

# **Truth On Fire**

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## Ordained to Eternal Life

Let us begin the New Year by contemplating the power of the word of God to radically and permanently change the dispositions of those to whom it is preached. One of the many Biblical illustrations of this truth took place in the synagogue at Antioch during the second missionary journey of the apostle Paul (Acts 13:14-52). After *the reading of the law and the prophets*, Paul and his company were asked by the rulers of the synagogue to share *any word of exhortation* they might have *for the people* (13:15). In response to their gracious offer (and no doubt recognizing the providential hand of God), *Paul stood up*, and respectfully requested that the congregation *give audience* to what they were about to hear (13:16). Paul proceeded to deliver an historical and prophetic masterpiece.

He began his message with the captivity of Israel in Egypt. He cited the forty years of wilderness wanderings, the conquest of Canaan, the four hundred-fifty year era of the judges, the work of Samuel the prophet, the kingships of Saul and David, and the preaching of John before the coming of Jesus -- the Saviour of Israel, and the fulfillment of all the promises made to David. He recounted the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of the Jews at Jerusalem, and concluded with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the fulfillment of the promises made unto the fathers.

It is worth noting that this *word of exhortation* delivered by Paul was also referred to as *the word of this salvation* (13:26), *the word of God* (13:43, 46), and *the word of the Lord* (13:48, 49). His final admonition consisted of three unambiguous assertions: *through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins* (13:38); *by him all that believe are justified* (13:39); and *beware of despising* the message of salvation in Jesus (13:40-41).

The disposition of the Jews toward the word of God stands in stark contrast to that of the Gentiles. The Jews were *filled with envy* at the Gentile multitudes, and spoke *contradictory* and *blasphemous* words against the word of God. Paul boldly accused them of *putting it away*, and *judging themselves unworthy of everlasting life*. The Gentiles, on the other hand, *desired for these words to be preached to them again the next Sabbath day*. They responded with gladness to the fact that God was offering to them the same forgiveness of sins, justification (righteous standing before Him), and eternal life. They *glorified the word of the Lord*, and *as many as were ordained to eternal life believed*.

The word *ordained* is from the Greek word **tasso**. It can have a range of meanings depending on the context in which it is used, including *to arrange* (in an orderly manner), *to place* (in order), *to dispose* (to a certain position or lot), *to addict*, and *to determine*. The verb form is a perfect passive participle, which tells us that this ordination to eternal life was of a permanent nature, that it came upon them from an outside source, and that it took place prior to (and as a condition for) the exercise of faith.

Our task is three-fold: (1) to determine the sense of *ordained* as it is used here, (2) to identify the source, and (3) to ascertain the time at which it took place. The context enables us to achieve all three objectives, especially since Luke takes great care to

represent eternal life as a genuine offer made by God to all men without exception or distinction, and faith as the condition upon which God justifies sinners, whether Jew or Gentile.

The clear meaning of *ordained* in this context is that the Gentiles had become *permanently disposed* toward eternal life due to the effect of the word of God upon them. The hunger to hear resulted in an addiction to those things that pertain to eternal life, and a resolute determination to trust in Jesus to receive the benefits of salvation. There is nothing in the context to suggest an act of God in eternity past. The believing Gentiles were ordained (disposed) to eternal life in an *historical* (not eternal) context after hearing the word of salvation and before they believed. The unbelieving Jews had every opportunity to be ordained to eternal life, but chose rather to reject the word of the Lord.

Brethren, the disposition of the Gentiles to eternal life holds two great lessons for us. First, it confirms that one's response to the word of God is the critical difference between heaven and hell. Second, it defines that disposition of soul that always precedes saving faith. How many professing Christians have never experienced a fixed determination to pursue the Lord and or a permanent addiction to those things that pertain to life and godliness? As we embark upon the New Year, let us examine ourselves to see whether we have been ordained to eternal life or merely pretenders to it.

## God's Goodness at the Eleventh Hour

The great majority of God's people, at one time or another, find themselves in need of an encouraging word from God. Jesus spoke such a word to His disciples as he likened the kingdom of heaven unto a certain householder who went out to hire laborers into his vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). He spoke of a twelve-hour workday that began *early in the morning*, at which time the householder reached an agreement with a certain number of workers for *a penny a day* in wages. They were *sent* to work immediately (20:2). The householder likewise hired additional workers at the *third*, the *sixth*, and the *eleventh* hours. Unlike the first workers who had contracted for a penny, the rest had only the word of the householder that he would *give* unto them *whatsoever was right* (20:4, 7). At the end of the workday, all were paid a penny in wages for their efforts *beginning from the last unto the first* (20:8).

The first group *murmured against the goodman of the house* because he had made the one-hour workers *equal* to them (20:12). In other words, they accused him of unfair treatment, especially since they had *borne the burden and the heat* of the entire day, and should have been paid more. The householder defended his actions inasmuch as he had honored his agreement with them (20:13), had acted *lawfully* as the proprietor, and had shown goodness and magnanimity to the others simply because he was *good* (20:15). He actually addressed one of them as "*Friend*" (20:13). He had done that which was right! The exercise of goodness on his part was no justification for the *evil eye* with which they now looked upon him (20:15). The point of the parable is that the goodman had been fair to the first workers, and more than fair to the rest! All had reason to rejoice in the goodness of the householder!

Can you identify with the workers hired at the eleventh hour? The day was far spent. They had been *standing idle all the day* without a job offer from another employer (20:6-7). Eleven hours of idleness had no doubt produced a sense of hopelessness! Too much time had elapsed! The window of opportunity was about to close! For whatever reason, they had blown it!

The sun was just an hour or so from setting in the western sky when the goodman came along, and said, "*Go ye also into the vineyard: and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive*" (20:7). Thank God for the goodman! How they must have appreciated this opportunity at the eleventh hour! How much more must they have rejoiced in learning that they had not been penalized at the end of the day for eleven hours of idleness! There was simply no way they could have anticipated the depth and breadth of his goodness!

The enemy, my friend, is an expert at hurling accusations in the direction of the eleventh-hour saint! Satan is the architect of ambivalence in the child of God. He is headmaster in the school of hopelessness. He targets preachers who have been idle in preaching, pastors who no longer pastor due to a sense of frustration and failure, divorcees whose lives are in disarray, evangelists and soul-winners who have become lukewarm and have ceased to bear fruit, deacons who no longer minister, teachers who have become idle in their study of the Word, and anyone else who has lost precious time

and ground that they feel can never be recovered. All of these are likely to hear the words "You blew it! It's over!" whispered repeatedly into their spiritual ears by the diabolical one. The antidote for the devil's lies is the truth about the goodman, who is willing to grant full compensation to all who are willing to work in his vineyard, even at the eleventh hour! Why? He is good, pure and simple!

Brethren, there is consolation to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ, the goodman of His own spiritual and eternal household. The Lord saves sinners by grace through faith apart from works. At the time they exercise faith in Him, they become His workmanship created unto good works. The saints soon discover that His goodness knows no boundary, and His longsuffering knows no end! The key to compensation is a willingness to work in His vineyard without regard for hour at which the work is commenced. If you happen to be an eleventh-hour saint beset by discouragement, take hope in the truth that the goodman is always willing to work the full extent of His goodness in those who are willing to work...even at the eleventh hour!

## Let Us Reason Together

They were on God's death row! The Grand Jury, consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, had considered all the facts in the case, and had issued scathing indictments of a lethal nature against them. The Prosecutor had rested His case, and was now bidding the defendants to offer a rebuttal to the charges laid against them. At first glance, the situation would appear to be stacked against them. After all, the God by whom they were indicted was also the Judge, the Prosecuting Attorney, and the Jury. All that remained for the Court was the sentencing of the guilty. Lost sinners never see themselves in such a quandary before God apart from Spirit enlightenment. The nation of Israel, however, had every reason to see themselves in exactly that situation according to the prophecies recorded in Isaiah 1:1-24.

The charges made against Israel included spiritual rebellion and ignorance (1:2-3), backsliding in a sin-laden condition (1:4), unresponsiveness to previous chastening (1:5), spiritual sickness from the sole of the foot to the head (1:6), Sodom and Gomorrah-like attitudes and behavior (1:9-10), and spiritual harlotry (1:21). Therefore religious sacrifices and observances had themselves become acts of iniquity in the sight of God (1:11-14), wherein praying was ignored and prayers unheard (1:15). Like any charge that the Lord lays against a sinner, these were insurmountable!

In a move that stunned the Courtroom, the Jury came back with a recommendation of mercy and full pardon for the defendants if they were willing to obey certain directives set forth by the Judge (1:19). In short, the offer of mercy was contingent upon *putting away evil, ceasing to do evil, and learning to do well* (1:16-17). In the words "*Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool*" (Isaiah 1:18), the defendants are exhorted to embrace the offer without hesitation.

The phrase *reason together* indicates a reciprocal argument or discussion wherein both parties come to the conference table with a desire to nail down the unadulterated truth. According to J. A. Alexander, the Jews were extended "an invitation to discuss the question whether God was willing or unwilling to shew mercy, implying that reason as well as justice was on his side, and asserting his power and willingness to pardon the most aggravated sins." He continues by stating that "having shewn that the cause of their ill-success in seeking God was in themselves, and pointed out the only means by which the evil could be remedied, he now invites them to determine by experiment on which side the fault of their destruction lay, promising pardon and deliverance to the penitent, and threatening total ruin to the disobedient" (*The Prophecies of Isaiah*, p. 89-90). What the Lord implies will be the conclusion reached by this reasoning session is that the disastrous consequences of sin upon the nation cannot be attributed to the God Who is willing to forgive the sins and pardon the sinners that caused them! And so it is with every living soul that languishes under the same heavy burden of disobedience!

Do any of us have a need to reason together with the Lord? I believe this passage has equal application to both sinners and saints. The consequences of sin that lead to personal destruction can never be attributed to the Lord. The blame must be laid at the

feet of the defendants! God, on the other hand, is full of mercy and compassion toward those who through unbelief and self-will have inflicted spiritual harm upon themselves.

What words would we use to characterize our lives in the present hour? Are we living or languishing? Is there peace or perplexity? Is there a spirit of contentment or covetousness? Are we prayerful or prayerless? Are we powerful or powerless? Are we Spirit-filled or filled with self? Is our heart given over to blessedness or bitterness? Do the words from our lips tend to glorify God or gossip about those who are made after the similitude of God?

Brethren, in whatsoever state we might find ourselves, the time is always right to reason together with the Lord! Jesus said "*he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God*" (John 3:21). In other words, the godly individual, the doer of truth, reasons together with the Lord on a continual basis to ensure a growing conformity to truth! O Lord, grant to us the same godly desire in abundance!

## The Christian and Critical Thinking

A recent letter to the editor of our local newspaper sought to make a point about the lack of critical thinking in the religious world. An excerpt from the letter reads as follows: "Christianity...expects us to unwittingly swallow the idea that a virgin had a baby and a corpse climbed out of a tomb." The writer went on to attribute belief in these events to a lack of critical thinking. As I am sometimes prone to do, I wrote a letter to the editor in response to this false assertion. I have included below the contents of that letter.

