude to the most-high God for His good grace on my behalf. But you can also appreciate my fears concerning future reprisals by these same kings. I am neither a soldier nor a military strategist. My emotions were mixed at the time. The Lord, however, had compassion on my fears, and gave me this word in a vision. *‘Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward’* (15:1). Words of mine cannot express the encouragement I received from His words!”

Just one more question for the witness. “Abram, can you briefly describe the significance of this revelation?” Abram raises his eyes toward heaven for a moment as a tear makes

its way down each cheek. He clears his throat, and graciously asks the court to excuse the emotional lapse. "Sorry about that, but the '*shield*' still chokes me up. It meant that the Lord was all the military force and protection I would ever need. What He did once He could do a thousand times again. Guess what that did for my fears? The '*exceeding great reward*' set Him in contrast to all the stuff of life. As you are well aware, I was the wealthiest of men. I learned that discovering something new and fresh about Him at each door of decision and every occasion of obedience is the greatest compensation that a man can receive in this life! Simply stated, I learned that the richest of men are those who are full of God. The assets of this world, when held in a God vacuum, are no better than ashes!" The court thanks the witness for his testimony.

Brethren, may the grace of God enable all of us to discover afresh the exceeding great reward that God offers us in Himself and in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The riches of this life pale in comparison to the rewards that God has promised to the faithful! These are they that believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him!

## The Cross of Christ at Center Stage

The apostle Paul refused to glory or boast in his own personal accomplishments relative to the work of the kingdom of God. There was but one work that held center stage in his thinking, and that was the agonizing labor carried out by Jesus of Nazareth upon the Cross on his behalf. To the churches of Galatia, he made this inspired assertion—“*But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world*” (Galatians 6:14).

The world at large perceives the embrace of the Cross as the obliteration of self; the believer as liberation for the soul! The world sees the Cross as an end of all pleasure; believers as the escape from the penalty of sin! For the believer, the Cross first signifies death with Christ, then life with Christ, and genuine freedom! No alternatives for salvation exist outside of the Cross! The Cross is the single place where all conflicts between a holy God and sinful men can be resolved, and is therefore cause for great rejoicing!

The Congregationalist preacher Joseph Parker (1830-1902) performed the greater part of his pastoral ministry in London, England. Church historians regard him as one of the most powerful and influential preachers of the nineteenth century. He was reputed for his giftedness in delivering dramatic pulpit oratory, and over a period of thirty-three years built a rather large congregation at City Temple, where he served as pastor until his death. I recently came across one of his recorded public prayers, and offer its contents to you for your edification. At the heart of the prayer is the Cross of Jesus Christ.

“Almighty God, let our weakness be our prayer; let our hunger cry unto thee; let our thirst make known its own supplication. We are weak and weary and sad oftentimes, but the river of God is full of water, and the Cross of Christ rises high amid all the tumult and uproar of time. Thou knowest we need something to look upon; thou hast set up the Cross of thy Son as the object of our attention. We bless Thee for the Cross; its head is in heaven, and its arms are stretched out to the ends of the earth. There the Saviour is, there is the miracle of love. We know not all the meaning, but we know that we need it all. What sin is only God can know; we know in some little measure. It hurts the soul, it draws a great veil of darkness across the noontide sun, it takes away all the fragrance out of the flowers, it makes life bitter. This we know; this we have tested by manifold experience. The answer of the Cross helps us to overcome all of this sinfulness and weariness and all this sense of penalty. May we know the Cross more perfectly, may we draw nearer to it every day; let it be to us the great mystery, the wonder that has no solution we can comprehend, the glory that blinds all other light. Yea, we bless thee again and again in manifold and ever increasing song for the Cross. Some days we feel our need of it more than others; sometimes we are frivolous and earthly and selfish, and have no need or desire to see the Cross; but sometimes we need it all, and feel our need of it most when we cannot tell it.”

'Lord, help us then to see such degree of the meaning of the Cross as shall help us to believe and live and be glad. As for the fools that would lead us away from the Cross, do thou turn them blind, confound them in their groping and wondering, and when they cry out for help take hold of their hands and bring them home again. As for the wise men that think there is nothing but earth and space and time, may we never be overcome by them, may we hold on to our holy faith that round about us is the spirit-world, above us is God's kind heaven, in front of us an infinite destiny. The Lord fill us with these holy thoughts and great wonders and solemn aspirations, and the Lord help us to turn our piety into service, so that at eventide, when the shadow lengthens and the home-going time has come, we may be called up as servants good and faithful. Amen" (*Studies In Texts*, Volume IV, p.44-45).