"A recent letter sought to instruct readers in the matter of 'critical thinking' with respect to the Christian faith. The writer implied that believers in Jesus Christ who embrace His virgin birth and resurrection do so in an 'unthinking' manner, and suggested that a dose of good old-fashioned critical thinking might serve to relieve them of the fiction they have swallowed. It must be understood that criticizing the Christian faith is no indication that one has applied critical thought to the process. The letter appeared to be little more than a subjective and weak attempt to redefine critical thinking, and to demagogue sympathetic readers.

What is critical thinking? It is the objective pursuit of reality, and the underlying truth that supports it! Critical thinking refuses to accept long-standing traditions simply because they have a track record of acceptance. It refuses to allow prejudicial bias to dictate the parameters of the pursuit. What the writer expressed was nothing more than the widely held opinion of humanistic rationalism, which rejects Divine intervention in the affairs of mankind as a possible explanation for any phenomenon. No system of thought can consider itself critical that is biased and subjective at its core, and places an 'off limits' tag on God and His ability to reveal Himself to His creatures. It must therefore be conceded that genuine critical thinking is fully capable of producing a validation of the Christian faith.

Since critical thinking seeks to establish the facts in a given situation, it is therefore reasonable to ask what objective criteria are available to the believer in Christ? The panoply of facts that would satisfy any critical thinker includes dozens of Old Testament prophetic utterances that could find fulfillment in only one person—Jesus of Nazareth. In 750 B.C., Isaiah, a Jewish prophet of public record, predicted that a virgin would conceive, and bear a son, as a sign that Immanuel ('God with us') had injected Himself within the context of history (Isaiah 7:14).

In tandem with this prophecy is the inquiry offered to the angel by Mary herself, saying "*How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?*" (Luke 1:34). Mary acknowledged her virginity at the time of conception, and her confession is a matter of historical record. Critical thinking rejects the idea that Mary misrepresented herself to the angel. It looks rather at the public record, and concludes that the virgin birth of Christ was both an historical fact and a prophetic fulfillment.

Shall we call the five hundred plus eyewitnesses who saw Jesus alive after His death and burial? Shall we ask the priests in the temple at the time of His death to testify concerning the massive veil that was supernaturally rent from the top to the bottom?

Within a few months, a significant number of these same priests were *obedient to the faith* as a result of critical thinking (Acts 6:7). In other words, they began to connect the dots through an objective approach to the events surrounding the death of Jesus, and came to the unavoidable conclusion that He was indeed the risen Messiah, the Son of God, and worthy of absolute trust!"

Brethren, the Christian faith has nothing to fear from true critical thinking. The subtle danger comes from those who seek to redefine critical thinking as mere skeptical criticism rooted in humanistic rationalism. Perhaps the best Scriptural example of critical thinking is found in Acts 17:10-12, which speaks of the Jews in the synagogue at Berea as being "*more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.*" May the Lord grant us the grace to go and do likewise!

## The Greater Axis of Evil

In his State of the Union address last Tuesday evening, our President identified the nations of North Korea, Iraq, and Iran as constituting an "Axis of Evil" against the civilized world. The qualifications for this distinction appear to be three-fold: (1) relentless efforts to procure weapons of mass destruction, (2) willingness to deploy these weapons against America and her allies as acts of terror, and (3) track records of cruelty that suggest they should be taken seriously. President Bush admonished the nation that a passive wait-and-see posture toward the Axis could be catastrophic in its effects. He served notice to every alliance government that, if need be, America would act alone to thwart the terrorist threat.

What has been the response thus far? Well, *USA Today* reported that the Axis of Evil has scoffed at the President's words. Moreover, Alliance nations are indicating that the go-it-alone attitude expressed by George Bush was reckless and ill-advised. A French editorial writer has suggested that the events of September 11 were little more than a "parenthesis" in American history to which we have simply overreacted. In other words, it's time we put those events behind us, and got off the vengeance kick!

I totally agree with and support our President in his proactive stance toward this Axis of Evil. I would disagree, however, with the position that this threesome represents the greatest threat to our national security. There is another Axis of Evil at work within the spiritual and moral infrastructure of America that threatens her very existence as the world's last superpower. Let any national leader or spokesman for righteousness sound the alarm regarding its sinister nature and intent, and they would be laughed to scorn.

Just what is this Axis of Evil of which we speak? It is the threesome that inflicts its pernicious damage on every human soul! It is the triumvirate of treason that stands against every expression of godliness! It is the spiritual cancer that has corrupted the cosmos! They are the original marauders of mass destruction that have terrorized rich and poor, great and small, mighty and weak for the last six thousand or so years! According to the apostle John, they are *the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life* (I John 2:16).

There are no indications on a national level to suggest that sinful pride and passions have been on the wane since the events of September 11. They continue to flourish. America has cried out for the help of God while maintaining its indifference toward the holiness of God! We pray that He might succour us, but have no desire that He might sanctify us! We affirm the righteousness of our cause, but wink at the unrighteousness that abounds within our borders!

Abortion forces continue to legally murder on a daily basis some four thousand innocent babies in the name of constitutional rights. Several hundred new pornography websites are launched daily on the Internet. Millions of live-in couples continue to fornicate out of wedlock. Irresponsible husbands and fathers continue to abandon their wives and children to a hostile world. A self-serving and power-hungry Congress continues to perpetrate a punitive and confiscatory tax policy against the citizenry. Federal and

appellate courts continue to rule in favor of homosexual rights, and against moral purity and common sense. The alleged intolerance of the religious right continues to evoke comparisons to the Taliban. And Super Bowl Sunday will end in a drunken stupor for millions of sports addicts. These are just a few of the many fronts where this Axis of Evil is waging war against America. If we lose this war, my friend, it matters not what other wars we win!

Brethren, in the midst of the spiritual Sodom we call America is the local New Testament Church to whom God entrusted the *gospel of Christ*, the *power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth* (Romans 1:16). The message that extols the cross of Christ, the precious blood that God Incarnate shed for sinners, and His victorious resurrection from the dead is the one arsenal with power sufficient to destroy the Evil Axis within the heart of every sinner who believes it!

This Axis of Evil—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—makes North Korea, Iraq, and Iran look like preschoolers in terms of potential for eternal damage! The crucial question at this hour is this: “Can the Church of Jesus Christ be both salt and light, experience Pentecostal power, and boldly proclaim the message of salvation to a lost and dying world, if the greater Axis of Evil is alive and well within her own membership?”

## Resisters and Receivers

The words receiver and resistor are terms that are recognized immediately by experts in television and radio technology. They are elements of electronic circuitry that enable those devices to convert transmitted signals into images and sound. For the student of Scripture, the words receiver and resistor represent two kinds of individuals who are distinguished by their response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The eternal destiny of every soul hinges upon its response to the gospel call. Our purpose is to examine briefly the testimony of Scripture regarding receivers and the resisters.

The God-anointed preaching of Peter at Pentecost *pricked* the hearers *in their heart* (Acts 2:37). The verb *pricked* is from the Greek word **katanusso**. It refers to a thorough piercing (or stinging to the quick) that evokes strong emotion in its object. Those who are *pricked* are greatly pained and deeply moved! Luke's record of this event couples a plural verb with a singular object, signifying that the hearts of the multitude were pricked as one. No one in this group escaped the call of God to salvation! The Spirit plunged the cutlass of conviction down to the quick of their collective heart. He pierced them *even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit*, and discerned *the thoughts and intents* of their heart (Hebrews 4:12).

Those who were pierced as one thus cried out as one, saying: "*What shall we do?*" Peter encapsulated God's offer of salvation in one word—"Repent!" Baptism would serve as *the answer of a good conscience* (I Peter 3:21) in those who embraced Jesus of Nazareth as the crucified, risen, and exalted Lord. The result? They that *gladly received his word* were baptized (2:41). The unmistakable inference is that those who were pierced and called as one did not respond as one. The call was effectual in the three thousand souls who gladly received the word.

A short time later, the leaders of the synagogue set up false witnesses against Stephen, and brought him before the Council on charges of blasphemy and religious subversion (Acts 6:9-15). The high priest offered Stephen an opportunity to answer the charges made against him (7:1). He proceeded to deliver what is arguably the most comprehensive analysis of redemptive history recorded in scripture (7:2-50). He concluded his homily in a manner similar to Peter, accusing them of *always resisting the Holy Ghost* (7:51) and being *the betrayers and murderers of the Just One* (7:52).

In this instance, the hearers were *cut to the heart* (7:54). The verb *cut* is from the Greek word *diaprio*. It means *to cut through with a saw*, and signifies a tearing of the emotions caused by enragement and exasperation. The same word is used in Acts 5:33 to describe the same reaction to the same word spoken by Peter to the same religious Council. It is a virtual certainty that a number of these who were *cut to the heart* on two occasions were previously *pricked in their heart* on the day of Pentecost. It is no stretch to assume that some among the *great company of priests who were obedient to the faith* (Acts 6:7) were present at the Council, and therefore *cut to the heart* before they believed.

On the road to Damascus, Jesus reminded Saul of Tarsus that it was difficult for him *to kick against the pricks* of Spirit conviction (Acts 9:5). The word *pricks* is the translation of **kentron**. It refers to any sharp or pointed stimulus by which a puncture is made and stinging sensations are experienced. According to Jesus, Paul had endured for some time the goads of the Spirit regarding Jesus of Nazareth. He had kicked against them repeatedly, and was finding it increasingly more difficult to do.

When did these goads begin? Well, we know that Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen, and consented unto his death (Acts 8:1). There can be no doubt that he was also *cut to the heart* by the preaching of Stephen, and goaded by the glory on Stephen's face as he looked expectantly heavenward with his dying breath. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul revealed that he had obtained mercy so that *Jesus Christ might shew forth in him all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting* (I Timothy 1:16). Paul was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a resister of the Holy Ghost who had been both pricked and cut to the heart on many occasions. On the road to Damascus, however, the resister became a receiver by obedience to *the heavenly vision* (Acts 26:19).

Brethren, we may conclude from this analysis that being pricked in the heart by the Spirit is no guarantee of an effectual call. On the other hand, being cut to the heart by the Spirit-anointed word does not preclude an effectual call at a later date. The call of the gospel becomes effectual and profitable when it is *mixed with faith* in those that hear it (Hebrews 4:2). Lastly, we can be assured that the mercy and longsuffering of God is able to transform the most flagrant resister into the most faithful receiver!

## Are You Content with an Ishmael?

Most students of Scripture agree that the current conflict between Israel and the Arab nations began in the twenty-first chapter of Genesis. There the Scriptures make us privy to the mocking of Isaac by his elder half-brother Ishmael. The immediate solution recommended by Sarah was casting out Hagar the bondswoman and her son Ishmael—a solution endorsed by the Lord himself even though it was *grievous* to Abraham at the time (Genesis 21:11-12).

It has occurred to me that this entire episode might have been avoided if Abram had sought just one additional piece of information from the Lord regarding the promise of a *land* and a *great nation* (12:1-2), which were later reaffirmed as *thy seed* and *this land* (12:7). The critical piece of information concerning the seed that would come from *his own bowels* (15:4) could have been obtained by asking one more question—“Which womb?” Failure to nail this down left him vulnerable to the advice of Sarai to take her handmaid, Hagar the Egyptian, as a wife for the purpose of obtaining children (16:1-3). It was so done, and Hagar conceived.