Brethren, we have passed through another season of Thanksgiving for God's good grace and bounty toward America. She is indeed the land of the free, and the home of the brave! Her armed forces are presently defending our political freedom in efforts to rid the civilized world of terrorism. We must remind ourselves, however, that the battle for spiritual freedom was fought and won nearly two thousand years ago at the Cross, and that there is no greater terror than that inflicted upon the human soul by sin! May the Cross of Christ take center stage in our expressions of gratitude toward God!

## The Chief Minister of Music

Does your congregation have a minister of music on staff? How about a worship or praise leader? If yours is a larger church congregation with an ample budget, the answer to these questions may be in the affirmative. For the vast majority of evangelical churches, which do well to provide for the pastor and pay the bills, the desire for a full-time staff member with training and expertise in sacred music is a longing that will go largely unfulfilled.

Many pastors, especially those in rural communities, find themselves performing double duty every Sunday as both song leader and preacher. The lack of a so-called "strong music program" sometimes becomes a source of discouragement for these pastors when they see apparently good prospects for church membership gravitate to other churches (the critical point of the decision being the music program, and what the other church offered in terms of music). The problem with such a pragmatic approach to the ministry of music in the church is that it fails to recognize that every congregation of Christian brethren, without regard for the size of its membership, has a Minister of Music present at every scheduled meeting.

The Bible teaches us that a supernatural unity (oneness) exists between the One Who *sanctifies* believers and those whom He has *sanctified* (Hebrews 2:11). For this cause, the Sanctifier is *not ashamed to call them brethren*. The writer of Hebrews proceeds to quote the prophetic words of the Sanctifier as recorded in Psalm 22:22, saying: "*I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee*" (2:12). These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ to the Father, both His and ours! He is resolved both to declare and to sing in the midst of the church. Let the theologians and theoreticians debate exactly how He does this. Personally, I take this to mean that Jesus actually preaches with the preacher during his pulpit declarations, and sings along with the singers of praise, whether congregational or special.

In 2 Cor. 5:20, the apostle Paul expressed the same spirit of collaboration (i.e., laboring together toward a goal) in the phrases "*as though God did beseech you by us*" and "*we pray you in Christ's stead.*" In a very real sense, Jesus is present at every scheduled church service as both Preacher and Minister of Praise Songs! With this truth in mind, how shall we account for dull church services that lack fervency in the preaching and praising? Could it be a lack of collaboration? That is, could Jesus be working toward one goal and the congregation another?

The Lord Jesus made His objectives perfectly clear regarding the church services where He would be in attendance. His primary goal for the preaching is to impact the brethren with God-centered truth! His primary goal for the singing is to impact the God of heaven with praise! The degree to which we collaborate with Him in these two areas will determine (to a great extent) the degree to which our ministries are pleasing and effective in His sight!

I have noticed that the Classified-Help Wanted sections of many denominational publications frequently carry ads from churches for ministers of music. Sometimes

potential applicants are made aware that the church desires a blend of traditional and contemporary music styles. In others, the preferred style is strictly contemporary (i.e., advocates of traditional worship music need not apply). What do ads that distinguish between traditional and contemporary music reveal about a church? They disclose that someone or something other than the God of heaven has become the primary focus of the music! In other words, the worship has become man-centered rather than God-centered!

The one principle that should govern our congregational music choices is whether or not the Lord Jesus, the chief Minister of Music, could offer it to the Father as appropriate praise! Why would the brethren want to engage in that which the Lord Jesus cannot endorse? Does this mean that contemporary music is inappropriate? Absolutely not! What it does mean is that a music program that is governed by its anticipated effect upon the worshipper (whether traditional and contemporary) does not conform to the expressed will of Christ!

Brethren, our primary concern for all church music should be its anticipated impact upon the Father, and upon His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ! Every other consideration is secondary in nature, and virtually meaningless if the first order of business is obscured. The aforementioned double-duty pastor should take comfort in the fact that he has the collaboration of Christ in both the song leading and the preaching!

## The Kingdom in Proper Perspective

This world is not my home; I'm just a passin' through: my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue. You might recognize these words as the beginning of a very familiar chorus. Its popularity is rooted in the fact that it reminds us of the world to come, which stands in stark contrast to the turmoil of the present age and its hostility toward the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is my conviction, however, that longings for the world to come should be balanced with truth regarding the kingdom of God.

In his testimony before Pilate, Jesus said: "*My kingdom is not of this world*" (John 18:36). This statement affirmed the heavenly origin of his kingdom, but did not preclude an earthly manifestation and function. In other words, while his kingdom was not *of* this world, it was most certainly *in* this world as a contagion of spiritual salt and light! In his intercessory dialogue with the Father, Jesus spoke of his disciples as being *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:11, 16). Their citizenship was in another world, but their impact would be felt in this one!

Jesus exhorted the multitudes, saying: "*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you*" (Matthew 6:33). Jesus taught that the dominant priority of every life should be a zealous pursuit of the kingdom of God! He made known to Nicodemus that the one requirement for *entry* into *the kingdom of God* was the new birth, or being *born again* (John 3:3-7). As a result of faith in Jesus Christ, God the Father *delivers* born again believers *from the power of darkness*, and *translates* them *into the kingdom of his dear Son* (Colossians 1:13). In this new relationship they enjoy *the forgiveness of sins* as a fruit of *redemption through his blood* (1:14). The bottom line is that the kingdom of God is here and now, and Jesus reigns as King!

In the light of kingdom truth, we ought to consider carefully whether an evangelistic dialogue that begins by asking sinners if they would like to go to heaven when they die is the most appropriate approach. The man born blind who had received his sight was right on target when he asked his religious detractors, "*Will ye also be his disciples?*" (John 9:27). The word *also* implies that his was a faith that would follow Jesus, and he inquired whether the Jewish leaders were willing to do the same. The point is that an evangelism that produces believers without producing disciples is defective and deceptive.

The commission of the kingdom is to *teach* [make disciples of] *all nations* (Matthew 28:19). Discipleship is much more than going to heaven when one dies! It is placing oneself under the discipline of the King for the advancement of his kingdom *in* this world! It is not praying the prayer, but surrendering the will! It is experiencing God here and now! It is exhibiting the trademarks of kingdom life, which are *righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost* (Romans 14:17). It is expecting that one day we shall see the King face to face as the culmination of our kingdom experience *in* this world!

Brethren, the world in which we live is a hostile place. It is entirely proper for the child of God to long for that heavenly city whose Builder and Maker is God. His kingdom, however, is a formidable force in this world. It resides within every soul where Jesus has

been allowed to exercise his rule! While there is great comfort in knowing that death has lost its sting, there is greater comfort still in knowing that we have walked with the King in the midst of this wicked and perverse generation, and made a positive difference for the glory of Christ, and the furtherance of his kingdom, in this world!

## A Ministerial Charge

Robert Murray McCheyne was a remarkable man. He was born May 21, 1813 in Edinburgh, Scotland. In 1843, at the young age of twenty-nine, he died of typhoid fever. His life spanned but three short decades, but its impact for Christ was felt throughout Scotland. At age four he was able to write the Greek alphabet, and spent his youth memorizing lengthy passages of Scripture. He graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 1830 with degrees in music, geography, and modern languages. At age eighteen he began seminary training in preparation for the ministry. He was ordained at age twenty-three, and served as pastor of St. Peter's Church in Dundee until the time of his death. Shortly before his passing, the Spirit of God stirred his church (and others where he had preached) with a mighty revival.

McCheyne preached an ordination sermon on December 16, 1840, that has been preserved for us in the archives of Christian literature. His text was taken from Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy—"I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (II Timothy 4:1-2). The exposition he provided was both powerful and timeless. He also delivered five distinct charges to the candidate for ordination. My purpose is to recount those five charges (with abbreviated excerpts) for our edification.