No rocket scientist was needed to predict the contentious relationship that would develop between these two wives—one barren and the other blessed! It is interesting that Abram, after hearing the complaint of Sarai, more or less washed his hands of the matter, saying: “*Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee*” (16:6). As a result, Sarai *dealt harshly* with Hagar, and *she fled from her face* into the wilderness (16:6-7). No mention is made of Abram being bothered by this first departure of Hagar even though she was carrying his seed in her womb (16:6-7). He appeared to have been somewhat indifferent! Perhaps he considered the restoration of harmony to his household a result he could live with at any cost! I realize that an argument for indifference based upon silence has its weaknesses, but the stark emotional contrast between this first departure and the final departure some fourteen years later is undeniable! I believe there are valid reasons for this emotional difference!

While Hagar had *fled* from Sarah, she was *found* by the angel of the Lord by a fountain of water in the wilderness. I wonder how many times the grace of God has found those who have fled from bad situations in life? The Messenger instructed her to return and submit herself under the authority of Sarah, and gave her a promise, saying: “*I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude*” (16:10). Does that not have a familiar Abram-like ring to it? He further prophesied the birth of a son, and directed her to call his name *Ishmael*, which means *God shall hear*.

Hagar obeyed the Messenger, with the result that “*Hagar bare Abram a son: and Abram called his son's name, which Hagar bare, Ishmael*” (16:15). Hagar no doubt shared with Abram all that the Messenger had revealed. So Abram, at age eighty-six, eleven years after departing Haran with the promises, now had a seed that he reckoned to be the fulfillment of that promise.

Thirteen years later, at age ninety-nine, God provided Abram with that one missing piece of information regarding the womb from which the promised seed would come. It is at

this time that Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, and a son named Isaac is promised as the fruit of Sarah's womb and the fulfillment of the covenant promise.

Please do not miss the mindset of Abraham with regard to Ishmael! He had spent nearly a decade and a half nurturing a boy into the early stages of manhood. He was content with the notion that Ishmael fulfilled the promise. Ishmael was destined to be a man of great influence among his brethren, and would never back down from a fight (16:12). In other words, he was no sissy, but rather a man's man!

I suppose that in some respects he was every father's dream. This would explain Abraham's cry "*O that Ishmael might live before thee!*" when God revealed that the true son of promise was yet to come from the womb of Sarah (17:18). The point is that something far greater was on the way for Abraham, but he was perfectly content to forfeit the greater glory, and consider himself sufficiently blessed of God in his present situation.

Brethren, how many of us are content with an Ishmael when God would give us an Isaac? How many pastors are content with the effectiveness of their ministries? How many parents are satisfied with the influence they wield upon their children? How many prayer warriors have received all the help they need from the throne of grace? How many preachers and evangelists walk from the pulpit content with the results of the preaching and the power with which they delivered it?

I would challenge each of us to consider what greater glory God might have in mind for us beyond our current experience, and what additional revelation from the Word of God might be required to propel us to the next spiritual level. Ishmael was a blessing, but he was no Isaac!

## Glory in the Church

A doxology is a word of glory or praise directed toward the Godhead with the intent that an audience of kindred spirits will enjoin itself to the praise. Evangelical congregations often exhort one another to praise God from whom all blessings flow—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—and solicit that same praise from every creature on the earth below and every member of the heavenly host above. Formal doxologies of this sort are entirely proper and God-honoring if they come from the heart. Most of the doxologies recorded in Scripture, however, were offered spontaneously after a great deliverance was experienced or a great truth was revealed.

The song of Moses and Israel following the obliteration of Pharaoh and his army at the Red Sea is a perfect example of spontaneous praise on the heels of deliverance (Exodus 15:1-19). The tribute that erupted from the inspired pen of the apostle Paul after declaring the eternal purpose of God to unite both Jews and Gentiles in one body through the blood of Jesus Christ is an example of spontaneous praise in response to revealed truth (Ephesians 3:20-21)!

Our focus is the content of that doxology regarding the ability of God to exceed the expectations of his people in response to prayer! The doxology of Paul reads as follows: *“Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”*

Five exegetical / expository notes are in order:

- (1) The phrase *unto him* is written twice to emphasize the single object of praise. Salvation by grace through faith leaves no room for boasting on the part of man.
- (2) The phrase *exceeding abundantly above* is the translation of the Greek word **huperekperissou**, a combination of **huper** meaning over or above, **ek** meaning from or out of, and **perissou** meaning abundance beyond measure. Paul often intensified his descriptions of God by the use of multiple prefixes. So he challenges us to reckon God's ability to perform as immeasurable with an exponent of three. Students of basic algebra understand this equation to be immeasurability to the third power or infinity cubed! The mathematician protests, “You cannot cube an infinite number and obtain a tangible or measurable result!” The point exactly!
- (3) The verbs *ask* and *think* are both present tense, suggesting an ongoing pattern of prayer. *Ask* is in the Middle Voice, indicating that the petitioner seeks to derive some personal benefit from the answer God provides.
- (4) The ability of God is inseparably linked to the power that works in us. God is sovereign, but in the exercise of his sovereignty he allows himself to be limited by the response of man (Psalm 78:41). Wonder of wonders that we are laborers together with God!

- (5) The phrase *in the church* is a reference that applies primarily to the local church. The word *glory* refers to the words of our lips as well as his manifested presence in our midst! Is there glory in your church?

A classic example of God exceeding the expectations of a praying church is found in Acts 12:1-17. Herod had killed James the brother of John with the sword. A favorable response from the Jews emboldened him to do the same to Peter after the Easter season had passed. Peter was arrested and jailed. Herod assigned sixteen Roman soldiers (four shifts of four daily) to guard him until the appointed time. The death of Peter appeared certain, but *prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him* (12:5). Since Barnabas and Paul were in Jerusalem at the time, it is reasonable to assume that these two prayer warriors participated in the intercessory meetings.

The Lord sent his angel, who delivered Peter from the prison, opened a massive iron gate, led him out into the streets of the city, and then departed. Peter considered the matter, and headed for the house of Mary the mother of John Mark. Many were there praying for Peter, and he astonished them with his arrival.

Many expositors cite the reaction of the petitioners as indicative of a lack of faith, assuming the church was praying for a supernatural deliverance from Herod the executioner. I disagree with that assumption. It is clear to me that the church, having suffered the loss of James, was now interceding on behalf of Peter so that he might die with the same grace and glory of James, Stephen, and others before him. After all, this was the same man who thrice denied the Lord on a previous occasion when he felt his life was at risk.

The rejoinder "*It is his angel*" given to the damsel Rhoda actually expresses the belief that Peter was executed, and that his spirit was there to assure them that he had died triumphantly with his testimony and integrity intact. They were *astonished* because God performed exceedingly abundantly above all that they were asking and thinking!

Brethren, it is high time for God's people to experience afresh the immeasurable power that comes from persistent prayer and personal purity! It is time to meld the ability of God with our availability for his sovereign purposes! It is time for the church to be astonished once again by the supernatural works of God, and render unto him spontaneous doxologies in his manifested presence! It is high time for glory in the church! Amen!

## The God Who Works at Wits End

The one hundred-seventh Psalm begins with an affirmation that the Lord is *good*, and admonishes *the redeemed of the Lord* to vocalize this sentiment, giving thanks unto Him for His enduring mercy (Psalm 107:1-2). The Psalm is essentially a collection of historical snapshots that magnify the Lord's inexhaustible capacity for pity toward His people, and His corresponding ability to deliver them out of their distresses. On four occasions the Psalmist bares the burden of his heart, saying: "*Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!*" (107:8, 15, 21, 31). While the wonderful works of God extend to all men without exception, it is the elect of God whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy who extol them! The burden of the Psalmist is that all men were even as himself in lavishing appropriate praise upon the Redeemer!

It is instructive that the goodness of God provides no immunity from the *distresses* of life (107:6, 13, 19, and 28). The Hebrew root for *distresses* speaks of *narrowness* accompanied by *anguish*. The figurative use depicts the distressed individual as one being squeezed in the vice of trouble to the point of accentuated pain. The reality that finally hits home is that the stressful circumstances are beyond control and coupled with an acute sense of desperation!

Sound familiar? Well, you're in pretty good company! The apostle Paul told the church at Corinth that the *distresses* he incurred *for Christ's sake* served to *approve* him as a *minister of God* (2 Corinthians 6:4; 12:10). David prayed: "*O bring me out of my distresses*" as one whose *eyes were ever toward the Lord* (Psalm 25:15-17). The bottom line regarding our distresses is that they are sometimes self-imposed due to sinfulness and at other times suffered in the context of faithfulness! In either case, it is God Who comes to the rescue with merciful solutions!

The Psalmist includes an interesting reference to merchant mariners. These are men who "*go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end. Then they cry unto the Lord, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven*" (v.23-30). The implication is that trouble comes to these men while conducting business affairs apart from any sin connection. Moreover, the Divine design behind their distress is made apparent—to bring them to their wit's end.

The word *wit* signifies human wisdom and its ability to extricate the possessor from trouble. The wits of men, however, are limited. The Lord is in the business of bringing the objects of his affection to places of wit deprivation, where silence breaks forth into supplication and futility becomes a foundation for faith! Blessed are the men, women, and young folk alike who find at the end of their wit the beginning of the goodness and mercy of God!

Brethren, do you remember the disciples of our Lord Jesus, who were distressed more than once on the Sea of Galilee, and saw first hand the storm transformed into a calm? Can you see the prophetic element in the mariner experience that found at least partial fulfillment in the disciples? There is no question that one of the major objectives in the three-year discipling ministry of Jesus was to bring those twelve chosen men to their wit's end repeatedly, so that they might learn to rely upon Him absolutely and completely through every circumstance of life.

Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and can be expected to deal similarly with us! If you are a distressed disciple who has arrived at wit's end, be assured that the Lord has woven the silver lining of goodness and mercy into the fabric of your storm, and is prepared to bring you to your desired haven at His appointed time and for His glory!

## Forgetting the Works of God

The one hundred-sixth Psalm is a companion Psalm to the one hundred-seventh. Both Psalms bid the reader to give thanks unto the Lord for His enduring mercy, and contain numerous examples of Israel's spiritual cycle of backsliding and deliverance. Among the illustrations employed by the Psalmist is the Red Sea victory. The Psalmist writes, *"He rebuked the Red sea also, and it was dried up: so he led them through the depths, as through the wilderness. And he saved them from the hand of him that hated them, and redeemed them from the hand of the enemy. And the waters covered their enemies: and there was not one of them left. Then believed they his words; they sang his praise. They soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel: But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert"* (106:9-14).

The array of verbs used to describe the actions of both God and his people are profound! God is portrayed as one who rebuked, who led, who saved, and who redeemed. The people are those who believed, who sang, who soon forgot, who waited not, who lusted, and who tempted God in the wilderness. So the subtle drift within the spiritual cycle becomes readily apparent: faithfulness and joyfulness soon give way to forgetfulness, forgetfulness leads to carelessness, carelessness nurtures wantonness, and wantonness wounds the heart of God to the point of provocation! Nations and individuals continue to repeat this same sad cycle unto the present hour!

America is no exception to the pattern. Tomorrow we will hit the six-month mark since the September 11 terrorist attacks. A recent article in the Florida Times-Union stated that the "spiritual activity and depth of people's beliefs have returned to pre-attack levels." This assessment was based on responses from local area church leaders as well as published findings from the Barna Research Group. One Presbyterian minister said that what disturbed him most about the whole situation was that a 5,000-point loss in the stock market would probably create or cause more soul searching than the loss of three thousand lives.

The Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy opined that statements from religious leaders that connected the events of September 11 with the "sins" of the nation left many Americans confused. The Barna study, based on a random poll of 1,010 Americans, actually shows that since September 11 fewer people consider themselves to be Christian (86% to 84%), fewer people believe that moral truth is absolute (38% to 22%), fewer people agree that the Bible is totally accurate (43% to 40%), and fewer people agree that God is an all-knowing, all-powerful creator (72% to 68%). These statistics led the Barna report to conclude that the church was basically asleep at the switch, and missed a golden opportunity to provide genuine spiritual help to those who were searching for answers. They provided a level of emotional comfort, but failed to impart eternal and infallible truths that might have enabled troubled souls to establish a lasting connection with God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ!

The most alarming statistic is the one that shows a sharp decline in those who believe in the absolute nature of moral truth, which corresponds to the decrease in those who hold to Bible accuracy! The latter-day Bible translation frenzy is one of the primary culprits!

The latest “gender-neutral” effort from the publishers of the New International Version (NIV) is nothing more than an attempt by satanic forces to represent God Almighty in culturally acceptable terms—politically correct, ethnically sensitive, and morally inoffensive! Israel of old was guilty of the Canaanization of God by attributing to Him the characteristics of the deities of the surrounding nations, and thus making him more religiously palatable to the heathen. They were subsequently sent into Assyrian and Babylonian captivity for such idolatrous behavior.

What we are now witnessing is the Americanization of God as religious profiteers seek to make Him all things to all men! It is no wonder why people are confused! The religious voice cries, “Trust in the Lord!” The world replies, “Which one?” If the Americanization of God is a form of idolatry no less serious than that practiced by Israel, can our own decline and captivity be less certain?

Brethren, it was said of Israel that they soon forgot the works of God after such great deliverance from the enemy. If and when we repeat this cycle, we are of all men most miserable. We must ever keep the eternal and infallible truth of God before us in both our private and public lives.

My advice to any individual looking for absolute truth in a world of moving targets is to secure a copy of the 1611 King James Version, a college dictionary, and an exhaustive concordance to learn the root meanings and comparative usages of Hebrew and Greek words. Combine these basic tools with a prayerful and teachable spirit, and give yourself to lengthy periods of meditation. Use a notepad and simple filing system to record and keep the jewels of spiritual truth that the Spirit unfolds to you, and determine to be a doer of truth. If we do these things, we will not soon forget the works of God, and will not fail in our pursuit of Him!

## The Longsuffering of God

All believers would agree that longsuffering is one of the most cherished attributes of God. While all of God's virtues elicit wonder and adoration from His subjects, we tend to magnify those qualities that we perceive to have impacted our lives more directly. For example, the attributes of omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience speak of His grandeur and transcendence whereas love, mercy, and longsuffering validate His condescendence to men of low estate.

As one of the objects of His mercy, I cherish dearly the inexhaustible supply of grace that has been allotted to me by the Lord Jesus. I never cease to marvel at the manner in which He hears my cries of distress, has compassion on my ignorance and frailty, and applies the cleansing power of His precious blood to my wretched soul time after time after time! Like Nicodemus, I often find myself asking, "How can these things be?" The longsuffering of God is indeed a wonder of wonders to the humble heart!

The New Testament word *longsuffering* is from the Greek **makrothumia**, a combination of **makro** (*long*) and **thumia** (*temper* or *heat*). It signifies that God is essentially long-tempered, and reaches His boiling point, so to speak, only after lengthy exposure to the rejections and provocations of men. What if God was short-tempered like many of us? What if it took a mere handful of disobediences or acts of indifference for Him to write us off, and withdraw His gracious influences from us? Where would any of us be without the longsuffering of God? Make no mistake! God has a boiling point! The doctrine of longsuffering, however, teaches us that He is predisposed to reach it later rather than sooner!

A classic picture of longsuffering in action is found in Romans 10:21, where Paul writes: "*But to Israel he saith, All day long have I stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.*" The hands of the Lord always signify help as a component of salvation. The verb *stretched* means to *spread out* or *spread forth*. Its primary root means *to fly*, which lends a degree of animation to the word. In other words, we see the hands of the Lord flying from His side into the fully outstretched position. The contrast in verb tenses is also instructive. *Stretched* is in the aorist (past) tense, while *disobedient* (a refusal to be persuaded) and *gainsaying* (words of contradiction) are actually present participles. A literal translation is *the ones who are continually disobeying and the ones who are continually gainsaying*.

The tenses indicate that Israel continues to persist in unbelief and opposition to the gospel beyond that day in which the Lord stretched forth His hands. That day was indeed long, beginning with Moses and ending with the death of Christ at Calvary. O how much God endured at the hands of Israel, interceding for them in His final hour with the words, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" In the final stretching forth of His hands is the evidence of undying compassion for those who nailed Him there! The conclusion to be drawn from this passage is that resolute persistence in unbelief is the one transgression that will bring God to the boiling point, and close the door of salvation.

Brethren, all of us can attest that the Lord Jesus is immeasurably longsuffering to us! Yet there are many in our neighborhoods, in our places of work, and in our families who are disobedient and gainsaying, to whom Jesus is stretching forth His powerful redemptive hands! As those who have experienced first-hand His saving grace, we ought to be His ambassadors in bringing the gospel to a world of sinners that God so loved and for whom Christ died.

## The Bottom Line: Foreknown or Never Known

The bottom line is a term that refers primarily to the lowest line in a financial statement, showing net income or loss. In its more general usage, it represents the essential point of an argument or the final result of an analysis. The bottom line is a valuable commodity because it sets forth in black and white what might otherwise be seen in enigmatic shades of gray.

The student of Scripture will find many bottom lines embedded within the pages of Holy Writ, especially in the matter of salvation. One bottom line with which all of us are familiar is that there are only two types of people who have ever walked the face of the earth—believers and unbelievers. The same bottom line might also be expressed as the saved and the lost. The Bible furthermore sets forth this dichotomy as those whom God foreknew and those whom He never knew!

What exactly does it mean to be foreknown of God? The Greek word is **proginosko**, a combination of **pro** (beforehand) and **ginosko** (to know). Its NT usage, however, tells us that much more than prior knowledge or awareness of individuals is implied. It rather signifies that God had intimate and personal relationships with certain people because He determined them to be so!

It is said that Christ was foreknown (KJV “foreordained”) before the foundation of the world as the Lamb without blemish and without spot (I Peter 1:20). Israel was foreknown by God as the instrument of Messianic fulfillment (Romans 11:2). Moreover, individual believers were foreknown by God, as stated in Romans 8:29-30: *“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.”* The comments of Spiros Zodhiates regarding this third usage are helpful. He concludes, “**Proginosko** essentially entails a gracious self-determination on God’s part from eternity to extend fellowship with Himself to undeserving sinners” ([The Complete NT Word Study Dictionary](#), p. 1216). Those whom God foreknew are those with whom He determined to have a relationship!

Does the Bible provide any clue as to who these people are? Yes, it does! They are believers! While it is true that God has mercy upon whom He will have mercy (Romans 9:18), it is also true that God has concluded all men in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all (Romans 11:32). The fact is God has willed to have mercy upon all who by faith cast themselves upon His mercy.

The Bible says that it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe (I Corinthians 1:21), which is in harmony with the good pleasure of His will (Ephesians 1:5), the good pleasure that He has purposed in Himself (1:9), the purpose of Him who works all things after the counsel of is own will (1:11), and the eternal purpose that He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord (3:11). God’s eternal purpose as an expression of His good pleasure has always been to save them that believe! These are they who are foreknown of God, with whom He has determined to have a personal and

eternal relationship! Only in the philosophical speculations of Calvinism will you find God withholding the ability to believe from some while regenerating others prior to justification so they can believe. Both Jesus and John the Baptist taught that belief was requisite to spiritual birth and life (John 3:14-15, 36).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned that the performance of noteworthy religious service was not to be mistaken for knowing God or being known of God (Matthew 7:21-23). According to Jesus, only those who do the will of the Father may be assured that such a relationship exists. His shocking profession at the Judgment to those who had prophesied, cast out devils, and done many wonderful works in His name (apart from absolute surrender) would be: *"I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."* He never knew them, and they never knew Him, although they knew much about Him! God knowing us is more critical than our knowing God. Christ's acceptance of us is a far weightier matter than our acceptance of Him

Brethren, all of us belong to one of these two groups—the foreknown and the never known! To which do you belong? Is it possible to know? Absolutely! If the convicting work of the Spirit has led you to a place of repentance (a surrender of your will to His) and faith (humble dependence upon the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus for salvation), you are among the foreknown, the predestinated, the called, the justified, and the glorified. Apart from grace-wrought repentance and faith, the issue (from a human perspective) will ever remain in doubt.

It is my conviction that no lost person should ever concern him- or herself with whether they are foreknown or predestinated. The only relevant issue is whether he or she has believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. The answer to that question will ultimately determine the bottom line!

## The Saviour of All Men

One of the admirable traits of the apostle Paul was his ability to communicate the gospel effectively to every strata of society, and to accommodate every intellectual level. During a visit to Athens, as recorded in Acts 17:16-34, he went toe-to-toe with the philosophical heavyweights in the midst of Mars' Hill. He had been summoned by both Epicureans (the hedonists) and Stoicks (the fatalists) to explain in further detail the strange resurrection doctrine he was disseminating in the synagogue and daily in the marketplace. He employed the altar inscription TO THE UNKNOWN GOD as an introduction, and argued convincingly that the days of superstitious and ignorant worship were henceforth inexcusable! God, who had *winked at* (overlooked) such idolatrous behavior in times past as an expression of compassion toward the ignorant, was now commanding all men every where to repent.

The content of Paul's message to the Athenians (17:22-31) is full of theological gems worthy of an entire volume of exposition. We only have the space here to offer a few brief remarks regarding two of its phrases. The first is *all men every where* (17:30), an all-inclusive phrase that describes both the target audience of the gospel and the extent of the atonement. In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded His disciples to *go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature* (Mark 16:15). If God has an expressed desire for every soul to hear the gospel, then there must be a corresponding value in the atonement as a basis for the offer of forgiveness and life for those who repent and believe. If the resurrection of Christ impacts all men every where with an assurance of judgment to come, then the death of Christ brings the corresponding assurance that *the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Isaiah 53:6), and has borne the judgment of all. Paul preached that *Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures* (I Corinthians 15:3).

Paul could make that assertion with absolute assurance whether he was addressing a congregation of five thousand or evangelizing a single lost soul in one-on-one personal work. Paul proclaimed the message of repentance to all men every where because Christ had died for the sins of all men every where! Those who have a problem looking into the eyes of a lost sinner and saying confidently, "Christ died for our sins—yours, mine, and those of the whole world " probably have a different gospel than that which Paul preached!

The second is *that man whom he hath ordained* (17:31). The scriptures teach us that Jesus is both God and Man. As God in the flesh, He is fully qualified to judge the quick and the dead. In this message, however, Paul places the emphasis upon Jesus the Man, and the fact that all men every where shall be judged by another man. The man Christ Jesus, however, was unique among men. He was conceived in the womb of a virgin. As the risen and glorified Son of God, He is the one Mediator between God and men (I Timothy 2:5). As our Mediator, He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3). He is a High Priest Who was touched by the feelings of our infirmities; who was in all points like as we are, yet without sin (4:15). He was taken from among men and ordained for men so that he might have compassion on

the ignorant, inasmuch as He Himself also was compassed with infirmity (Hebrews 5:1-2). He learned obedience by the things that He suffered, and finished His course as the perfect man and author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him (5:8-9). Jesus, the Mediator Man, has an eternal and unchangeable priesthood. He is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and higher the heavens (7:24-26). This is the Man before Whom all men every where shall one day stand to give an account.

Brethren, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ distinguishes the Christian faith from all other religions. It authenticates every word that proceeded from His lips as being the truth. It proves that He spoke the truth, lived the truth, and is the absolute embodiment of truth! His resurrection exposes every other religious system for what it is—a lie! He is the Saviour of all men, especially of those that believe! He is the Man Whom God has ordained, Who is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them! Amen!

## The Most Sacred Location

Israeli military forces rolled into Bethlehem last week as part of an aggressive campaign to locate and eliminate Palestinian terrorists responsible for the recent wave of suicide bombings. A certain number of these terrorists sought refuge in the Church of the Nativity (the traditional birthplace of Christ), betting that the Israelis would think twice before desecrating such a sacred landmark. The gamble worked! What could have been a relatively short-lived firefight with the Palestinians being overwhelmed and eradicated by superior forces turned into a standoff.

The international media repeatedly described this Church as “perhaps the most sacred site in the Christian religion.” This oft heard phrase caused me to ponder its validity. Is it true? Is this traditional scene of the birth of Christ the most sacred location in Christianity? The fact that a physical building was being referred to as the most sacred of Christian sites reminded me how easy it is for the religious world to embrace symbols rather than substance, and to mistake sentimentalism for spiritual reality. For the student of Scripture, the answer to the question “What is the most sacred location in Christianity?” is a no-brainer. It is the body of the believer!

The apostle Paul made this truth abundantly clear to the Corinthian church when he exclaimed: “*What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you...?*” (I Corinthians 6:19). The word Paul uses for *temple* is **naos** (the innermost sanctuary) as opposed to **hieron** (the outer temple courts). It is a term that evokes images of the wilderness Tabernacle where the Shekinah glory of Jehovah was manifested.

John taught us that Jesus is the primary antitype of the Tabernacle, saying, “*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt [tabernacled] among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). Is there a more profound truth than God, Who inhabits eternity and cannot be contained by the heavens, inhabiting the bodies of those who trust His Son for forgiveness of sin and eternal life? The Church of the Nativity may indeed be the birthplace of Jesus, but He no longer resides there. The friends of Jesus once placed Him in a borrowed tomb, but He no longer rests there. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, invades the heart of the believer, transforms an earthen vessel into a sanctuary for the living Christ, and abides there forever! Glory!

Brethren, if God could rekindle this neglected truth in the hearts of His people, and cause us to experience afresh the reverence and humility worthy of such awareness, then perhaps a spark of genuine revival would be ignited within local churches across the land. The absence of revival is due as much to sins of the body as it is to sins of the spirit. It is God's desire to sanctify the believer wholly in body, soul and spirit. Progress toward this goal is contingent upon a recognition that the body of the believer is the most sacred location in Christianity!

## Peace through the Prophetic Word

"Mideast Turmoil" is the topic dominating both major network and cable news programs these days! President Bush has sent Secretary of State Colin Powell to the region as ambassador plenipotentiary in an attempt to negotiate and initiate a political solution for the escalating violence. Those of us who seek to stay abreast of unfolding events are aware that leaders of both Arab States and European Nations continue to express their exasperation with Israel in terms that are increasingly inflammatory! Many are now referring to Israel as the real instigator of terrorism (i.e., the proverbial fly in the ointment). Recent pro-Palestinian protests on American college campuses seem to indicate a revival of anti-Semitic sentiment. A common debate theme this last week was whether the United States should abandon its support for Israel.

The question on many minds is: "Are there any solutions on the horizon?" Well, it depends on whom you ask. It seems that analysts and spokespersons of every stripe have weighed in and offered their opinions regarding the path to peace. There is one breed of analyst, however, that has been largely ignored in the dialogue. He is the one person who can provide a definitive answer to the question, and knows exactly what the future holds. We are no doubt referring to the prophetic analyst!

One of the unique virtues of the prophet is the abiding relevance of his inspired writings long after he returns to dust! In 520 B.C., the prophet Zechariah was made privy to the unfolding events of the last days, to which we have become the eyewitnesses. He delivered *the burden of the word of the Lord for Israel*. Our focus is the prophecy of Zechariah 12:1-14.

What were some of his predictions? First, he said that the Lord would *make Jerusalem a cup of trembling to all the people round about* at a time when the nation would be under *siege* (12:2). Israel today is flanked on every side by Islamic nations committed to her destruction. We are told a siege is on the horizon. In other words, we can expect continued deterioration in the relationships between Israel and her Arab neighbors.

Secondly, the Lord will *make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all people* (12:3). The word *burdensome* signifies a heavy load that is imposed upon the bearer. The potential ramifications of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are worldwide, which is exactly the reason President Bush gave for sending Colin Powell to the region. The prophet furthermore affirmed that *all that burden themselves with it [Israel] shall be cut in pieces, though all the people of the earth be gathered together against it* (12:3). The nations that *burden themselves* with Israel are those who seek either to eliminate the burdensome stone or support those who do. The day is approaching when every nation will be forced to become friend or foe, protagonist or antagonist. The antagonist position is a recipe for national suicide.

The bottom line is that *the Lord shall defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem* (12:8), and *will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem* (12:9). Any peace plan that cedes any portion of Jerusalem to Palestinians or Arabs is doomed! Why? Because God

Himself is opposed to such a plan! Pray for our President and his advisors, for they are treading on the thinnest of ice!

A third and most profound prediction made by the LORD was that *“they [Israel] shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his only son (12:10).* YAHWEH (Jehovah) revealed through the prophet that *He Himself* would become a man and endure a piercing unto death by His own people. How much more evidence does an intellectually honest Jew need than the words of Jehovah Himself regarding His incarnation, His death, and His resurrection unto glory? It's all there in that one statement!

Jesus of Nazareth is Jehovah Incarnate! He is the Messiah that was sent to the Jews, and was made a propitiation (satisfaction) for the sins of the whole world (I John 2:2). He is coming again, at which time the Jews will be brought face-to-face once more with the Christ that loved them, and gave Himself for them! This will be a bitter and mournful experience, but will ultimately result in the salvation of the third part of the nation that survives the day of the Lord (13:7-9). The context enables us to understand that the confession *“The LORD is my God” (13:9)* is equivalent to saying *“The Lord Jesus Christ is my God!”* No possibility of salvation exists for any person, whether Jew or Gentile, unless this confession with the mouth is accompanied by faith in the heart!

Brethren, these are perilous times, but they are also the times of the Lord! Armed with Biblical truth, the disciple can conduct his or her daily affairs with the certainty that whatsoever God has purposed to do shall be done, and avoid any sense of false security created by worthless treaties and broken promises. If there is anything we have learned about the Lord, it is that His word and His promises shall never fail! While turmoil rages in the Middle East, there is sweet peace and rest in the heart of the believer!

## Knowing and Doing the Will of God

The spiritual health of the believer faces no greater threat than disobedience to the known will of God. The illustrations that could be cited in support of that statement are many. Perhaps the most notable among them is the prophet Jonah, whose deliberate dismissal of a preaching assignment not only imperiled a crew of merchant mariners, but nearly cost him his own life and ministry as well.

At the risk of oversimplification, let it be said that Jonah got into spiritual trouble because he understood more than he was willing to undertake! In other words, there was a glaring disparity between what he knew and what he did! Three days and three nights in the belly of the fish led him to perceive that he was in the belly of hell itself, having been cast out of God's sight (Jonah 2:17-3:4). In Jonah's case, failure to undertake that which he understood robbed him of the blessedness that should have been his as God's anointed prophet!

The Lord Jesus taught this same truth to the disciples on the eve of His death. After washing the disciples' feet, and supremely illustrating the kingdom principles of servanthood and humility, Jesus said: "*If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them*" (John 13:17). *Happy* is the Greek **makarios**. Its root signifies beauty (blessedness, happiness, prosperity of soul) on a spiritual level. Jesus set forth this expectation for every individual who undertakes to do all that he or she understands to be the will of God!

The word *if* is used twice in the English version to introduce the conditional phrases. Jesus, however, used two different conditional classes in stating the principle. The phrase "*If ye know...*" is a first class Greek condition, which assumes the condition to be fulfilled or true. The phrase "*if ye do...*" is a third class Greek condition, which states the condition as unfulfilled with the probability of fulfillment. Jesus credited them with a firm grasp of the concept, but left the door open as to whether they would put the principles into practice. Each of us has learned from personal experience what Jesus implied in His instruction—that our knowledge of God too often exceeds our experience of God!

This dynamic usually works in reverse for the new convert. In the days and weeks immediately following the grace of spiritual birth, the believer lives on a spiritual level where experience surpasses knowledge. Zealous babes in Christ have been known to undertake far more than they understand. With the ticking of the spiritual clock, however, knowledge tends to gain the ground necessary to establish a desirable balance with experience. As long as instruction and implementation move forward together, the Spirit is able to produce His fruit and beautify the life. The believer is happy in Jesus! Any slack in devotion to Christ that allows knowledge to expand without a corresponding exercise of obedience immediately threatens that happiness! As the scripture says: "*Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin*" (James 4:17).

Brethren, one of the strongest indictments against the church in this hour is that she knows much more than she does! What she understands far exceeds what she

undertakes! This is what makes her lukewarm in the sight of God. One of the evidences of genuine revival in any church or individual is a renewed hunger for an experience of God that meets or exceeds our knowledge of Him!

Let us join our hearts with the Psalmist, as he prayed: "*Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee? Shew us thy mercy, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation*" (Psalm 85:6-7).

## Restore the Violence!

Most of us would agree that violence is both harmful and undesirable behavior without regard for the venue in which it is exhibited. In its coverage of volatile events, the media has demonstrated that violence is everywhere in our world. As a matter of fact, it has developed its own unique parlance to describe the types of violence it covers—Domestic violence, Neighborhood violence, Classroom violence, Workplace violence, Campus violence, Courtroom violence, Fan violence, Film violence, Drug violence, Gang violence, Inmate violence, Motorist violence, Mideast violence. Are you getting dizzy? Well, suffice it to say we are surrounded by the stuff! And while we might be sympathetic to every “Stop The Violence!” placard holder, we must consider the question, “Is all violence bad?”

The Lord Jesus spoke of a violence that was rampant in the days of John the Baptist, and had carried over into His own ministry. He referred to it as Kingdom violence! In an address to the multitudes, Jesus said: “*And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force*” (Matthew 11:12). The broader context was a public endorsement of John the Baptist as the greatest of the prophets! He was neither a *reed shaken by the wind* nor a man *clothed in soft raiment fit for kings' houses* (11:7-11).

John had come on the scene in Elijah-like power, but was held to a higher standard than the secondary manifestations of miracles! He was a God-anointed preacher of the Word! According to Jesus, the preaching of John had fomented a spirit of violence within the souls of his audience that made them willing to bust through any and every obstacle that stood between them and the kingdom, including the religious hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees! They wanted in at any cost, and would let nothing stand in the way!

The Greek word for *violence* is **biazo**. It means *to press violently or forcefully*, and signifies forceful endeavor to achieve an objective. Jesus used the same word (translated “*presseth*”) in Luke 16:16 to describe the phenomenon, saying: “*The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.*” The phrase *every man* should be understood to mean every person in whom the preached Word had had its intended effect! Some of the violent, however, encountered obstacles they failed to overcome, and were thus shut out.

Remember the young rich man who came running to Jesus, kneeling and asking what he might do to inherit eternal life? He was grieved to discover that his forceful endeavor to enter the kingdom was no match for the covetousness of his heart in spite of the fact that Jesus loved him (Mark 10:17-22)! Some appeared to encounter no other obstacle than lack of faith. A scribe who had answered Jesus discreetly regarding the greatest of the commandments was told: “*Thou art not far from the kingdom of God*” (Mark 12:28-34). You can almost detect in the words of Jesus a prediction of success as the scribe wrestled with kingdom truth.

What shall we say concerning Judas Iscariot? The man who spent three years in the inner circle of the King will spend eternity in outer darkness! I recently heard one

preacher describe the tragedy of Judas as one who kissed the door of heaven and went directly to Hell! John summed up his failure in four words—“*he was a thief*” (John 12:6).

Brethren, this generation desperately needs a fresh infusion of Kingdom violence fomented by God-anointed preachers in sanctified pulpits! The mission requires purified prophets! Miracle workers need not apply!

In my years of ministry as a pastor, I have encountered precious few souls who, like Jacob of old, were willing to wrestle violently with God until the break of day, and refused to relinquish their grip on the Messenger until they had secured a blessing from His sovereign and gracious hand! While kingdom violence on a national scale would not guarantee that every person who pressed for the kingdom would be successful in his or her quest, it would be infinitely better than the current environment! O God, restore the violence!

## Big Lessons from Small Creatures

My wife and I flew to Texas this last weekend to share in our daughter's graduation from Dallas Theological Seminary. Dr. Haddon W. Robinson delivered the commencement address, which was entitled "Big Lessons from Small Creatures." The message was taken from the text in Proverbs 30:24-28, which says: "*There be four things which are little upon the earth, but they are exceeding wise: The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in the summer; The conies are but a feeble folk, yet make they their houses in the rocks; The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands; The spider taketh hold with her hands, and is in kings' palaces.*"

Please allow me to share that message with you in summary form. While I have embellished them somewhat, the main points are his. I trust they will bless your life as they blessed mine.

- (1) Ants are exceeding wise because they know what time it is in life. Ants know that winter is coming, and that sustenance will be required for the difficult times that lie ahead. What they have learned from the past teaches them that they must make the most of the present in order to prepare for the future. Many souls lack such wisdom! They are fixated on the past (with its successes and failures) and never seem to connect it to the future. Others live by the mantra "One of these days when such and such a thing happens I'm going to do this or that" but such and such things never seem to materialize as they had planned, and thus nothing gets done in the present to prepare them for the future. The ants connect all three. They know what time it is in life, and take the appropriate steps now so that they will not be caught short then! The wise man or woman will do likewise in their relationship with the Lord Jesus.
- (2) The conies are exceeding wise because they know where their security lies. The coney is a rock badger that was prominent throughout the entire region of Sinai, Lebanon, and Palestine. They were rabbit-sized and equally defenseless. They lived in the holes and clefts of rocks, which provided their only protection against predators! In like manner does the wise individual know that his or her security lies solely in the Rock of Ages, the Lord Jesus Christ!

Theological systems and points of doctrine are no substitute for the living Christ! Imagine two conies—one Calvinist and one Arminian—debating whether a particular Rock cleft was sufficient in size to provide shelter for an entire family of conies when two birds of prey carry both conies away to be devoured! Was the strength of a theological argument able to deliver either of these conies from disaster? The bottom line is that anything short of Christ Jesus the Rock is a false security!

- (3) The locusts are exceeding wise because they know where their power lies. They have no king, but go forth all of them by bands. Their power lies in community. A single locust isolated from the horde poses little or no threat to the surrounding vegetation. As a horde, however, locusts can inflict billions of dollars in damage to an agricultural economy! Wise men and women know the power of spiritual

community, and plug themselves into a local church ministry! Moreover, they refuse to build walls of separation between themselves and others who share the same nature and proclaim the same gospel!

- (4) The spider is exceeding wise because it understands the incongruity of grace. It is found in kings' palaces, but has no business being there! There is something incongruous about the spider and a king's palace. There is no logical fit! So it is in the spiritual economy of the King of kings, Who taught us that we must die in order to live, be last in order to be first, and take up a cross in order to obtain a crown. These are incongruous realities, but they are the stuff of grace.

Which one of us has any business living in the King's palace? It is grace, my friend, that illumines us to our sinful condition. It is grace that stirs our hearts to stretch forth our hands, and take hold of the Bread of life. It is grace that breeds perseverance in our hearts to lay hold of eternal life. It is pure incongruous grace that fits a sinner like me for a palace like His!

Brethren, there are big lessons to learn from small creatures. In closing his address, Dr. Robinson tactfully reminded us that if we had the brains of an ant, we also would use the past to make the most of the present in preparing for the future. If we had the brains of a coney, we would ensure that our single source of security was the Lord Jesus Christ, the Rock of Ages. If we had the brains of a locust, we would understand the power of community, and meld our lives with a local assembly of believers. If we had the brains of a spider, we would walk in constant appreciation of the good grace of God, which has brought us into union with Christ by faith, and will one day enable us to share an eternal abode with Him! Amen!

## The Necessity of Vision

I find myself going back to favorite portions of the Bible from time to time, and measuring myself against them. I ask myself, "To what degree is my life conforming to this truth that I discovered so many years ago?" At times my conscience bears positive witness to the facilitation of that truth, and at others there are pangs of conscience due to shortcomings. The next question is, "What am I going to do about it?" The answer to this query is critical inasmuch as it determines how far I go with God!

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

The absence of vision is costly! Where there is no vision "*the people perish.*" The Hebrew word for "perish" means to cast off restraint. The "people" are God's people, but in principle refers to any people without the governing influence of God's truth upon their lives. Such was the condition of Israel prior to Samuel, wherein "*the Word of God was precious [rare] in those days; and there was no open vision [revelation]*" (1 Samuel 3:1). The lack of a prophetic voice left the people without the governing power of truth, and every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Absence of vision obscures the will of God, and frustrates the life. It renders the Christian aimless and powerless in his or her spiritual walk.

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

Vision means everything to a disciple and his church. As our verse says: "*He that keepeth the law, happy is he.*" No disciple can rise above his or her vision! No church is any stronger than the collective vision of its members. How is your vision these days?

## Jesus by the Minute

No shopper on the face of this earth can rival the American consumer for available selections in goods and services. The principles of capitalism operating in concert with freedom have made ours the most advanced civilization in the history of humanity! We purchase our computers by memory capacity, speed, and software; our food by unit, pound, box, case, and pallet; our clothes by catalogue, mail order, and Internet; our entertainment by cassette, CD, DVD, and World Wide Web download. The marketing options are endless!

I recently discovered that it is now possible for consumers of Christian music to buy Jesus-by-the-minute. My discovery took place as I read the feature article in the Lifestyle section of the Florida Times-Union, Sunday, May 5. The piece was entitled "Between a Christian rock and a hard place" with a by-line that read "Christian performers now have to find ways to sell records and sell faith without selling out". The article discussed the "balancing act" required by Christian artists to avoid becoming either too overt or too covert with Jesus in the lyrics.

The author cited industry insiders in explaining that JPMs (Jesuses Per Minute) had become the critical factor. A succinct summary of his research was articulated in the following paragraph: "Many Christian fans want overt lyrics with high JPM counts. They want artists unashamedly singing about the life they've found with Christ. But if you're trying to sell as many records as possible, especially to secular audiences, the fewer JPMs the better." According to the author, the marriage of religion and capitalism in the quest for Christian record sales has "propelled Christian music into the mainstream", transforming a "self-contained niche" into "a \$1-billion dollar industry with access to marketing largesse and high production values." In light of the marketing success enjoyed by the joint forces of capitalism and religion, it is entirely appropriate to ask whether joint endeavors of this nature occurred in time past, and how a Holy God reacted to greed and avarice in the context of religion.

Three examples come to mind. The first is Balaam the false prophet (Numbers 22:7-24:25), who found himself between the proverbial rock and hard place. He had no desire to curse the nation that God had blessed, but found that the "*rewards of divination*" (22:7) and a promotion to "*very great honour*" (22:17), as offered by Balak, king of Moab, represented an irresistible opportunity for financial and career advancement. In what he must have considered a clever balancing act, Balaam *taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel* (Revelation 2:14) to commit idolatry and whoredom, thereby kindling the anger of the Lord, whereby twenty-four thousand Israelites lost their lives. His reward was short-lived! The Israeli army slew Balaam with the sword a short while later.

The second example is Ananias and wife Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), who saw an opportunity to achieve self-sacrificial saint status while privily pocketing a portion of capital gains from a land sale. Both were stricken dead the same day within the space of three hours (5:7). We learn from this sobering episode that God has a zero-tolerance

policy for any profiteer, whether saint or sinner, who operates under the cloke of religious piety.

Our third example is the Lord Jesus Christ (John 2:13-17), who, during a Passover temple visit, lamented that His *Father's house* had become *a house of merchandise*. He *drove* the profiteers *out of the temple* with a *scourge of small chords*, and taught us that God detests any religious enterprise, whether true or false, that seeks to build wealth at the expense of the worshipper!

Brethren, what do you suppose is the mind of God toward these "Christian" musicians who engage in the by-the-minute marketing of His beloved Son? They are no more acceptable in the eyes of God than Balaam, Ananias and Sapphira, or the moneychangers in the Jerusalem temple. I realize there are many Christian musicians who unapologetically make much of the Lord Jesus, and desire only the approval of God in their ministries. But how many others (including ministers of music in local churches) are applying some variation of Jesus-by-the-minute to draw secular audiences, build attendance, and enhance revenue?

The apostolic formula as expressed by Paul was strictly "*Jesus Christ, and him crucified*" (I Corinthians 2:2), and "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*" (Philippians 1:21). Paul had no fear of Jesus overload in the content of his preaching! Why? Simply because he was bought by the blood of Christ, and neither he nor his message could be bought at any price! Why should not the same be true for the Christian musician? Why would anyone but a godless merchandiser fear Jesus overload in his or her singing?

## Election and the Last Days

The terrorist attack of September 11 has sparked a resurgence of interest in Biblical prophecy concerning the last days. Many are asking, "Where are these events taking us? What shall the end be? And how will they ultimately affect me?" For the believer in Jesus Christ, there is no need to scramble for the latest prophetic volume at the local Christian bookstore. The Word of God is replete with answers, several of which were disclosed by the apostle Paul in the second chapter of his Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (II Thessalonians 2:1-17). In this passage, Paul expounds upon *the day of Christ* (2:2), providing words of comfort for believers (2:13, 17) and warnings of condemnation for unbelievers (2:10-12).

Paul had apparently received word that the church at Thessalonica had been *shaken in mind* and *troubled* by certain *words* and *letters* from prophetic imposters regarding the day of Christ. The gist of the false teaching was that the day of the Lord was already underway, implying that faith in Jesus had done nothing to *deliver* them *from the wrath to come* (I Thessalonians 1:10). It was therefore necessary for Paul to restore the former confidence by reiterating his doctrine of the last days. The day of Christ would not begin until (1) believers had been gathered together unto him at his coming, (2) apostasy within the church (a *falling away*) had become rampant, and (3) the Antichrist (the *man of sin*, the *son of perdition*) had been revealed (2:1-3). The *mystery of iniquity* is already at work, but will be *hindered* by the Spirit of God until he is removed with the Church (2:7).

Paul therefore issued these words of comfort, saying: "*But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth*" (2:13). He employed the doctrine of election as a source of comfort. The salvation to which they had been chosen was deliverance from the day of wrath, which was now nearer than when they believed (Romans 13:11).

Election was predicated upon the proclamation of gospel truth, the sanctification (convicting work) of the Spirit, and belief of the truth in response to the grace ministered by the Spirit and the Word. In other words, election is conditional. The phrase *from the beginning* refers to the beginning of the gospel ministry in Macedonia during the second missionary journey (Philippians 4:15), which took Paul's mission team from Philippi to Thessalonica (Acts 16:40-17:1).

Wresting these words of comfort from the context as a proof text for unconditional election blurs the distinction between what God determines eternally and what He demonstrates historically. Jesus was, in an eternal sense, the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), but was crucified historically outside the gates of Jerusalem in 33 A.D. In like manner, the Thessalonian believers were "chosen in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4), but were actually elected in Christ circa 53 A.D. through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth. Election in the NT is always in Christ, who is the chief cornerstone, elect, and precious" (I Peter 2:6). God's elective decree is that all who believe on His Son Jesus, who is the Elect One, shall be

chosen in him to receive and experience all the elective benefits of grace (Ephesians 1:3-14), including deliverance from the wrath to come.

Paul likewise issued warnings of condemnation for those who refused to *receive and believe the truth*, but rather had *pleasure in unrighteousness* (2:10-12). According to Paul, those who reject gospel truth in this age will be *deceived* by Satanic *signs and lying wonders* wrought by the Antichrist, and will suffer *delusion and damnation* because *they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved*. The phrase *love of the truth* signifies the love of God toward all mankind that emanates from the gospel.

In Paul's mind, God had provided a full satisfaction for the sins of the whole world, and desired for *all men to be saved, and come unto the knowledge of the truth* (I Timothy 2:4). The unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica who were *moved with envy*, recruited *lewd fellows of the baser sort* in opposition to the gospel, and *set all the city in an uproar* against Paul and his associates (Acts 17:1-5), had the opportunity to be elected to salvation if they had received and believed the truth. They chose rather to *resist the Holy Ghost* like their fellow countrymen in Jerusalem (Acts 7:51).

Brethren, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, it is a great comfort to know that God has secured our future through his elective purpose in Christ. For both receivers and resisters, the question "How will the events of the last days ultimately affect me?" has been answered. The believer has been elected to escape the day of wrath! The unbeliever who persists in unbelief faces a future fraught with eternal danger! Where do you stand?

## Peace and Conflict Resolution

It seems that with every passing week the fuse on a new powder keg of international conflict is ignited. In many instances, we observe the extinguishing and relighting of the same lethal fuses. The hostilities between Israel and Palestine have been upstaged recently by the renewed military posturing and border skirmishes of India and Pakistan over the Kashmir territory—a disputed region over which both nations desire sovereign control. The issue that must be settled at some point in time is, “How can peace be achieved and the conflicts be resolved?”

The answer to these questions first depends upon the definition we assign to peace. All would agree that peace signifies a measure of tranquility. Disagreements arise, however, in expanding the meaning to include the method of attainment. If peace is merely the *absence of* conflict, then any number of methods might be employed to attain it—negotiation being chief among them. If peace is actually the *resolution of* conflict, then only one method is sufficient to attain it—a full-scale war that renders one side decisively triumphant and the other thoroughly defeated, resulting in the unconditional surrender of the beaten party.

The chronicles of international conflict teach us that enmities eased through negotiation tend to resurface and intensify in time, whereas hostilities resolved through conquest tend to be marked by permanence and longevity. A second consideration is the nature and severity of the conflict. If two individuals have exchanged unkind words, an apology from the offending party coupled with acceptance of that apology from the offended party might well be sufficient to resolve the issue forever. If suicidal zealots from al-Qaida, however, attack a sovereign republic, crashing fuel-laden hijacked aircraft into the Pentagon and World Trade Center towers, and killing thousands of hapless citizens, what are the chances that a negotiation will put an end to the enmity? The only resolution possible for such a conflict is the total obliteration of al-Qaida through triumphant warfare!

What about the hostility that exists between a Holy God and sinful men as a result of the Fall of Adam? The Bible says: “*Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned*” (Romans 5:12). Adam’s disobedience constituted rebellion against God’s righteous and benevolent authority! The phrase “*all have sinned*” signifies that every man *since* Adam also *sinned with* Adam, and was thus a co-conspirator in the rebellion. According to Romans 5, the Fall rendered all men *without strength* (5:6), *ungodly* (5:6), *sinner* (5:8), and *enemies* (5:10). Thus “*the carnal mind [the unregenerate lost man] is enmity [in a state of active hostility] against God*” (Romans 8:7). Make no mistake! The injurious acts of terror perpetrated against America by al-Qaida pale in comparison to the ungodly deeds committed against God Almighty by us—the members of Adam’s race!

So how did God resolve this conflict and make peace a possibility? Well, the most amazing truth is that He chose not to attack us directly although that certainly would have been a righteous course of action for which He could never have been faulted! He decided rather to wage war against our enemies in a three-pronged attack. The first was

against *our sins*, the *wages* of which are spiritual and eternal *death* (Romans 6:23; Revelation 20:14). The second was against *him that had the power of death, that is, the devil* (Hebrews 2:14). The third was an assault against death itself, the *last enemy to be destroyed* (I Corinthians 15:26).

These objectives were accomplished in the death of Jesus on the cross and in His resurrection from the grave on the third day! God in Christ *reconciled the world unto Himself* (II Corinthians 5:19), *made peace through the blood of His cross* (Colossians 1:20), and now bids all men to *be reconciled* [enter an eternal peace agreement by faith in His Son Jesus] *to God* (II Corinthians 5:20). Genuine gospel endeavor is *preaching peace* to every sinner in behalf of the One Who *made peace*, and Who *is peace* to all who believe (Ephesians 3:14-17).

Brethren, what an unfathomable peace is ours through the Lord Jesus Christ! His work on the cross satisfied every requirement of divine justice, and broke down every barrier to peace. When Jesus cried, "*It is finished*," He served notice that every condition for peace between Holy God and sinful men had been set in place. The only obstacle that remains is an unbelieving heart in those for whom Jesus died!

In six thousand years of human history, world leaders have yet to ink a peace treaty that can rival the blood of Jesus for its ability to secure everlasting peace and salvation for those who agree to God's terms! While you and I may be non-factors in the Kashmir and Middle East conflicts, we certainly have the opportunity each and every day to be a critical factor in the life of some lost individual who is still at enmity with God, and who longs desperately for a resolution of the conflict that still rages within the soul!

## The "Look and Live" Object Lesson

The dictionary defines an object lesson as a concrete illustration of a moral or principle. The object lesson is one of the most powerful and effective tools available for communicating profound spiritual truth! It is therefore no surprise that the Lord Jesus employed object lessons on a regular basis throughout His teaching ministry.

One of the key recipients of an object lesson was Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, who came to Jesus by night to express his personal conviction regarding the divine origin of His ministry. In the one-on-one discourse that ensued, Jesus focused upon the new birth as a requirement for kingdom entry. Nicodemus, who held the rank of master (teacher) within the religious hierarchy of Israel, struggled unsuccessfully to grasp the spiritual significance of the words "*ye must be born again*" (John 3:7). In an effort to build a bridge of understanding, Jesus cited an OT incident recorded in Numbers 21:5-9 to illustrate the God-ordained means whereby a spiritually dead man might experience spiritual birth. Nicodemus was no doubt familiar with this historical event.

The object lesson was stated as follows: "*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*" (John 3:14-15). Three observations are in order. First, the brass serpent was clearly intended to foreshadow Christ on the cross. The snake-bitten Israelites who looked upon the brass serpent were required to behold the very image of that which was the cause of their impending death. Likewise, he who beholds Jesus on the cross is brought face to face with his own sins inasmuch as Jesus was made sin for us, who knew no sin (II Corinthians 5:21), and his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree (I Peter 2:24).

Secondly, the remedy was put in place to benefit of every Israelite who suffered from the deadly venom. None of them was excluded! Reformed theologians argue that, because the remedy was limited to the nation of Israel, the atonement of Christ on the cross was therefore limited to the elect. This spurious analogy breaks down simply because none of the surrounding nations suffered from the same plague, and no evidence exists that every Israelite had been bitten.

Thirdly, a distinction must be made between the cure provided and the cure appropriated. The Lord instructed Moses, saying: "*It shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live*" (Numbers 21:8). The cure for snakebite was set in place when Moses lifted up the brass serpent on a pole. The cure saved no one! The Lord required a look of faith in order for the cure to become effectual in those who were snake bitten. The fact that "*much people of Israel died*" (21:6) indicates that many of the snake-bitten, for whatever reason, failed to appropriate the cure. The only limitation placed upon the cure was lack of faith in those for whom it was provided.

Now, no theologian in his right mind would argue that the cure was irresistible, or that those who perished from snakebite suffered from a total inability to look upon the brass

serpent simply because God decided not to grant that ability to them! Amazing enough, I have interacted with Calvinists who actually sought to make that very argument!

The word *so* is an adverb used twice in our text. It can refer either to the extent (degree) of an action or to the manner of an action as compared to another. The first usage clearly signifies comparative manner. The lifting up of the Son of man would take place *in like manner* as the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness. The second usage has been seen traditionally as signifying the extent or degree to which God loved the world; that is, he loved *so much* that he gave his unique, one-of-a-kind Son. If Jesus, however, used the adverb in both instances to signify likeness of manner, then his purpose would have been to impress upon Nicodemus the similar manner in which God, who acted out of loving compassion for snake bitten Israelites, was preparing to act in behalf of all men, both Jew and Gentile, who were under condemnation and wrath because of sin and unbelief!

In this object lesson, the Lord clearly intended to draw a parallel between snake-bitten Israelites and sin-bitten humanity as a whole! In his two usages of the phrase *whosoever believeth*, Jesus established a distinct class of individuals who will experience the new birth and everlasting life! The *world* represents the larger class for whom a sin cure has been provided. The *ones who believe* represent the sub-class that appropriates the cure! The fact that Nicodemus later defended the ministry of Jesus (John 7:50-52), and assisted Joseph of Arimathaea with his burial (John 19:39-40), is a good indicator that the object lesson worked!

Brethren, could the Lord Jesus have made the means to the new birth any clearer? A lost sinner who is dead in sins is born again by looking in faith to the Christ Who died for his sins and rose again the third day. It is all a matter of grace through faith! By using this object lesson, Jesus established for all time the principle of look and live as the way of salvation and the means to the new birth. May the Lord grant to all of us this week an opportunity to share the truth of this object lesson with someone who has yet to appropriate the cure for sin!

## The Work of God

It was in the synagogue at Capernaum nearly two thousand years ago that Jesus defined the work of God. The teaching session was interactive in nature, meaning that the attendees were afforded the opportunity to offer feedback and submit questions to the guest lecturer. But this was not your average synagogue crowd. In the back of their minds was the recent miraculous feeding of several thousand Jews with five barley loaves and two small fishes. Many in the congregation were eyewitnesses who had been satiated with the overabundance.

A campaign to make Him king had been set in motion, marked by a willingness to invest whatever labor was required to make it happen. Jesus knew that a selfish desire for continued physical fullness was behind the effort, and exhorted them to redirect their labor toward "*that meat which endureth unto everlasting life*" (John 6:27). The response "*What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?*" indicated a desire for specifics (6:28). So the Lord said: "*This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent*" (6:29).

Two ideas appear to be melded together in this definition. First, the work of God is the abandonment of any works of righteousness that one might deem necessary to earn everlasting life. If a man wants to do the work of God, and experience everlasting life, which the Son of man alone can give, he must stop working to earn it and start trusting to receive it! Secondly, the work of God is the gracious endeavor of the Father to draw unregenerate sinners to His Son, so that they might believe in Him and have eternal life! Engaging in the work of God is engaging oneself with the God who is working to ignite faith in the hearts of the lost.

After Jesus defined the work of God as faith that excluded meritorious works of righteousness, they immediately began to excuse themselves from such faith because, as they saw it, sufficient evidence was lacking to command such trust. They reasoned that Jesus, who had fed them once, was no match for Moses, in whom they allegedly trusted, who had fed them for forty years in the wilderness. Jesus forthwith returned the dialogue to matters spiritual and eternal, contrasting the earthly, perishable bread given through Moses with the heavenly, nonperishable bread that the Father was giving to the world through His Son Jesus.

Anyone who studies the content of this passage will reach the inescapable conclusion that giving is at the core of the work of God! The Son of man *gives* everlasting life (6:27). The Father *gives* to men the true bread from heaven (6:32) The bread of God *gives* life unto the world (6:33). Jesus *gives* His flesh for the life of the world (6:51). The Father who draws men (6:44) *gives* to them the ability to come to His Son (6:65). The Father *gives* to the Son every drawn individual who believes, and none of these shall ever be lost (6:37, 39).

The phrases "*all that the Father giveth me*" (6:37) and "*all which he hath given me*" (6:39) are an interpretive challenge for any expositor or theologian. In His divine and practical wisdom, however, Jesus included the interpretive keys within the text itself. The

verb *giveth* in 6:37 is present tense, signifying durative or continuous action. Jesus is referring to a giving activity that began with John the Baptist and continued into the present hour. A literal translation is “every one that the Father is giving to me shall come to me.” The verb *hath given* in 6:39 is a perfect tense, signifying completed action with abiding results. In this statement Jesus included all who had been given to Him up to that moment.

The meaning that emerges from the text is that the Father is continually giving to the Son, one by one, those who believe on Him to life everlasting. All who are given become an abiding possession of Christ, and for that reason none of them shall ever be lost. This is the Father's will! The use of these two verb tenses in the order that Jesus used them was designed (1) to teach us that the work of God is primarily a real time activity, and (2) to disabuse us of the notion that this giving of the Father was a done deal in eternity past! The cumulative result of what the Father *is giving* to the Son in the present will determine what the Father *hath given* to the Son at the time of reckoning.

The Father is still engaged in the work of drawing and teaching sinners in order that they might believe on the Lord Jesus and be saved. It becomes more apparent with each passing day that this world is starving for spiritual sustenance. The Bread of heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the only answer! The first order of business for any man is to hear and learn from the Father those things that pertain to His Son, and, having been taught, to come to Christ, believing on Him unto life everlasting. The second order of business is to become a laborer together with God, distributing the bread of the gospel to all who suffer from spiritual hunger. This is the work of God—the noblest work on the face of the earth!

## Dealing with Difficult Truth

Someone once remarked that the truth of scripture contains shallows where a child may wade and unfathomable depths where the most mature of men may swim. Oftentimes a dive into the Biblical depths results in a return to the surface without reaching the bottom. In some passages there appears to be no bottom; that is, no bottom that is obtainable in this life.

The apostle Peter, in closing his second letter, spoke of the linkage that exists between the second coming of Christ and the salvation of sinners, reminding his readership that Paul's epistles contained *some things hard to be understood* regarding these same doctrines (II Peter 3:15-16). I wonder whether Peter, in addition to affirming these doctrinal challenges, was admitting to difficulties he also incurred while seeking to digest the truth disclosed by Paul. The fact is that some truth is just difficult to grasp!

How then are we to deal with difficult truth that exceeds our ability to comprehend? Two episodes in the Gospel of John lend themselves to a comparative analysis of how difficult truth was handled. The first is found in John 6:41-43. We are told that the Jews "*murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven.*" They debated among themselves whether this son of Joseph, whose father and mother they knew, could make such a claim in good faith. If you and I had heard our Lord assert His heavenly origin in that context, we also might have found that claim a hard one to swallow, knowing that genealogical records offered as evidence in a court of law might win the day in contesting His claim.

The fact that they struggled with difficult truth did not in itself constitute a spiritual defect. The problem was in how they struggled—they *murmured!* The word *murmur* means to grumble in a low tone. It is vocal disgruntlement! In our time the disgruntled postal worker has become the poster child for malcontented workers whose smoldering ill-will toward management eventually erupts in violence. Murmuring is always indicative of rebellion against authority. In this case, it was directed toward Jesus, whom they ultimately crucified in rejection of this claim.

The second is found in John 16:16-19. Less than twenty-four hours remained until Jesus would take His place on the Cross of Calvary. He maximized this precious time to prepare His disciples for the spiritual trauma that would soon engulf their lives, and set the expectation for the glorious benefits of His vicarious suffering, death, resurrection, and return to the Father. They appear to have listened quite attentively until Jesus mentioned a first *little while*, after which they would not see Him, and followed that up with a second *little while*, in which they would see Him again, after which He would go to the Father.

A discussion broke out immediately as to the meaning of those words. The consensus was "*we cannot tell what he saith*" (16:18). They were struggling with difficult truth. The text tells us how they struggled—they *enquired!* The verb *enquire* means to seek with zeal, and the imperfect tense calls attention to the fact that the discussion had some

duration to it. They were *desirous* (willing) to ask Jesus for additional light, and Jesus granted their desire (16:29).

These eleven remaining disciples provide for us the perfect model for dealing with difficult truth. The spirit of enquiry governed the discussion. It is only reasonable to assume that more than one opinion might have been offered during the exchange, but all were willing to subject personal opinion to a further dispensation of light from the Lord. How often does this attitude prevail where you worship and live when discussions about difficult truth arise?

We know from scripture and personal experience that the ideal can be abandoned when the spirit of enquiry is set aside for personal dogma. Murmuring can erupt among the people of God as quickly as it can among the lost with disastrous consequences. Ask the prophetess Miriam about the price she paid for vocalizing her disgruntlement with brother Moses over a marital decision that was difficult for her to grasp. If she had enquired of the Lord instead of murmuring against her brother, she most likely would have received the light she needed without having to endure the chastening of leprosy (Numbers 11:1-15).

Brethren, as students of scripture, it is our duty to explore the whole counsel of God. Such a pursuit will inevitably bring us face to face with difficult truth. The conclusions we reach as a result of diligent and prayerful study may differ from those of others who have pursued the truth with the same diligence. We must be careful not to murmur among ourselves against others with whom we disagree.

The Lord recently reminded me that a spirit of enquiry is what honors Him in areas of disagreement among brethren. One day the Lord Jesus will answer our enquiries in full, and all of us will see eye to eye on everything. But until that day arrives, the spirit of enquiry must prevail in dealing with difficult truth!

## The Abuse of Judicial Power

Judicial power is the authority to interpret existing law, institutionalize a court decision, and interdict the violators. As we have seen far too often in America, it is a double-edged sword. The judiciary reinforces the Constitutional good when it captures the true intent of the framers, and rules objectively on legal matters. It engages in Constitutional sabotage when it superimposes the political whims of the prevailing culture, and "legislates from the bench" in rendering its opinions.

The potential for both good and evil in the judiciary was recognized by one of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson. On September 6, 1819, he wrote: "The Constitution is a mere thing of wax in the hands of the judiciary, which they may twist and shape into any form they please." Another validation of that reality was provided for us this last week by a three-member panel of the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals in California, which ruled in favor of atheist Michael Newdow, declaring the phrase "under God", as contained in the Pledge of Allegiance, to be unconstitutional. Public backlash from this decision has caused the Court to place the ruling on hold until a full panel of judges can evaluate the decision on its merits.

The phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge by an act of Congress in 1954. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who signed the act, said: "From this day forward, the millions of our school children will daily proclaim in every city and town, every village and rural schoolhouse, the dedication of our Nation and our people to the Almighty." If the Supreme Court hears the case, and upholds the ruling of the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court, recitation of this dedicatory proclamation will become a violation of federal law, turning these same millions of God-honoring children into criminals.

I have mixed emotions about this judicial boondoggle. I hear the Psalmist say: "*The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God*" (Psalm 9:17), and wonder how much longer the mercies of God will keep America from the point of no return. I eavesdrop on Paul as he preaches in Athens, and hear him declare that God *hath made of one blood all nations of men, that they should seek after the Lord, that He is not far from every one of us, that all men are the offspring of God, that God has commanded all men every where to repent* (Acts 17:24-31), and wonder why the phrase "under God" has not been instituted by every nation under heaven as a proclamation of dedication. I peruse the writings of Peter, and find that *judgment must begin first at the house of God, with dire consequences for those who do not obey the gospel of God* (1 Peter 4:17), and wonder why the Church is so upset by this ruling when it appears she cannot get herself under God! I study the epistles of Paul, and understand that *all the world is under the law and guilty before God* (Romans 3:19), that *the scripture has concluded all under sin* (Galatians 3:22), and perceive that no man or nation who refuses to be under God can ever be *under grace* (Romans 6:14).

Brethren, as we approach another Fourth of July in America, may we all invest a little private time to intercede for our nation and its leadership, and to offer thanksgiving to God for allowing us to live, and move, and have our being in the greatest nation on the face of the earth. Beside the nation of Israel, who gave us the Messiah, the Lord Jesus

Christ, and the Scriptures, no nation has done more to defend the God-given freedoms of mankind! Again, Thomas Jefferson recognized the magnitude of our stewardship in this matter, saying: "God who gave us life gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the Gift of God? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever."

If what Jefferson observed two centuries ago caused him to tremble, how much more ought we to fear for our future as we continue to witness the ongoing abuse of judicial power in America?