The charges are as follows:

- (1) "Thank God for putting you into the ministry. It is the greatest honour in this world. Had I a thousand lives, I would willingly spend them in it; and had I a thousand sons, I would gladly devote them to it. Do not forget, then, dear brother, amid the broken accents of confession from a broken heart, to pour out a song of thankfulness.
- (2) Seek the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Remember the apostles. Before the day of Pentecost they were dry, sapless trees with little fruit; but when the Spirit came on them like a mighty rushing wind, then three thousand people were pricked to the heart. Pray that you may be filled with the fire of the Spirit...that you may pierce into the hard hearts of unconverted sinners.
- (3) Do not rest without success in your ministry. Exhort the brethren to cleave unto the Lord. Do not rest till you get them to live under the pure, holy rules of the gospel. Do not be satisfied without conversions. You will often find that there is a shaking among the dry bones, a coming together of bone to his bone, skin and flesh come upon them, but no breath in them. Oh, brother, cry for the breath of heaven! Remember a moral sinner will lie down in the same hell with the vilest.
- (4) Lead a holy life. Your whole usefulness depends on this. Your sermon on Sabbath lasts but an hour or two; your life preaches all the week. Remember, ministers are standard-bearers. Satan aims his fiery darts at them. If he can only

make you a covetous minister, or a lover of pleasure, or a lover of praise, or a lover of good eating, then he has ruined your ministry forever. Implore His Spirit to make you a holy man.

- (5) Be a man of prayer. Give yourself to prayer. If you do not pray, God will probably lay you aside from your ministry, as he did me, to teach you to pray. Get your texts from God, your thoughts and words from God. Carry the names of the little flock upon your breast, like the High Priest; wrestle for the unconverted. Luther spent his three best hours of the day in prayer. John Welch prayed seven or eight hours a day. Oh that God would pour down this spirit of prayer upon you and me.”

Brethren, ministers molded in the manner described by McCheyne may well be a dying breed in America. They are, however, absolutely essential if this generation (beginning at the house of God) is to experience genuine revival wrought by the Spirit of God! Some churches have earned the reputation of “preacher killer” simply because this kind of man disrupts the status quo, and brings a passion to the pulpit that is unpalatable to the rank and file. Even the prophet Elijah, who exemplified all of these traits, got caught in the downward spiral of discouragement because of a religious leadership that rejected the truth, choosing rather to worship and serve another god. Oh Lord, mold us preachers according to charges of McCheyne, and stir your people to pray likewise both for their pastors and for themselves! Amen!

## God at Risk with a Righteous Man

Do you believe that God will take a risk, or put Himself at risk, in His dealings with humanity? In reading the account of Matthew this week regarding *the birth of Jesus Christ* (1:18-25), I was reminded afresh that God will indeed put Himself at risk if He can find the right man with which to do it. The kind of man of which we speak is a righteous man. The Scripture tells us that Joseph, the legal father of the Lord Jesus, was a *just man* (1:19), and exactly the kind of man required for the entrustment of the Holy Child Jesus.

A stewardship of this magnitude has never been equaled! A parental responsibility has never been greater! The story of Christmas, unlike any other, illustrates the unfathomable relationship between sovereignty and vulnerability! I call your attention to four distinctive character traits that were evident in Joseph the just man, the man with whom God placed Himself at risk.

The first is a refusal to participate in the public humiliation of another. In this case, it was the woman to whom he was engaged. While he contemplated a divorcement as part of his initial response, he was determined that under no circumstances would it be done in a manner that would inflict public harm or embarrassment upon her. It would remain a private matter. Such is the disposition of a righteous man.

I recall a 1974 college chapel service, in which the preacher (a soul-winning icon among Independent Baptists) spoke of his public rebuke of an usher who was too slow (in his opinion) in getting an information card to a visitor in the congregation. He sought to justify the action in terms of his spiritual authority as pastor. The fact is this “man of God” was self-absorbed and deceived. He abused his position to humiliate another in a public venue—something Joseph refused to do!

The second is an aversion for impulsive decision-making. Although he was *minded* to put her away, we are told that *he thought on these things* (1:20). The Greek verb translated *thought* indicates an *inward reflection* upon, and *consideration* of, a matter. It means *to ponder*. Joseph knew the stakes were high. It was no time for haste! After an ample season of reflection, the angel of the Lord appeared with revelatory light regarding the Holy Ghost conception. Time given to reflection brought heavenly direction and the right decision! Deliberative restraint is one of the marks of a righteous man!

The third is an obedient response to revelation. A righteous man does not necessarily have all the answers. Sometimes darkness may temporarily obscure his path as he waits patiently upon the Lord. The exercise of restraint, however, does not demonstrate a lack of resolve. In the dream, the messenger of the Lord brought light. After Joseph was *raised from sleep*, he *did* as he was *bidden* (1:24). A righteous man is predisposed to obey the light he is given.

The fourth is sexual purity. We are told that these events took place *before they came together* (1:18). The virginity of Mary, as the sign of Divine conception (Isaiah 7:14), usually overshadows the fact that Joseph himself was a sexually pure man—a virgin engaged to a virgin. There was no promiscuity, nor surrender to lust, within this

relationship. Joseph proceeded to marry his sweetheart in obedience to the Lord, and *knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son* (1:25). A righteous man is a sexually pure man, who, by the grace of God, has mastered his God-given sexual passions. The events surrounding Christmas demonstrate the direct link between sexual purity and spiritual privilege!

Brethren, the Christmas season is the celebration of Emmanuel, God with us. It concerns a virgin maiden, chosen of the Lord to be the vehicle by which God Himself, robed in human flesh, would enter this world for the purpose of saving His people from their sins. But it also involves a righteous man named Joseph, the spiritual head of his household, to whom God the Father would entrust the care of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world.

Although Joseph is seldom the focal point of Christmas, his righteous character speaks volumes about the kind of man with whom God will put Himself at risk to accomplish His will in the earth! A sober reflection upon the manner in which Joseph conducted himself during the most critical years of human history prompts this question: Is God willing to put Himself at risk with me?

## The Petition of Achsah

Now that The Prayer of Jabez has captured the imagination of the Christian community, it is time for the sequel. I would like to offer The Petition of Achsah as a suitable title. Achsah was the daughter of Caleb, who had offered her in marriage to any man who would smite the city of Kirjath-sepher, and take it. A relative named Othniel responded to the offer, and conquered the city. *So Caleb gave him Achsah his daughter to wife* (Judges 1:12-13). We might be inclined at first to consider physical beauty as the chief reason why Othniel put himself in harm's way for Achsah. I prefer to believe it was a far more substantial reason. How about the same passionate faith and godly character that he observed in her father Caleb?

Achsah exerted her influence upon Othniel immediately as *"she moved him to ask of her father a field"* (1:14). The Hebrew root translated *moved* means *to prick*. Its figurative usage indicates *stimulation* and or *seduction*. The idea is that Othniel approached Caleb after yielding to her repetitive prodding. Upon securing the field, she approached her father Caleb personally with this petition: *"Give me a blessing: for thou hast given me a south land; give me also springs of water"* (1:15). The man who had approached Joshua with the famous "Give me this mountain!" request was now on the receiving end of a similar petition from his own daughter.

His response appears to have exceeded her expectations in the form of *upper and nether* (lower) *springs*. It is unclear whether these springs were located on the northern and southern ends of the field respectively, or located at higher and lower elevations. Also unclear is the precise reason for the request. What is crystal clear, however, is that she desired a complete package consisting of both land and water resources.

The Lord Jesus instructed the woman at the well that *"whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life"* (John 4:14). At a future point in time, He reiterated the same truth by declaring, *"If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water"* (John 7:37-38). John added: *"But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified"* (v. 39).

Jesus was indeed glorified! He suffered and died on behalf of sinners! He made a full satisfaction for sin! He was buried in a borrowed tomb, and destroyed the bands of death by virtue of His glorious resurrection! As the Landlord of His own universe, and seated at the Father's right hand, He grants fields of salvation to His people, and plants within the belly of every believer the upper and nether springs of spiritual sustenance and power! The believer is thus assured that the springs of living water are always close at hand and accessible in every circumstance of life! The salvation of Christ is indeed the complete package! Glory!

Brethren, for what shall we petition our heavenly Father in the coming year? The petition of Achsah appears to provide the simplicity and practicality so desperately needed

among God's people in this hour. The blessing we need from the Father is the fresh flow of living water within the bosom of every believer, resulting in a church aglow with the power and glory of God! May all of us find an occasion to come into the Lord's presence, and, in the spirit of Achsah, petition our heavenly Father for a fresh experience of that complete salvation package that was secured for us by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ!