

Truth On Fire

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Life and Righteousness

Every Bible expositor runs the risk of oversimplification when seeking to carve up large servings of meaty truth into bite-sized portions for hearer consumption. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a classic example. In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul found it necessary to refute the heresy that obedience to the law was a requirement for justification before God.

Grace and works are mutually exclusive in the scriptures as a basis for salvation. In making his argument, Paul drew a distinction between the promise (covenant) that God made with Abraham and the law that was given four hundred thirty years thereafter (Galatians 3:15-29). The gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Paul, has its roots in the promise and is a fulfillment of it. The law serves as a schoolmaster to expose our sinfulness and bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

Another critical point made by the apostle is that the promise and the law are not competitors. That is, they do not represent two viable alternatives for salvation. Why? Well, there are two essentials for salvation that the law cannot provide—life and righteousness. So Paul asks a rhetorical question and provides the answer, saying: *“Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law”* (3:21). In so doing, he provided two bite-sized portions of truth for the Galatians, and for us as well. Eternal life is the gospel solution for our spiritual death in trespasses and sins. The law has no solution for spiritual death due to its inability to impart life to the obedient.

The question of whether sinful men are good or bad is thus eliminated from the discussion. The relevant issue is whether a man is dead or alive! Moreover, the righteousness of God is the gospel solution for our spiritual nakedness before God. The law has no solution for our unrighteous state due to its inability to impute a righteousness that measures up to God's standard—his own glory! Perfect obedience to the law would still leave us short of that glory as well as dead in trespasses and sins. The promise to all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is eternal life (regeneration) and righteousness (justification). The law extends no such promise to those who are under its dominion.

It is a noteworthy observation that life and righteousness are virtually interchangeable as used by Paul to make his point. In other words, Paul could have said, “If there had been a law which could have given righteousness, verily life should have been by the law” without diminishing his point. This is not to suggest that the doctrines of regeneration and justification are synonymous or equivalent. It does demonstrate, however, that life and righteousness are inseparable as Divine bestowals in response to faith in Christ.

John Wesley, in a message entitled *The New Birth*, spoke of the two great works of justification and regeneration in connection with our salvation. He reasoned that though both of these Divine acts take place instantaneously in a moment of time, justification must logically precede regeneration. His thought is that in justification God does something *for* us, clearing away our sin and guilt, so that in regeneration He is free to do

something *in* us. It is admittedly a fine point to argue since the scriptures represent faith as requisite to both righteousness and life. The point is Wesley properly understood the Biblical relationship between faith and these two great works—faith precedes them both!

Brethren, in our efforts to evangelize the lost, bite-sized portions of truth are of great value! At the risk of oversimplification, let it be said that the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection on behalf of sinners has opened the way for God to bestow upon a believing sinner the two benefits of grace he or she most desperately needs—righteousness and life! They are not attainable by works of righteousness that we have done. They flow freely from the hand of a merciful God to those who come before Him with humble heart and empty hands, and trust the Lord Jesus to do for them that which they cannot do for themselves. This is the promise of God, and the path to life and righteousness!

In Need of Living Water

There is an unavoidable crisis that looms across many areas of the United States, the impact of which will be especially acute in the South. According to experts, it is just a matter of time before this ticking time bomb explodes, and drives major population areas into an unsavory decision-making process. The unfortunate fact is many residents of those areas predicted to be most directly and adversely affected by the crisis have no clue whatsoever as to the impending danger. Are we referring to potential oil shortages that would produce inordinate transportation costs and cripple the national economy? No! The crisis to which we refer is far more fundamental to our existence—a shortage of water!

An article that appeared in the Metro section of the Sunday, July 14 edition of the *Florida Times-Union* was entitled “Water shortage strikes South” with a sub-title that read “Supply won’t cover growing populations”. The author spoke of “a dark cloud hanging over the South, threatening its continued economic viability.” He further expanded on this theme, saying, “The availability of water, the most essential commodity to human life, is failing to keep up with rising demand in the region’s most populous and fastest-growing states—Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas.” The unambiguous message was that growth comes to a screeching halt when the demand for water exceeds the supply!

It was stated that by 2050 some cities in Texas would not have enough water for the people they expect to live there, that the worst environmental depletions due to the pumping of groundwater are occurring in Tampa, and that the customer base in Atlanta, in the peak periods of 1999 and 2000, used more water than it was predicted to be using in 2030. It was also noted that all of these areas are energetically engaged to develop both supply-side and demand-side solutions to the crisis, including desalinization plants and conservation guidelines. Every region of the nation with a looming water crisis is doing everything within its power to avert it!

The Lord Jesus likewise emphasized the importance of water. He told a Samaritan woman that if she had known the gift of God, and who was that said to her: “Give me to drink”, that she would have asked of him, and he would have given her living water (John 4:10). He added, “*Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life*” (4:13-14).

While teaching in the temple, Jesus exclaimed: “*If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water*” (7:37-38). John goes on to tell his readers that Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive after He was glorified. As one embarks upon a reading of Acts, it is obvious that the Church, beginning at Pentecost and expanding beyond Jerusalem, was awash with the water of Holy Ghost power! The church grew exponentially as the Word of God spread and was preached in power! What is clear to the most casual observer of the church in this hour is a water shortage of

drought proportions! The pulpit is powerless and the pew is listless! For many congregations, growth has come to the proverbial screeching halt!

The problem with the current living water crisis is that an infinite supply is being met with inadequate demand! What is truly alarming is that those churches most directly and adversely affected by it appear to be doing little or nothing to avert it! It confirms what Jesus taught His disciples, saying: "*the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light*" (Luke 16:8).

Brethren, what the cities of the South fear, and are seeking to avert at all costs in the physical realm, has already become a spiritual reality for the church. She desperately needs a fresh flood of living water and Holy Ghost power! As individual believers and congregations, we must come to grips with the problem, and determine to do every thing within the prescribed will of God to procure a fresh dose of living water from the limitless wells of salvation!

It will require a two-fold abandonment. First, we must confess and abandon all sin and personal defilement in a fresh pursuit of holiness. Second, we must abandon ourselves to the revealed will of God in a fresh pursuit of obedience. Where believers are energetically engaged in these two pursuits, a fresh flow of living water is not far behind! Each of us then must ask ourselves, Will I be one of those individuals? Will mine be one of those churches?

Calibration of the Heart

I was involved in a traffic accident back in the Fall of 1970. Another vehicle had cut in front of me as a result of an abrupt lane change, and immediately slammed on his brakes. As you can imagine, that driver's actions made me an instant tailgater. He was forthwith rear-ended by my little Volkswagen, and, as you have already guessed, I was ticketed for causing the accident.

In addition to standard bodywork, the repairs on my car included replacement of the fuel tank. A week later I ran out of gas on Interstate 95 while the fuel gage was reading two or three needle widths above empty. The mechanics that replaced the fuel tank had failed to recalibrate the internal fuel quantity transmitter. The fuel gauge was receiving faulty data from the transmitter, leading me to believe I still had fuel to burn when in fact I was dead empty. I was stranded on the roadside because that critical internal mechanism was overlooked in the damage repairs.

In the spiritual realm, God has endowed every man with a critical internal mechanism called the heart. The heart is more than the pilothouse of mind, emotion, and will. It is the fountain and source of all the activity of man. It is the whole inner self. Furthermore, it suffers damage every time it collides with sin, requiring regular recalibration through the instructive and corrective ministry of God's Word.

Neglect of the heart in matters spiritual can result in deception and emptiness of life, leading an individual to trust in resources that in fact do not exist. This is the essence of idolatry! Thus we are warned that the heart should be kept with all diligence, for out of it are issues of life (Proverbs 4:23); that sin is inherently deceitful, and able to harden the heart against God (Hebrews 3:13); and that if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me (Psalm 66:18). The flippant manner in which sin is both discussed and dismissed by secular and religious men alike is an evidentiary argument for epidemic heart damage! It is impossible to be serious about God without a corresponding seriousness about sin!

The prophet Jeremiah, as the Lord's spokesman, pulled no punches regarding the devastating damage that sin had inflicted upon Israel. He proclaimed: "*The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars*" (Jeremiah 17:1). What metaphors! The hot iron melts the soft wax as it carves out its abiding message. The hardness of the diamond leaves an indelible etching upon surface it impacts. The heart of man is where sin leaves its indelible engravings, degrading the character, the memory, and the conscience in the process. Sin manifests itself in a myriad of ways: fits of anger, misrepresentations of the truth, sensual indulgences, and faithless acts. The real problem with sin, according to Jeremiah, is that it is never done with us even though we may be done with it!

The New Testament answer to heart damage is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps no church fellowship was birthed from a more sinful and perverse background than the one at Corinth. Yet in his second epistle, Paul reminded them that they were "*the epistle of*

Christ...written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart' (II Corinthians 3:3). The Spirit of God is a living pen of iron and a diamond robed in Deity! He is able to perform open-heart surgery on one who believes in Jesus. He engraves eternal truth upon the tables of the heart. He applies the precious blood of Christ to the sin-scarred soul. He purges the conscience from dead works to serve the living God! In other words, He is the peerless practitioner of heart recalibration.

Brethren, there is no more vital requirement for the disciple of Jesus Christ than to attend daily to the affairs of the heart, recognizing its deceitful nature and constant need of monitoring. The heart left unattended will always lead its owner to deception, miscalculation, and emptiness. It is also true that every human crisis, whether personal or international, has its origin in a defective heart that is out of sync with the God of truth. Every transgression further dulls the spiritual senses as one sin is layered over another. The cumulative effect is a heart hardened toward the things of God. A revival wrought by the Spirit breaks through these layers of spiritual scar tissue. It cleanses and recalibrates the heart, and restores every spiritual gauge on the instrument panel of life to its proper function. The only alternative to periodic heart recalibration is finding oneself dead empty somewhere down the road of life!

Thinking in Global Terms

The exponential advances of communications technology in the twentieth century have reduced the world—the whole world—to a more manageable size. It just doesn't seem as big and vast as it did fifty years ago. I remember when ABC Sports starting taking us "around the globe" to cover major sporting events. That was exciting stuff back then. No longer were we dependent upon month-old newsreels to get a glimpse of sports history. Now we speak in terms of global markets, global trade, global warming, global positioning satellites, global thermo-nuclear war, and global terrorism. The world as we have come to know it demands that every modern-day business and political leader be a global thinker!

Global thinking, however, is not a new concept. The Lord Jesus Christ was the consummate global thinker, and taught His disciples to be so. He said unto them: "*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*" (Mark 16:15). The sole imperative or command was to *preach* the gospel! *Go* is actually a past participle that modifies the command. The sense is, "Having gone into all the world, preach the gospel to the entire creation." Jesus assumed that global vision would inevitably lead to the global dispersion of these men, wherein they would proclaim to every sinner the good news that God in Christ had suffered and died for their sins, and provided a way of salvation. More than any other entity on earth, the church of Jesus Christ should be a role model for global thinking!

The Lord Jesus provoked global thinking in His evangelism as well. On one occasion, he asked the question, "*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*" (Mark 8:36). The contrast between the individual soul and the sum total of global wealth was no doubt intended to teach the superior value of the human soul over tangible and measurable riches—the former eclipsing the latter! According to Jesus, every man shall be deemed profitless whose passion for temporal attainments precludes the spiritual welfare of his eternal soul! In this case, global thinking can lead to deadly miscalculation!

Our Lord's emphasis upon global thinking appears to have made a lasting impression on the apostle John. In his first epistle, he twice employed the phrase "the whole world" to describe the extent to which Jesus satisfied the justice of God regarding sin and the pervasive influence of wickedness over unbelievers as a whole. The apostle writes, "*And he is the propitiation [satisfaction] for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world*" (1 John 2:2). In closing the letter, he affirms, "*And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in [under the sway of] wickedness*" (5:19).

The expositor Alexander Maclaren stated, "John learned from Jesus to use that phrase 'the world', not as meaning the aggregate of material things, but as meaning the aggregate of godless men...the mass of people that are not of God." The aggregate of godless men is exactly what the phrase *the whole world* implies! In his comments on 1 John 5:19, John Calvin wrote, "Under the term *world*, the Apostle no doubt includes the whole human race." It is unfortunate that Calvin disallowed the same meaning for the identical phrase in 2:2 since the apostle John was no doubt consistent in both instances.

It is out of the whole world—the aggregate of godless men for whom a satisfaction for sin was made—that the Lord Jesus continues to seek and to save that which was lost! It is God's good pleasure to save them that believe!

Brethren, global thinking in Biblical terms is a sign of spiritual health. On one side of the coin is the proper valuation of the soul. No amount of success as defined by this world can compensate for soul neglect that ends in the lake of fire. The recent chaos that ripped through our financial markets due to “false profit” statements will pale in comparison to the “no profit” statements issued at the Great White Throne for sinners who died as unbelievers. On the other side of the coin is the aggregate of godless men, women, and young people for whom Jesus died—a group of which we all were once a part! Our escape from the dominion of wickedness was facilitated by grace that brought us to a place of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It appears that the apostle John used the phrase *and not for ours only* to remind his readers of this truth, and to reinforce global thinking. The death of Christ included the sins of all and excluded none! So also eternal life in Christ includes all who believe and excludes all who persist in unbelief. May the Lord Jesus enable us all to think in global terms as defined by the scriptures! Amen!

Great Mercies for Our Small Moments

Robert Robinson (1735-1790) is not exactly a household name for most of us. His widowed mother sent him to London at age 14 to become a barber and hairdresser. He was converted to Christ at age 17. He became a Methodist minister, and later moved to Cambridge, England where he pastored a Baptist church, and wrote a number of hymns. The most well-known of these -- "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" -- is one of my cherished favorites, especially the last two lines: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love; Here's my heart, O take and seal it; Seal it for Thy courts above." Many times have I uttered those words at the throne of grace!

He wrote the hymn in 1758 at age 23. There is a well-known story that on a particular day in his later years he encountered a woman who was studying a hymnal, and she asked how he liked the hymn she was humming. In tears, he replied, "Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then."

My heart is stirred by the passion and acute sense of sorrow in his response. I wonder how many saints in this hour are suffering the same heartache and regret because they have wandered too far for too long? There are no details regarding how he got to that state or whether the joy of his salvation was ever restored. But the important issue is whether restoration to an experience of full salvation was possible? The Bible answers that particular question in the affirmative!

The nation of Israel was notorious for spiritual drift and disobedience. They wandered too far for too long on too many occasions! Yet we know from Scripture that God never abandoned His chosen people although His chastening rod at times made them feel forsaken and ashamed. He continued through the centuries to send prophets with messages of impending judgment as well as promises of deliverance if they would repent and turn from sin.

The prophet Isaiah, after delivering the suffering servant of Jehovah message (Isaiah 53), proceeded in the next chapter to issue words of hope and gracious expectation to the nation. He said: "*Fear not; for thou shalt not be ashamed: neither be thou confounded; for thou shalt not be put to shame: for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth, and shalt not remember the reproach of thy widowhood anymore*" (Isaiah 54:4). A few verses later he added, "*For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy upon thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer*" (54:7-8). The explanation for such an enduring love lies somewhere in the stratosphere of grace. It is beyond the comprehension of man!

It is not uncommon for the wayward saint who has squandered away too many of his or her years to struggle with feelings of shame and regret over the losses incurred. Some remain so distraught over wasted years that they question whether God could ever use them again, and find some solace in the words of a certain frustrated father who said to Jesus, "*Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief*" (Mark 9:24). Moreover, we have a

tendency to reckon the severity of waywardness in terms of time: that is, three weeks is worse than three days, three months worse than three weeks, three years worse than three months, etc. No doubt there is an element of truth to these comparisons. But the encouraging truth offered by our Redeemer is that He reckons all of these time periods as small moments mixed with a little wrath, which He desires to offset with great mercies and everlasting kindness. According to Isaiah, the power of Divine restoration is so pervasive that the former shame and reproach is forgotten as the Lord ushers in a new era of spiritual power, usefulness and fruitfulness!

Brethren, the apostle Paul issued a similar encouragement to the Corinthian believers, wherein he affirmed that godly sorrow for sin leads to repentance, which breaks forth into a fresh experience of regret-free salvation (II Corinthians 7:10). All of us wander from the will of God to some degree on some occasion for varying lengths of time. In whatsoever state of waywardness we might find ourselves, it must always be remembered that God, in His everlasting kindness, has great mercies for our small moments!

Seeking God Early

One of the celebrated heroes of September 11, 2001 was Todd Beamer, a 32-year-old business executive aboard United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in rural Somerset County, Pennsylvania. After the intent of terrorist hijackers had become apparent, Beamer used an in-flight telephone to contact a GTE operator with whom he spoke for thirteen minutes. Beamer asked her to pray with him, and they recited Psalm 23 together. The phone line was still open when the operator heard him say, "Are you guys ready? Let's roll!"

Those words were soon to become the battle cry for the war against terrorism. The intense pressure of a life-threatening situation had evoked from this man a courageous response of the highest order! As a result, the phrase "Let's roll!" has been coined to express ironclad resoluteness of will in the face of danger!

The Christian life by comparison is far more perilous! Spiritual danger lurks around every turn in the road, and nothing short of a resolute will is required to stay the course! Our adversary the devil, the master terrorist, roams the earth with a view to hijacking and crashing the spiritual life of every impotent and vulnerable saint he can find! Make no mistake! Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are in full-scale life-threatening combat against the powers of darkness! Our battle cries must therefore be Biblical!

I would like to suggest a scriptural mantra that also came to life in a dire situation (1 Samuel 23:7-15). It was declared by David upon a mountain in the wilderness of Ziph, and directed toward God rather than men. The enemy was king Saul, who set out *to besiege David and his men* (23:8), who *secretly practised mischief against him* (23:9), who *sought him every day* (23:14), and who *was come out to seek his life* (23:15). These were the circumstances out of which David cried, "*O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee*" (Psalm 63:1). As the initial phrase of Psalm Sixty-three, it set the stage for every subsequent expression of worship and godly optimism!

David's resolve toward God was the outgrowth of an intimate relationship with God! They were intertwined! *O God* represents his invocation of the Divine presence; *my God* expresses his capitulation to the Divine will! In the first, God is addressed; in the second, God is possessed! Invocation without capitulation equals self-deception! America is at odds with God for this very reason. Saying "Under God" without getting under God is an exercise in futility! Furthermore, the godless age in which we live has managed to transform the phrase "O my God!" into a comedic and sacrilegious expression that repeatedly violates the Third Commandment! It should never leave the lips of a believer, including its "O my Gosh!" equivalent!

The resolve of the Psalmist as expressed in the words "*early will I seek thee*" was no doubt an operating principle in his life. It should likewise govern ours in at least the following five ways:

- (1) We ought to seek God early in life. The passage of time tends to harden the impenitent heart. One of the alarming realities among American youth is the early age at which many appear to be enslaved to revelry and lust.

- (2) We should seek God early in the day. Better to meet with Him before the daily warfare begins than to approach Him defeated after the day is done! No soldier worth his or her salt would dare to engage the enemy without the proper munitions.
- (3) We should seek the Lord early in the time of crisis. We must always expect the unexpected in our walk with God! A crisis seldom announces its arrival. David's life reveals a pattern of seeking God's prior approval for courses of action in times of crisis.
- (4) We should seek God early in the time of temptation. God has promised a way of escape in every situation wherein we are solicited to sin (I Corinthians 10:13). David's failure to apply this principle as he watched Bathsheba bathing led to the single blemish on an otherwise exemplary record.
- (5) We should seek God early in the time of decision. The course of our life is the sum total of the decisions we make. And unlike a crisis, many decisions are routine in nature, and can be anticipated well in advance. God has promised to direct our path if we acknowledge Him in all of our ways (Proverbs 3:6).

Brethren, there are many external aspects of life that are beyond our control. It is possible, however, to control its internal aspects, including the spiritual principles that we allow to govern us. Blessed is that man, woman, or young person who has determined to seek God early as an operating principle of life. Resolve of this caliber is the stuff of which godly lives are made!

The Guidance We Embrace

The guided tour can be a fascinating and rewarding experience. It usually surpasses the typical sightseeing adventure because of the illuminating detail and intangible local flavor imparted by the guide. Several years ago my family and I took a guided tour of Saint Augustine, Florida in a horse-drawn trolley. The guide escorted us on a predetermined path through key sections of the old city, embellishing his monologue with historical gems regarding the people, landmarks, and historical events that had impacted the city through the centuries. After the tour, I harbored a deeper appreciation for the city, its founders, and the significance of its role in American history.

A guided tour of far greater significance is available to every believer in Jesus Christ. In the Upper Room discourse following the exit of Judas Iscariot, our Lord said to His disciples, "*Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you*" (John 16:13-14). Jesus promised that the indwelling Spirit would be a supernatural guide, imparting the truth to our minds and hearts, and elucidating the robust riches of Christ along the way!

At the core of His ministry is the magnification of Jesus. The Spirit is not self-serving! Any church that heralds the "anointing" of the Holy Ghost as the centerpiece of its ministry is a pretender to His presence and power! Spirit power in the church is evidenced by an obsession with Jesus Christ, *in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Colossians 2:3). The spirit that magnifies itself is *another spirit* (II Corinthians 11:4). Thus we are able to discern whether our spiritual guidance is supernatural or superficial!

In addition to the Spirit as a supernatural guide, there are three other types of guides that also demand our attention. They are:

- (1) The evangelical guide as represented by Philip in Acts 8:26-40. In the Gaza desert he encountered an Ethiopian eunuch, who was returning from a worship experience in Jerusalem, and reading Isaiah's prophecy about the lamb whose life was taken away (Isaiah 53:7-8). Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading. He replied, "*How can I, except some man should guide me?*" (8:31). Philip *preached unto him Jesus*, and provided the guidance necessary for this man to become a baptized believer, who went on his way rejoicing!
- (2) The hypocritical guide as affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 23:16 regarding the scribes and Pharisees. The scathing charge "*Woe unto you, ye blind guides!*" was the fourth of eight "Woes!" in which the word *hypocrites* was used seven times. *Blind guides* implies that the professed ability to provide spiritual guidance apart from a true spiritual sight that issues forth in consistent godly living is damnable hypocrisy, which can only lead those guided by it into the same hypocrisy and damnation. Jesus taught that the blind leading the blind results in both falling into the ditch of spiritual ruin (Matthew 15:14).

(3) The diabolical guide as related by Peter concerning Judas Iscariot, who “*was guide to them that took Jesus*” (Acts 1:16). The enemies of Christ are always on the lookout for an “insider” who will sell out the Master and abandon the Kingdom cause for the right worldly price. It is evidence to them that Christ lacks credibility, which they use to justify and bolster the satanic Christ-rejecting spirit that binds them. Judas, as a professed follower of Christ, was both hypocritical and diabolical in the guidance he managed to provide in his lifetime. What a pathetic legacy was left by this man!

Brethren, the path we travel through this life is essentially a guided tour in which we find ourselves both guiding others and being guided. Two questions that naturally arise from this awareness are: (1) what manner of guidance am I providing to those within my realm of influence, and (2) what sources am I deferring to for personal guidance? The proper answer to the first is evangelical guidance. The answer to the second is both supernatural and evangelical.

If we walk in humility before God with Spirit power, we enjoy the benefits of supernatural guidance as well as the fellowship of other evangelical guides who walk in that same Spirit. In a world saturated with both hypocritical and diabolical guidance, may God grant us the good spiritual sense to choose wisely in terms of the guidance we embrace!

Redemption and the Forgiveness of Sins

Redemption and the forgiveness of sin are two inseparable themes in the scriptures. They go hand in hand. It is a doctrinal impossibility to expound one without including the other. In the book of Ephesians, for example, the apostle Paul declared, "*In whom [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace*" (1:7). He states the relationship as one of near equivalency. The sinner who is saved by grace is purchased and purified by the same sinless and divine blood. A thousand years earlier, king David likewise linked the two together in Psalm 130, proclaiming that there is *mercy and plenteous redemption with the Lord, who would redeem Israel from all his iniquities*" (130:7-8).

The content of Psalm 130 is the prayer of a stalwart believer who cries unto the Lord *out of the depths* (130:1). While it may be difficult to put a fine point on the exact nature of his trouble, the cause is abundantly clear—iniquity (130:3). Thus he asks the Lord to *hear his voice*, and that His *ears be attentive* to his *supplications* (130:2). The root meaning of *attentive* is literally *to prick up the ears*, and in this case suggests the undivided attention of God! This is always the case with disobedient believers who hunger for complete restoration of fellowship with their Lord. They desire His undivided attention for these most serious of spiritual transactions, and never find Him reluctant to give it!

The Psalmist also offers an alarming hypothetical in the form of a rhetorical question. He asks, "*If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?*" (130:3). The verb *mark* means *to hedge around, to protect*, and usually conveys something positive. It is used here, however, to suggest the horrid outcome if should God mark our iniquities: that is, if He hedged them round about so that neither mercy nor forgiveness could touch them. In such a situation, redemption and the forgiveness of sins would be impossible, with the result that no one would be able to stand in His presence or withstand the Judgment to come! Underlying this hypothetical statement is the conviction that God would be absolutely just if He marked iniquities, and excluded all of mankind from His presence both temporally and eternally!

Fortunately, God is as liberal with His mercy as He is stringent with His justice. Sinful men are indeed able to stand in God's presence because *there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared* (130:4). Forgiveness is God's divine prerogative as well as His delight! As the offended party, He retains the right to grant forgiveness both exclusively and exhaustively! Genuine repentance that brings forgiveness senses the wound of God's heart, and issues forth in fear—a godly reverence for God that does not take for granted His gracious bestowals of mercy! Charles Haddon Spurgeon offered the following insight: "None fear the Lord like those who have experienced His forgiving love. Gratitude for pardon produces far more fear and reverence of God than all the dread that is inspired by punishment. If the Lord were to execute judgment upon all, there would be none left to fear Him."

Brethren, the hope that redemption and the forgiveness of sins provide for all who believe is worth more than the combined riches of this world. It is a hope experienced in

day-to-day life, and one that shall be realized in eternity to come. God does not mark our iniquities, but rather attends to our cries of desperation so that we might be forgiven, and that He might be feared! Praise God for redemption, and the forgiveness of sins!

Character Traits for Leadership

He was a Hebrew, the son of Levite parents, and destined to become the greatest leader in Jewish history. The first critical journey of his life was taken at age three months upon the river of Egypt in an ark of bulrushes daubed with slime and pitch. God's providence took him from reeds of the river to the palaces of Pharaoh where he received the best of grooming and education. In early manhood, he committed the crime of manslaughter against an Egyptian taskmaster, which precipitated a second critical journey of some two hundred fifty miles southeast into the land of Midian. The man who had shown such concern for the burdens of his brethren now had incurred burdens of his own. The labors of the next forty years would prepare him for the most significant labor of his life—the exodus of Israel from Egypt. We are speaking of Moses, the man of God.

The details of his initial contacts in Midian are provided for us in Exodus 2:15-22. The manner in which Moses conducted himself speaks volumes about the kind of man he had become. It also suggests to us at least three of the character traits that God values in a spiritual leader.

The first character trait displayed was a willingness to intervene on behalf of the weak. We are told that a group of shepherds came and drove the seven daughters of Reuel away from the water troughs after they had filled them with water. Moses would have none of this. As one against many, he *stood up and helped them* (2:17). He was not afraid to put himself at risk for the right cause or for the cause of right! God is always looking for men, women, and young people who are willing to prosecute kingdom causes, and put themselves at risk for others.

The second was a willingness to provide for those in need. As the daughters recounted the episode to their father, they said that Moses had not only “delivered us from out of the hand of the shepherds”, but also “drew water enough for us, and watered the flock” (2:19). His desire to defend them flowed most naturally into a desire to provide for them! Moreover, his heroic and gracious actions secured for him an invitation to “eat bread” at Reuel's house (2:20). In like manner, the responsibility of the pastor is to water and feed the flock with the Word of God! Impoverished indeed is the church whose pastor sees himself first and foremost as an administrator and program director!

The third trait is found in the words, “*And Moses was content to dwell with the man*” (2:21). Moses demonstrated a willingness to adapt to new surroundings. He found in them a sense of sufficiency and contentment. He did not consider the former palace lifestyle as some great prize in life that was lost. His spirit of contentment was so obvious to Reuel that he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses, and she became his wife. The absence of contentment has been the downfall of too many saints! Its presence in Moses enabled God to prepare him for greater service still!

Brethren, all of us should examine ourselves to determine whether we possess these character traits, and to what degree they are operative. These same three traits found perfect expression in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who intervened on behalf of sinners who were bullied under sin's bondage. He shed his precious blood and died for

them. It is Jesus who provides a robe of righteousness to all who come unto the Father by him. It is Jesus who was content to live in poverty among men in order to bestow grace upon them. He was rich, but for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might be made rich.

These character traits that were exemplified in Moses, and perfected in the Lord Jesus, are absolute requisites in our labors for the Lord. May God make them real in us for the furtherance of his kingdom and for his glory!

A Time for Sober Reflection

This week will mark the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack upon the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon. It is being referred to as “a time for reflection”, and rightly so. Several secular and religious media sources have opted to originate their broadcasts from lower Manhattan where the most lethal destruction took place. With almost every camera shot, the viewer can see in the background the enormous seventy-foot deep crater where the two megastructures once stood as emblems of our financial influence and power. In addition to the staggering loss of life that devastated thousands of families, the Insurance Information Institute estimates that the total insurance loss will ultimately exceed \$40 billion.

The question on my mind is, “Exactly where should sober reflection upon these year-old events take us? Some would argue that the fruits of reflection should lead us to fortify our borders with Canada and Mexico. Others might conclude that we should privatize airport security and replace the current corps of bumbling baggage screeners with true security professionals. Military zealots might call for a rekindling of America’s anger for the atrocities committed against her, and the earmarking a few bombs for Baghdad. The saints of God, however, should allow a sober reflection to take them far beyond such shortsighted conclusions. I have two in mind.

The first is the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. My imagination was jogged last week by the comments of a man who witnessed the collapse of the South Tower. He said it sounded like “ten thousand deafening cannon shots set off in rapid succession” as floor after floor of steel beams and girders snapped like toothpicks under the unbearable weight. The mental image created by his words caused me to reflect upon the Cross. How incalculable was the total weight of human sin that God the Father laid upon the Lord Jesus? According to the OT scriptures, the Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of every human soul that had gone astray (Isaiah 53:6).

John the Baptist affirmed this truth by identifying Jesus as “the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). It was by the grace of God that He tasted death for each and every man (Hebrews 2:9). What a burden! The collapse of a thousand Trade Center Towers could never equal the degree of devastation incurred by the Lord Jesus as He bore the weight of our sins in His body on the tree!

The second is the potential death of a nation. Is there any doubt in the minds of God’s people that the window of opportunity seized by the terrorists was related to a purposeful slackening of God’s providential care? If our nation refuses to cease from its rebellion against the Almighty, what additional judgments can we expect? Will they be more severe?

A significant portion of the American populace, whose minds have been corrupted by materialism, humanism and moral relativism, would disavow that possibility. They are simply deceived by the god of this world! Even so, we as believers must recognize that the activity of the church will be a far more critical factor in determining America’s future than the work of government.

The promise that Solomon received in the night at the beginning of his reign is as applicable now as it was then: *"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land (II Chronicles 7:14).* Show me a church that is genuinely energized about America's welfare, and I will show you a church that is totally engaged in spiritual warfare!

Brethren, it is indeed a time for reflection! As God's people, we must believe that the weapons in our spiritual arsenal—prayer, intercession, and supplication—are far more effective than the FBI, cruise missiles and combat troops! And while the collapse of the Trade Center Towers may have some value as a spiritual object lesson, there is one huge difference! It took nearly a year for ground crews to remove the Trade Center debris, leaving an empty crater to remind us of our losses. It took the Lord Jesus just three days and three nights to rise victorious from the grave, leaving an empty tomb to remind us of the gains He secured for us! Thank you, Lord Jesus!

An Appropriate Response to the Harvest

The Lord Jesus often used the common realities of agricultural life to illustrate the more ominous truths of the spiritual realm. One of the themes He employed routinely was that of the harvest. At Jacob's well outside the city of Sychar, for example, Jesus taught His disciples that while the physical harvest of local crops was still four months away, the spiritual harvest of precious souls was imminent. Thus He instructed them, "*Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest*" (John 4:35). At another strategic point in His ministry, our Lord said unto His disciples, "*The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into His harvest*" (Matthew 9:37-38).

The common thread in both of these texts is the element of urgency. The phrase "*white already to harvest*" suggests to us that an immediate response to the crop condition is mandated in order to avoid spoilage as a result of delay. The contrast between a plenteous harvest and a shortage of laborers stresses the same urgency from a manpower perspective. The key to a successful harvest, according to Jesus, is a response that is both immediate and adequate.

It has been my privilege to pastor churches in rural farming communities. Over a period of two or three weeks every fall, farmers would take corn and soybean samples to the Cooperative for a moisture content analysis. When moisture levels dropped below the optimum percentage, farmers would throw everything they had at the harvest—combines, hauling trucks, and manpower! The window of opportunity for getting the harvest out of the field was not open-ended!

In His Matthew 9 exhortation, Jesus cited prayer as the means for obtaining adequate resources for harvest. He urged, "*Pray ye the Lord of the harvest.*" Two important truths confront us here. First, *pray* is the aorist passive imperative of the Greek *deomai* (prayer prompted by an urgent sense of need). Imperatives are commands, which means prayer for harvest needs is not optional! The aorist tense suggests that this kind of praying had been previously neglected, and should begin forthwith as a habit of life. By using the passive voice in the command, Jesus implied that harvest needs should drive a disciple to a place of intercessory prayer!

Secondly, the harvest is the Lord's! It is not ours! Personal success or failure in harvest ventures is irrelevant! The harvest is not about us. It is about Him! The Cross of Calvary signifies our Lord's compassion for every fallen son of Adam. It is His gospel that is proclaimed to sinners far and wide! Some of us plant, some water, but it is God that gives the increase!

The Lord of the harvest responds to prayer by sending forth laborers into the harvest. The words "send forth" are from the Greek **ekballo**. It is a strong action verb meaning "to cast or throw out." Have you ever seen a fisherman wading through the shallows with a cast net looking for mud minnows or finger mullet, and forcibly throwing his net once a school of baitfish is spotted? If so, you have the picture of this word. The Lord is the Master Fishermen, Who propels into gospel service the laborer who responds to the

need of the harvest. As soon as the words "Here am I; send me" were uttered by Isaiah, the Lord responded with "Go, and tell this people" (Isaiah 6:8-9). Isaiah expressed a willingness to be used of God, and received his commission in short order. It was Vance Havner who said, "Let a man be made usable, and God will wear him out!"

Brethren, all of us live, move, and have our being in a field of harvest. Both the field and the harvest are the Lord's! Have the needs of the harvest driven us to prayer? Do we live each day with the clear sense that we have been sent forth into that harvest? Is ours an attitude of urgency or indifference?

Two things are certain! First, there are precious few churches in America whose response to the harvest has been immediate and adequate! Second, the Lord is still in the business of sending forth willing and obedient laborers into the fields of harvest! There is only one appropriate response to the harvest as Jesus described it—"Here am I; send me!"

The Remedy for Spiritual Termites

Are you a homeowner? If so, the scientific order of *Isoptera* within the animal kingdom should be a matter of serious concern for you. About forty species of this creature (which in many ways resembles the common cockroach) live on the North American continent. Ten live underground. They have two requirements for sustaining their existence—moisture and cellulose. Many of you have already deduced that we are speaking of the termite, especially the subterranean variety. They are the smallest species within the order, but the most destructive!

The United States Department of Agriculture has long recommended the use of concrete, stone, and brick for building foundations in order to prevent termites from invading the superstructure. Even so, a crack measuring a mere one sixty-fourth of an inch in a concrete slab or exterior wall is sufficient to allow these wood-devouring insects to tunnel into the studs and framing virtually undetected. It is estimated that the average-sized termite colony can devour a one-foot section of two-by-four lumber in a three-month period. While that's not exactly the pace of a runaway freight train, the fact is termites can devour dozens of feet of cellulose-laden material before they are detected.

The subterranean termite is in many ways analogous to sin. Both perform the initial stages of their destructive work in dark seclusion. One ravages the house, the other the heart! The full extent of the damage for both homeowners and heartowners usually comes to light in the advanced stages of infestation. Jesus taught that a man is defiled by the evil acts that proceed *from within, out of the heart* (Mark 7:18-23). In other words, sin works covertly in the heart long before it becomes visible in an overt act! Sin in the heart is truly a spiritual termite!

The homeowner who hears the bad news of termite damage often gets that sinking feeling inside as he or she discovers the extent of the damage, and considers the financial cost of repairs. In some cases, the devastation is so severe that buildings must be torn down and rebuilt from the ground up. In like manner, the heartowner who is confronted with the bad news of sin-damage by God's Word and Spirit (John 16:8-11) experiences a deep sense of guilt, and considers how he or she might get right with God.

The big difference between homeowners and heartowners concerning the damages inflicted by termites and sin respectively is the party who pays the bill! It is the homeowner who bears the burden of repair or rebuild if he or she wants to be made whole. Even in cases where a termite bond is in place, the cost of premiums to keep the policy in force remains the duty of the homeowner. Any lapse in the paying of premiums results in a forfeiture of protection. The heartowner, on the other hand, is helpless to compensate God for offences committed against His Law. As an act of unmerited favor, God responded to the total ineptitude of sinners by becoming a man, and paying the cost of our salvation through His substitutionary sacrifice for sin.

Brethren, every homeowner is also a heartowner. It is a strange paradox when homeowners gladly bear the cost of home restoration but reject God's free offer of heart

restoration for which the cost was borne by another! Why are we so careful about home matters and so careless with matters of the heart? There is only one crack-free foundation for building a life, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ! There is only one remedy for the spiritual termites that infest the heart, and that is precious blood that Jesus shed for our sins!

The Gospel Deficiency of Reformed Theology

Do you remember the words, "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is"? Bill Clinton made this statement before a Federal Grand Jury on August 17, 1998, in response to allegations that he had previously lied under oath regarding a sexual affair with a White House intern. He further explained that the word "is" as understood to mean "is and never has been" would have an entirely different meaning than "is" as in "there is none". He argued that his former sworn testimony was "a completely true statement" because he had the second meaning in mind. My thought was that any politician who resorts to this kind of etymological hairsplitting to defend his integrity is desperate indeed!

Politicians are not alone in their ability to manipulate word meanings to their advantage. Theologians have done so for centuries in order to defend an interpretation of scripture or further a doctrinal agenda. Reformed theology is a case in point. One key issue is the meaning of the word "*world*" (Greek **kosmos**) as used by Jesus and the Apostles to describe the object of God's love (John 3:16) and the extent of the atonement (John 1:29). There is an interpretive axiom that says, "If the plain sense of scripture makes good sense, seek no other sense, lest you make the plain sense to become nonsense." The plain sense of "world" in John 3:16 is "humanity in its entirety (Jews and Gentiles without exception or distinction).

Reformed theology rejects the plain sense for another sense that is essentially nonsense, using a lethal mix of Aristotelian logic and misapplied scripture to arrive at a meaning of "world" that equates to the "world of the elect". It teaches that God loves only the elect and that Jesus died only for them, notwithstanding the plethora of scripture to the contrary. Reformed theology is truly Clintonesque in its attempt to redefine the "world" that God so loved, and reconciled to Himself through the death of His Son (II Corinthians 5:14-19).

At the close of His ministry, our Lord Jesus spoke these words: "*I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness. And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world*" (John 12:46-47). Jesus used the word "world" three times in these two verses. It cannot mean the "world of the elect" simply because Jesus included in that world every soul that hears His words and refuses to believe! In other words, the "world" as defined by Jesus consists of the elect and non-elect alike. The elect are those who believe; the non-elect are those who persist in unbelief. Jesus declared that He came to save them all, and that all were the objects of His love!

Reformed theology is a speculative philosophical system that suffers from a major gospel deficiency! The scriptures reveal that the apostolic gospel message consists of two main themes: the *provision* God made for the sins of mankind, and the *offer* of forgiveness and life to all who believe it. The provision is expressed in the words "*Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures*" (I Corinthians 15:3). In this passage, Paul was restating the core message he had preached to the Corinthians before they were saved, which is the same message he preached to every unbeliever he evangelized.

The offer is expressed in the words, "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house*" (Acts 16:31). The validity of the offer is absolutely contingent upon an actual provision for sin. So the only way Paul could have extended the offer to include the jailor's household was a conviction that Jesus had provided a sin satisfaction for every man in His vicarious death. Reformed theology is incapable of such conviction, and is therefore hamstrung by a gospel that only partially resembles that which Paul declared to the Gentiles.

Brethren, Jesus and the apostle Paul both proclaimed a universal offer of salvation backed by a universal provision for sin! Anything less is a departure from apostolic doctrine. Reformed theology, because it suffers from a gospel deficiency, should be rejected by every Bible believer. It was Jesus Who commanded the gospel to be preached to every creature. If there are some for whom Jesus made no provision for sin, how then can there be a gospel for them? And if the gospel offer is not backed by an actual provision for sin, how then is it possible for a Just God to hold the 'non-elect', for whom Christ did not die, accountable for rejecting a gospel that is 'non-applicable' to them?

A Mentor for the Men of God

The New Testament linchpin between the Gospels and the Epistles is the book of Acts. It is a transitional narrative that chronicles the explosive spread of the gospel from the Jews at Jerusalem to the Gentiles at Rome. Its content reveals the sundry kinds of supernatural phenomena that local churches can expect when they are endued with Holy Ghost power! It profoundly illustrates that God works through faithful men to advance His kingdom! Apollos, an Alexandrian-born Jew with an established reputation for oratorical eloquence and uncommon prowess in the Old Testament scriptures, is a prime example (Acts 18:24-28). Any preacher looking for a mentor would do well to emulate this man!

There are four notable attributes that commend Apollos to us as a role model. First, Apollos was a factual man. He was *instructed in the way of the Lord* and *taught diligently the things of the Lord* (v.25). In my understanding, the way of the Lord has to do with God justifying sinners by faith based on an approach to Him by blood sacrifice. From the days of Abel until Christ's death on the Cross, this was the way of salvation. Aquila and Priscilla were instrumental in teaching him that Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled all of the prophecies with which he had become so familiar!

The word *instructed* signifies a question and answer method of teaching wherein the pupil was required to provide oral answers to the teacher as evidence that he had mastered the content. Our English 'catechism' comes from this word. The word *diligently* is the Greek **akribos**, which means *accurately* or *exactly*. It takes serious mental discipline to be an effective pastor. The ministry is no place for the mentally lazy! It is a most noble pursuit to master the details of scripture!

Secondly, Apollos was a fervent man, and spoke as one *being fervent in the spirit* (v.25). The verb *fervent* is the Greek **zeo**, which means *to boil* or *to be hot*. Its form here is a present participle, indicating continuous action or habit of life. It tells us that his Bible expositions were packing spiritual heat and emotional passion every time they were delivered. Facts without fervency (i.e., truth without fire) promotes ambivalence toward truth. Fervency without facts (i.e., fire without truth) promotes divergence from truth. Facts mingled with fervency (i.e., truth on fire) promotes obedience to truth. So where is your church headed these days, dear pastor? The prevailing winds of ambivalence and divergence tell me that most churches are headed in the wrong direction! It will take men like Apollos to reverse the trend!

Thirdly, Apollos was a fearless man. Our text says he *spoke boldly in the synagogue* (v.26). The word *boldly* suggests *outspokenness* without fear of rejection. Apollos was neither obnoxious nor flamboyant. He was simply a man who considered the spiritual welfare of his fellow countrymen of greater import than his own personal welfare and safety. He was therefore willing to incur the risks of preaching the truth to a potentially hostile audience! For Apollos, fearlessness was an extension of fervency! An inverse relationship exists between fervency and fear. An abundance of the former produces an absence of the latter. The preacher who is fearful in public is one who neglects God in private; for it is there that the truth of Christ reaches the boiling point!

Fourthly, Apollos was a fruitful man! Any expositor who renders spiritual help to his hearers by means of impassioned truth may be reckoned fruitful! In the immediate context, the help he provided was directly related to his ability to craft from the scriptures impregnable arguments that *Jesus was Christ* (v.28). The phrase *mightily convinced* is the translation of a compound Greek verb that signifies total domination of an argument by the irrefutable evidence presented. The pastor who is skilled in the word of righteousness, and sets forth with unmistakable clarity both the 'what' (the object of faith) and the 'why' (the reason for faith) for his hearers, is a deep-rooted and fruitful tree for all who sit under his preaching. Apollos was such a man!

Brethren, the pulpits of America are crying out for men like Apollos! At no time in our history has there been a greater need for pulpiteers to exhibit that rare combination of facts and fervency before their congregations, and to do so with fearless allegiance to the truth! Spirit-filled men of this caliber are always fruitful! God is still in the business of using godly men who are factual, fervent, and fearless to minister much help to those who have believed through grace! For this reason, Apollos is a bona fide mentor for the men of God!

The Total Sufficiency for Our Depravity

What two distinctions do the words Trinity, sovereignty, and depravity have in common? First, all of them represent sound Bible doctrines taught by orthodox Christianity. Secondly, none of them is found in the scriptures. For this reason, the unorthodox religious world customarily accuses us of fabricating doctrines that the Bible does not teach. The Word of God, however, does in fact set forth the concepts and precepts represented by these theological terms. God is revealed as a Tri-Unity of Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Godhead is supreme in authority, executing its will and good pleasure without consultation from any external entity. The Bible portrays fallen man as morally corrupt and spiritually bankrupt. In theological lingo, this condition is referred to as “total depravity”.

The doctrine of total depravity as articulated by orthodox Christianity teaches that man is as *bad off* as he can be regarding his *condition* although he might not be as *bad* as he can be in terms of his *actions*. The initial act of sin caused Adam and Eve to incur spiritual death immediately, and the Bible tells us that spiritual (and ultimately physical) death *passed upon all men* as a result (Romans 5:12). In one tragic moment, they fell from the heights of sublimity to the depths of enmity. The initial indicator of depravity was an aversion for the presence of God. It rendered Adam and his posterity totally incapable of approaching God apart from a grace intervention.

Cain and Abel were therefore born into this world as totally depraved sinners. The manner in which God dealt with these two brothers, especially Cain, is critical to our understanding of total depravity. The fact is God was graciously interacting with totally depraved men thousands of years before the first theologians drew battle lines over its meaning and extent. A sober reflection upon God's behavior toward Cain as recorded in Genesis 4:1-16 is worth more than a thousand theological volumes on the subject!

It is useful to observe the effects of total depravity upon Cain. First, he exhibited a total disregard for the kind of sacrifice God required (4:3-4). The prescribed way of approach to God was a blood offering that symbolized a life sacrificed in place of the sinner who presented it. Abel complied with an attitude of submission; Cain disobeyed with an attitude of rebellion. Secondly, God's disrespect for his offering was met with anger rather than inquiry (4:5-6). He might have responded, “Lord, I desire your acceptance! What would you have me to do?” He essentially raised a clinched fist toward God, saying in effect, “How dare you disrespect the hard-earned work of my hands!? My offering is every bit as good as Abel's!” Thirdly, he disregarded his privileges as the firstborn as well as the gracious warning of impending sin (4:7). Fourthly, he committed the act of murder, gave false testimony in Lord's presence, and incurred additional curses (4:8-12). At the last, he complains of his unbearable punishment without the first word of confession or an ounce of sorrow regarding the sin that caused it (4:13). Cain teaches us that at the end of the road called total depravity stands the inn of brazen infidelity!

So what was the difference in these two brothers? Did God do something for Abel that He refused to do for Cain? The context provides the answers. First, Abel believed and

obeyed God while Cain chose unbelief and disobedience. In contrast to the baseless claim that God simply “passed over” Cain in the matter of personal salvation, the Lord made it perfectly clear to Cain that acceptance (i.e., a righteous standing before Him) was solely contingent upon a willingness on his part to do the right thing (4:7). Secondly, the argument could be made that God actually did more for Cain than He did for Abel in terms of grace! The Lord graced him with His personal presence, reasoned with him One-on-one, reiterated the terms of acceptance, warned him of the potential dangers of disobedience, and set a mark upon him to preserve his physical life, postponing an appointment with eternal damnation! It is a remarkable truth that Cain, the *first man* born into this world, was also the *first vessel of wrath* that God *endured with much longsuffering*—a man who fitted himself to destruction by his own devices (Romans 9:22). The same precious grace that Cain resisted was sufficient to save Abel from his sins.

Brethren, there is nothing like a Biblical context to set the record straight on doctrinal issues. Is it possible to reflect upon the Lord's interaction with Cain and draw the theological conclusion that God simply withheld from Cain the ability to believe? I have serious and reasonable doubts! I have no doubt, however, that the Lord Jesus Christ is the total sufficiency for our total depravity!

The Remedy for a Life Gone Sour

The Seventy-third Psalm is the remarkable analysis of a saint who had gone sour on life, but regained the proper perspective before it was too late. Asaph recorded his insights after struggling with what he perceived to be blatant inequities between the godly and the ungodly. The sore in his soul began to fester as he adopted a worldly mindset that equates an increase in riches and an absence of trouble with Divine approval (73:5, 12). The world tends to measure the success of an individual by his or her substance. The believer who adopts this bogus measuring stick can suffer from disillusionment so severe that it produces envy of the wicked (73:3), tears of discouragement (73:10), doubts about God's "hands on" administration of world affairs (73:11), and a sense of futility in serving God (73:13-14).

In the descriptive language of hindsight, Asaph reveals just how far he had drifted from the Lord, and how close he had come to throwing in the towel. He admits that his *feet were almost gone*, and that his *steps had well nigh slipped* (73:2). *Slipped* is from a Hebrew root meaning *to spill forth, to expend, or to sprawl out*. The picture is that of a wounded warrior sprawled out on the battlefield because of blood spilled and energy expended. The issue of whether he will live to fight another day remains in doubt.

He is also *envious at the foolish* (73:3). What does it say about a man when he finds himself looking up to a fool? Well, the only kind of man that can envy a fool is another fool, and an *ignorant* one at that (73:22). In his pitiful spiritual condition, he was *as a beast before God* (73:22). What this tells me is that Asaph was for a time dominated by carnal instinct rather than spiritual insight—a malady far too common among God's people. The walk of faith promotes self-denial and the doing of God's will. The world promotes self-preservation and the doing of one's own thing!

Asaph attributed his spiritual turnaround to a fresh journey *into the sanctuary of God* (73:17). What is in view here is a fresh experience of the presence of God without regard for the physical location. It's one thing to go to church, but quite another to *have church* while your *at church*! In the private recesses of his soul, Asaph met with the Lord afresh. What a difference! He now understands the *end* of the ungodly (73:17). Is it not true that the bottom line of your existence and mine is where we will be one hundred years from now? Wise indeed is the man, woman, or young person who exchanges the temporal view of life for one that takes eternity into account every step along the way!

Asaph recognizes that the pedestals of prosperity he once envied are actually *slippery places* for the wicked (73:18). *Slippery* is from a Hebrew root meaning *smooth*. It was sometimes used to describe flattering speech—words delivered so smoothly that they achieved their intended effect upon the target audience. A *slippery place* is simply a life of smoothness enjoyed by the ungodly that prosper in this world. The lifestyle they have achieved is in itself a form of self-flattery, which is idolatry. Slippery indeed is the ground where one worships at the altar of materialism!

The Psalmist further describes the end of the ungodly with words like *destruction* and *desolation*, and phrases like *utterly consumed with terrors* and *thou shalt despise their*

image (73:18-20). Asaph admonishes his readers in no uncertain terms that prosperity achieved without godliness, and apart from a life lived in the sanctuary, is a dead-end street! Trouble-free ungodliness is a myth that Satan markets to this world with great success!

In the final verses, Asaph declares, “*My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever*” (73:26). It is quite interesting that the words *portion* and *slippery* come from the same Hebrew root. In this subtle play on words, Asaph contrasts the artificial and short-lived smoothness found by the ungodly in materialism with the genuine smoothness of life he finds in God alone! This is the same smoothness that Noah found in the ark, that Joseph found in an Egyptian prison, that Daniel found in the den of lions, that Paul and Silas found in the jail at Philippi, and the apostle John found on the isle of Patmos. In short, God was enough!

Brethren, the road we travel toward the gates of heaven is often a difficult one. At times we may find ourselves taking our eyes off the prize, operating by carnal instincts, and becoming resentful and bitter. The message of Asaph is an encouraging one for such a time. It reminds us that the remedy for a life gone sour is simply taking a fresh journey into the sanctuary of God, and staying there until we are satiated with Him!

The Beltway Sniper Was Right!

The postscript of a note left by the Beltway sniper behind the Ponderosa restaurant last week issued the following warning: "Your children are not safe anywhere at any time!" In the minds of many, the message elicited dark images of high-powered .223 caliber bullets inflicting yet more lethal carnage upon an already shell-shocked community. The nation (especially those living in the killing zone) breathed a collective sigh of relief upon hearing that law enforcement officials had indeed captured the prime suspects. Now that the sniper is no longer able to make good on his warning, should we assume that the children are safe? Think again!

The warning issued by the Beltway sniper is pregnant with prophetic irony! Actually, it has been quite some time since our children have been safe! This was the reality in America long before the Beltway sniper brought down his first victim, and will likely remain so long after justice has been served upon him. America, my friend, is not a safe place for children!

The dangers that threaten our children begin in the womb. Statistics posted on the National Right to Life website reveal that in 1997 there were 306 abortions for every 1,000 live births. In that same year, more children died from abortion than Americans died in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War combined. The abortion total in the United States since 1973 is approaching 43 million. America continues to murder its unborn children at a rate of roughly 1.5 million per year.

Some unborn children who manage to survive into the third trimester of pregnancy face the possibility of partial-birth abortion. In this ruthless procedure, the abortionist pulls the baby into the birth canal (except for the head, which is deliberately kept just inside the womb), and jams scissors into the back of the baby's skull, spreading the tips of the scissors apart to enlarge the wound. After removing the scissors, a suction catheter is inserted into the skull and the baby's brains are sucked out. The collapsed head is then removed from the uterus. The chief opponents to the legal ban of this diabolical practice are none other than liberal Democrats in the Senate!

The dangers for womb survivors have only just begun. Child abuse has become epidemic! The Journal of the American Medical Association states that deaths due to child abuse are probably underestimated by two-thirds. Records show that from 1985 to 1996, 2,973 American children younger than 11 died as a result of abuse. Researchers opine that the true figure could have been as high as 9,467. Abduction is another form of abuse. In 2001, the total number of missing children reported to the police and entered into the FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) approached 725,000. According to the NCMEC Online Victimization report, America's children are now reported missing at the rate of 750,000 per year, 62,500 per month, 14,423, per week, 2,054 per day, and 85 per hour (or 3 children every 2 minutes).

The dangers for children continue with entry into the public school system. At kindergarten level and beyond, our kids are routinely hammered with the dogmas of

humanism and homosexuality. Godless evolution is taught as scientific fact. Homosexual wickedness is lauded as a wholesome and alternative lifestyle deserving of toleration. Thirty years ago, the propagation of these lies was dependent upon sympathetic teachers, who verbally indoctrinated the minds of children. Now they masquerade as truth in the printed pages of grade school textbooks.

What shall we say about child pornography, a tentacle of the Gay Rights movement? The U.S. Customs Service estimates that there are more than 100,000 websites worldwide that offer child pornography. ProtectKids.com reports that one in five children who use computer chatrooms have been approached over the Internet by pedophiles; and that nine out of ten children between the ages of 8 and 16 have viewed pornography on the Internet.

Brethren, can there be any doubt about the dangers that America's children face? One thing is certain! Parents have much more to fear from a corrupt American culture than .223 caliber bullets. Jesus told His disciples, "*Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God*" (Mark 10:14). Jesus was displeased when He spoke these words to his disciples, because they had treated the little children with indifference and disregard. Surely God is displeased with America for imposing the political correctness of its pagan culture upon them! The Beltway sniper was right! Our children are not safe anywhere at any time!

Back to Our Collective Prayer Roots

The early Church was endued with supernatural power to deal with the practical issues of kingdom expansion and the exigencies that went along with it. One of its key pre-Pentecostal activities was a prolonged engagement in collective prayer. Within the ten-day window between the Ascension and Pentecost, we are told that the disciples *went up into an upper room, and abode* there. The scripture further states, “*These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren*” (Acts 1:14).

This collective prayer meeting was in obedience to our Lord's command to *tarry in the city of Jerusalem, until they were endued with power from on high* (Luke 24:49). Obedience in prayer set the stage for the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Ghost. In my understanding, Pentecost was a one-time for all time event that made the Church the full-fledged body of Christ. But it also made the fulness of the Spirit her permanent birthright, so that it might be said of every local church since that time that “*they were all filled with the Holy Ghost*” (2:4). Thus it is worth our efforts to examine briefly the various aspects of this collective prayer meeting that led to the outpouring of God's power upon every one in attendance.

The first aspect was unity in diversity. The phrase *with one accord* speaks of single-mindedness. They may have held differing opinions about many aspects of life, but were in total agreement about the overriding need of God's grace and power for kingdom work. They prayed as one! I have observed that business team members routinely set aside personal opinions for the greater goals of profitability and customer satisfaction. Should church members do less in the prosecution of spiritual war?

The words *these all* refers to the eleven apostles (1:13) along with the women, Mary, and Jesus' brethren. What we see is a diverse collection of individuals whose common bond was absolute allegiance to Christ and total dependence upon the grace of God. At the foot of His Cross, Jesus established a level ground and common footing for all sinners! There were no insiders, nor outsiders, nor first-class or second-class saints! I cannot imagine two people with less in common than Mary and Matthew. Yet these two individuals were found commingling their hearts in prayer as a testimony to the transcendent power of the gospel!

The second aspect was tenacity. The verb *continued* is from the Greek **proskartereo**, meaning *to be strong toward* or *to exert strength toward* (someone or something). It is a present participle, signifying a continuous and unswerving commitment to the objective. Why were they so tenacious in prayer? Our Lord's promise of power for the waiting! The promises of God are always the catalyst behind spiritual consistency and persistency! The fact that there is never any quit in God means that there should never be any quit in us!

Moreover, a continuation in prayer spilled over into a continuance in doctrine (2:42) as well as attendance (2:46). What was true for the one-hundred twenty souls in the upper room became standard practice for the *three-thousand souls* saved at Pentecost (2:41)

and *about five-thousand men* who were saved as a result of a temple preaching service (3:11, 4:4). Is tenacity in prayer a standard practice in your church?

The third aspect was a sense of urgency. The phrase *prayer and supplication* is instructive. *Prayer* suggests the *worth* of God as the object of our prayers. *Supplication* suggests the wealth of God as the infinite resource for our needs, including humility on our part as supplicants. The apostolic band had an urgent need for supernatural power, and God was the sole resource for acquiring it.

The Bible is replete with examples of supplicatory prayer. Samuel was given to barren Hannah through supplication. In the case of Samson, he reckoned that a fresh anointing of God's power in death was better than a life of bondage without it. God honored the urgency in both of their requests!

Brethren, it's election season once again with all of the customary burning questions. Who will win this or that congressional race? Which political party will control the House and Senate, or hold the majority of governorships? But since the spiritual condition of the Church is a far weightier matter than the political landscape, the burning question for believers ought to be, What will it take to drive the Church back to its collective prayer roots?

The Divine Counsellor

The emergence of the consultant as a major player in the way corporate America conducts its affairs has had a significant impact upon the business climate. The consultant is the expert brought in to perform an objective analysis of the current business model, to identify areas of weakness, and to provide recommendations for streamlining workflows and improving the financial bottom line. Once the consultant has delivered the analysis, the company decides whether it will implement all, some, or none of the recommendations. In most cases, it comes down to the degree of trust! In other words, the greater the belief in the consultant's ability to deliver a flawless analysis, the greater is the likelihood that the company will act upon the recommendations. But there are no guarantees! No amount of faith or its lack can protect a corporation if it takes action based upon bad advice or refuses to act when given good advice!

I wonder how often we as believers look upon the Lord Jesus as a consultant? Did not Isaiah the prophet set forth *Counsellor* as one of the names by which He would be called? (Isaiah 9:6). The Hebrew word comes from a root that means *to advise* with the reflexive ideas of *deliberation* and *resolution*. In other words, the counsellor dispenses advice only after he has fully deliberated over every detail in the situation and concluded that the solution is built into the advice given.

In his commentary on Isaiah, J. A. Alexander points out that the word "never means one who asks but always one who *gives advice*, and more especially a public counsellor or minister of state" (The Prophecies of Isaiah, p. 204). Thus the apostle Paul could ask, "*For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counsellor?*" (Romans 11:34), and "*For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him?*" (1 Corinthians 2:16). The Lord Jesus Christ is the consultant par excellence. We may be certain that His advice is flawless because it issues forth from infinite resources and promotes the spiritual health of all who embrace it!

A practical understanding of His role as Counsellor may be garnered from the Four Gospels. In the accounts written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we find that advice was solicited from Jesus on numerous occasions. First, consider Nicodemus. We do not know the exact motivation behind his after-hours visit with Jesus (John 3:1-21). But we do know that mention of being *born again* as a requisite for kingdom entry triggered the question, "*How can these things be?*" (3:9), giving Jesus the Counsellor an opportunity to advise the Jewish leader regarding the path to spiritual life and salvation through a simple look of faith! The scripture appears to indicate that Nicodemus finally embraced the advice, and became a disciple indeed (John 7:50-51; 19:39).

Secondly, consider those nine disciples whose failure to cast out a dumb and deaf spirit had created public embarrassment for them as well as deep frustration for a desperate father (Mark 9:14-29). In the middle of the fiasco, Jesus came upon the scene, displayed His power and compassion by healing the son, and got the disciples off the hook. In the closed-door session that followed, the disciples asked, "*Why could not we cast him out?*" (9:28). The analysis given by Jesus the Counsellor identified the problem as a neglect of

prayer and a lack of spiritual discipline (fasting). The disciples no doubt took this as a form of criticism and rebuke, but also as the solution built into the counsel given.

Thirdly, consider Pilate. He was unable to find any fault in the Lord Jesus, but succumbed to the political and public pressures of the moment, and refused to defend the innocent God-Man in his courtroom (John 18:28-40). In his interrogation, Pilate asked five questions. Jesus the Counsellor gave responses to the first four, in which He affirmed His kingship, the otherworldly nature of His kingdom, and truth as its centerpiece. The very embodiment of truth stood before Pilate. Yet in his spiritual ignorance he proceeded to ask the final question, "*What is truth?*" (18:38). Silence! No response! Pilate then exited the judgment hall either because he had no interest in further responses, or because he perceived that Jesus had nothing more to say on the matter. In either case, Pilate committed the spiritual blunder of his life!

Brethren, long before corporate America discovered the value of the consultant, Jesus the Divine Counsellor was providing flawless analysis, advice, and solutions for the spiritually needy. It is difficult to swallow at times, but always provides power and victory for the swallowing! The one sobering reality afforded to us by Pilate is that counsel rejected may lead to the cessation of further counsel. There is no peril so great as asking Jesus questions and receiving no answers!

Cultivating the Capacity for Tears

It may be stated with certitude that all weeping is either the direct or indirect result of sin. We may also affirm that weeping is not (in and of itself) a sinful act. Men, women, and young people weep for any number of reasons—death and disappointment being chief among them. Through the course of a lifetime all of us will do our share of weeping. The fact is that life lived within the context of a sin-smitten environment is subject to a lot of pain and suffering. In seasons of physical, emotional, and spiritual trauma, weeping is often the expectation rather than the exception. We must keep in mind, however, that it is possible for a godly individual to shed a river of tears without the first trace of transgression.

The case for these assertions rests upon the Lord Jesus Christ. He was God Almighty, yet robed Himself in human flesh so that He might be touched with the feelings of our infirmities. He was neither a sinner nor sinful, but found Himself in dire situations that evoked strong emotions with tears. The Gospels reveal two occasions where Jesus wept. The first is Jesus visiting the tomb of the beloved Lazarus. The second is Jesus approaching the city of Jerusalem riding upon a donkey. In his book [A Harmony of the Gospels](#), A. T. Robertson sets the chronology with the raising of Lazarus taking place a short time before the entry into Jerusalem. Both events took place in the latter days of His ministry, and speak volumes about the weeping of God in shoe leather.

In the first instance, John tells us that “*Jesus wept*” as he came to the burial place of Lazarus (John 11:35). The verb *wept* is from the Greek **δακρῦο**, meaning *to shed tears*. It is used only here in the NT. In the second instance, Luke uses the more common word for weeping. It is the Greek **κλαίω**, meaning *to cry aloud* as an expression of grief. It is most often used to depict man’s response to death. But there was no wailing out loud done by Jesus at Lazarus’ tomb. We know from the preceding verses that God had designed the delay in getting back to Bethany. The death of Lazarus, though temporarily painful, set the stage for the display of omnipotent power and the glory of God. These were the tears of the Sovereign One Who was prepared to demonstrate His mastery over death itself!

Why did Jesus shed these tears? Was it due to the loss of an intimate friend? Was it empathy for the pain that death had imposed upon those whom He loved? Was it weak faith unable to pass beyond belief in His preventive power to envision and embrace His corrective power over death itself? Did the burial scene serve as a poignant reminder of sin’s ruinous effects upon His creative work? Could it be He knew that the miracle of raising the dead would be lost on many of the eyewitnesses? Perhaps it was all of the above. The fact is God Incarnate shed tears! There is no scripture to suggest that Jesus lost that capacity with His glorified body!

In the second instance, Luke tells us that “*when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it*” (Luke 19:41). At this juncture, Jesus cries and wails aloud as an expression of grief over Israel’s rejection of Him as Messiah. It is the God-Man’s response to Israel’s spiritual darkness and captivity to sin—the very maladies from which He came to save them. The same Sovereign One Who raised Lazarus from the grave

was unable to master the unbelief of Israel or avoid the pain and suffering inflicted upon Him by an elect nation that rejected Him. A proper view of God's sovereignty takes into account His prerogative and ability to impose limitations upon himself regarding what He will and will not do. It is abundantly clear in scripture that Jesus was limited by the unbelief of man, and allowed it to be so by sovereign disposition (Mark 6:5-6). It is equally clear that Jesus will in no wise cast out those who come unto God by Him (John 6:37).

Brethren, the capacity of Jesus for weeping, as the sinless Son of God, should cause each of us to consider our own capacity for tears. None of us will ever stand at a graveside and shed tears in the exact manner that Jesus shed them. But what about cultivating the capacity to weep over those who stand in spiritual jeopardy every hour because of unbelief?

It is reasonable to conclude that the more one grows in grace, and the more intimate one becomes with Jesus, the more likely he or she is to grieve and weep with Him over the spiritual needs of others. Moreover, if the Sovereign One is pleased to revisit America with a spiritual awakening through His local churches, we can be certain that it will be sown in tears!

The Old Ways of Thanksgiving and Praise

The return of the Jewish remnant from captivity in Babylon marked the beginning of a massive restoration project. God raised up two key spiritual leaders for this vast undertaking. Ezra the priest was responsible for inculcating the truth of scripture. Nehemiah the governor provided oversight for the building projects. Under their skillful leadership, meaningful worship was restored and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt. God had indeed granted grace and a little reviving to Israel in all that they were able to accomplish.

Included in the restoration of public worship was the Levite-led music ministry. Nehemiah called attention to its importance by making the following historical reference: “*For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chief of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving unto God*” (Nehemiah 12:46). I believe this citation is extremely significant. First, it affirms that Ezra and Nehemiah had no desire to restore the same worship conditions that prevailed prior to the captivity. Secondly, it strongly suggests that the regular rendering of praise and thanksgiving to God had become a lost art in Israel, and was likely a contributing factor in God’s chastening. But what model would they use? How far back in time would they have to go to find a God-pleasing pattern of worship? How about 560 years!

Both David and Asaph were gifted musicians through whom God inspired the Psalms—the songbook of Israel. Public worship in those *days of old* included designated singers and their directors whose primary contribution to worship was praise and thanksgiving unto God! At no time were praise and thanksgiving to be neglected or omitted! This was the pattern of choice in the restoration! So Nehemiah adds the following organizational detail: “*And Mattaniah the son of Micha, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, was the principal to begin the thanksgiving in prayer: and Bakbukiah the second among his brethren, and Abda the son of Jeduthun*” (11:17).

Mattaniah’s name means *gift of Jehovah*, a rather fitting moniker since thanksgiving in prayer is based primarily upon the Lord’s gifts—the Lord Himself being the Greatest Gift! He was *the principal*, meaning he was the headman, the first in charge, with respect to the offering of thanksgiving in prayer. The music ministry also provided for backups in the event Mattaniah could not fulfill his responsibility. Bakbukiah (along with Abda) were *second* in command. *Second* means *duplicate* (i.e., an exact copy). They were different men with an identical task! Job One for the chief singer and his backups was bringing thanksgiving and praise to the forefront at the outset of every public worship event!

Brethren, there is no way to overstate the primacy and value of thanksgiving and praise in the life of the believer and the local church. The ministry of Mattaniah in the post-captivity restoration of Israel confirms its importance. Perhaps one of the great encouragements to be drawn from Ezra and Nehemiah as they restored the music ministry in Israel is the validity that was attached to the old way of doing things! What if God’s men could convince a worldly, culture-driven church that going centuries back in time to rediscover God-honored patterns of worship would indeed constitute a great step

forward in our spiritual journey? In any case, one thing is certain! The old ways of praise and thanksgiving are the proven ways for securing the blessing and favor of God!

The Father of Faith with Feet of Clay

Abraham was the first patriarch of Israel and the spiritual progenitor of all who have been justified by faith. The scriptures also reveal that Abraham had feet of clay, and was as vulnerable to fleshly devices as any other man. In Genesis 20:1-18, we find Abraham engaged in a real life situation involving genuine passions. Abraham had journeyed toward the south country, and came to Gerar, where he sojourned (20:1). He lied to king Abimelech regarding his wife Sarah. She was his wife and half-sister, but was represented as a full sister in order to avoid being slain by the king for his wife (20:11). Upon hearing that Sarah's relationship with Abraham was strictly biological and not familial, Abimelech took Sarah, placing himself and his household in serious jeopardy before God (20:2-3).

God intervened in a dream, and set Abimelech on the proper course of action to resolve the issue (20:3-7). Abraham was forced to confess his faithless subterfuge in what surely must have been an embarrassing situation (20:11-13). Afterward he functioned as a true prophet in praying for Abimelech and his household (20:17-18). The result was a blessing for the house of Abimelech (20:18), and a promised conception for Sarah (21:2). This episode in the life of Abraham has a number of important spiritual lessons for us. Here are three.

- (1) The danger of false assumptions. Abraham had wrongly assumed that "*the fear of God is not in this place*" (20:11). His assumption bordered on arrogance. It was an insult to Abimelech and an affront to God. The fact that God had placed a special call upon Abraham did not preclude Him from revealing Himself to others and establishing relationships with them. Abraham was oblivious to this truth. His false assumption led him into deception. King Abimelech was a man who feared God, and it is clear from the context that this was not the first time that God and Abimelech had exchanged dialogue. We must always remember that God is free to work where He wills, and is under no obligation to make all of His ways known to us!
- (2) The value of integrity. Integrity of heart is a deep determination to do the right thing! Integrity enables one to behave with his or her passions under control. Abimelech was smitten with the beauty of Sarah. Based on the information given to him, he took a course of action that was honorable and acceptable. When confronted by God, he argued, "*In the integrity of my heart and the innocency of my hands have I done this*" (20:5). God responded by validating his claim to integrity, and affirming "*I also withheld thee from sinning against me*" because his integrity was intact (20:6).

We must learn from Abimelech that having integrity in the time of decision is more vital than having information. God can work with the integrity of our hearts to protect us from bad information. But no amount of good information can protect us from a devious heart that lacks integrity!
- (3) The method of God in reprovng His own. In the Biblical record, Abimelech was the only individual to whom God spoke. Moreover, he is the only one who spoke directly to God. He was also God's vehicle for reprovng both Abraham and Sarah. Here is

Abraham's reproof: "*What has thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done?*" (20:9). The severity of this rebuke is self-explanatory! He is guilty as charged! Now here is Sarah's reproof: "*Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other*" (20:16).

The phrase *thy brother* is a subtle reminder of her complicity in the deception (20:5). In referring to Abraham as *a covering of the eyes*, Abimelech reproves her for blind and reckless loyalty to her husband. In other words, no amount of loyalty to a mate can excuse deception. Because Abimelech had kept his own integrity intact, he was in a position to reprove a wife who had compromised hers. We learn from Sarah that integrity should always trump loyalty in any situation where the two are in conflict!

Brethren, it is true that Abraham, the father of the faithful, had feet of clay. May God enable us to benefit from his experience in matters pertaining to our assumptions and the integrity of our hearts, and to understand that a reproof delivered by a brother or sister in Christ might well be a rebuke delivered in God's stead.

The Offense of the Cross

Are you ready for another dose of religious sensitivity medicine? The Christmas season is in full swing, which means that the doctors of cultural relativism are out in full force once again to impose their virulent agenda upon the American public. The goal? Rid the cultural landscape of all religious content that is offensive or exclusivist in nature! In the minds of many, the gospel of Jesus Christ is an epidemic disease that must be eradicated if America is ever to become a homogenous and harmonious society. Its detractors allege that the Christian message is guilty on both counts—offensive to the multi-faceted religious tastes of mankind, and exclusive of any and all alternative messages of hope—and must therefore be subdued. The result is a predictable amalgamation of legal actions to hinder or halt public displays of Christian truth.

In response to the indictments of offensive content and an exclusivist message, the Christian must plead guilty as charged! The gospel is by nature offensive. At its core is the Cross of Christ, upon which God Incarnate suffered and died for sinners, accomplishing both God-ward and man-ward that which was impossible for sinful man to accomplish on his own. Paul and Peter both cite Isaiah 8:14 in referring to Jesus Christ as a *stone of stumbling* and a *rock of offense* (Romans 9:33; I Peter 2:8). The Greek word for *offense* is **skandalon** (Eng. 'scandal'). In its common usage, it referred to the stick used to prop up a trap. In gospel terms, it signifies a voluntary captivity to Christ that marks the death of ego and the self-life. The gospel that requires a sinner to cast him- or herself upon the mercy of God for forgiveness and life is a difficult pill to swallow!

The Jews, who had come to trust in the law of God rather than the God of the law, were offended by the gospel for that very reason. Salvation is not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to the mercy of God found in the Lord Jesus Christ (Titus 3:5). The apostle Paul was persecuted by the Jews for preaching the gospel of grace, and reminded the Galatians that adding anything to grace through faith as a basis for salvation (i.e., justification) would cause *the offense of the Cross* to cease (Galatians 5:11).

We are living in a generation of scoffers who would love nothing more than to eliminate offensiveness from the religious discourse in America, and make the religious and non-religious alike feel better about themselves. Well, that can be done easily enough, and has been done in many religious and societal circles. Religion in the Biblical sense, however, has more to do with making men *better* than with making them *feel better*. No lost sinner is bettered by a "feel good" gospel that leaves him or her dead in trespasses and sins!

The offense of the Cross is mandatory for another reason. As Paul expressed it, Jesus our Lord was "*delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification*" (Romans 4:25). The dark backdrop against which the gospel shines is the truth that sinners have offended God! If I am offended by a message of blood sacrifice that requires that I abandon myself to God's mercy for salvation, then it is a minor consideration when compared to the major stench in the nostrils of God that my offenses against His holiness and righteousness have caused! Christ suffered and died for *our*

offenses! A politically correct and morally corrupt world that is obsessed with the avoidance of offense toward others has virtually obliterated the truth that a thrice holy God stands offended by us! The remedy for our offenses against God is in the offense of the Cross!

The gospel is also by nature exclusivist. Jesus declared, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*" (John 14:6). Peter affirmed this truth, saying, "*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). No possibility of salvation exists in the traditions of Judaism, the tenets of Islam, the New Age movement, or in any other system of religious or philosophical thought that circumvents the offense of the Cross. Unregenerate men mock the God of scripture for being so narrow and exclusivist when in reality they ought to magnify Him for His grace in providing a way of salvation when He was under no obligation whatsoever to do so!

Brethren, may the Christmas season bring rejoicing to our hearts as we reflect afresh upon the reason for the season. God's good will toward men is His gracious response to our bad will toward Him! May we also determine that, as long as the Lord Jesus grants us breath to declare it, the offense of the Cross shall never cease! Blessed are they who not offended in Him, knowing that the offense of His Cross is the remedy for our offenses!

"Lovest Thou Me More Than These?"

Dawn was breaking across the Tiberian Sea some fifty miles north of Jerusalem. In a fishing vessel three hundred feet from shore were seven disciples who had zero results to show for a night of fishing. A solitary figure on shore, after confirming the fruitlessness of their venture, issued a command to cast the net on the right side of the ship. They complied, and one hundred fifty-three fish were enclosed therein. John recognized immediately that it was the Lord, Who afterward served them an impeccable country breakfast consisting of fish and bread cooked on an open fire. After they had dined, Jesus directed His attention toward Peter, asking him that most profound question, "*Lovest thou me more than these?*" (John 21:1-19).

Let us briefly consider the background of this excursion. At sunrise on resurrection day, the women who came to the sepulcher were met by an angel, who said, "*Go...tell his disciples that...he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him*" (Matthew 28:7). Mark cites the same angelic message, in which *Peter* is mentioned specifically (Mark 16:7). As the women were in route to deliver the message, Jesus met them to confirm the same instruction, saying, "*Go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me*" (Matthew 28:10).

In comparing the Galilee instruction with the fishing narrative in John, three conclusions may be drawn. First, these seven disciples had obeyed the Lord's instruction to go north into Galilee with the expectation of meeting Jesus there. Secondly, there were at least four disciples who did not make the trip, probably because of unbelief. The reason I count four is an assumption that the phrases *the disciples* and *my brethren*, as used by the angel and Jesus respectively, referred to the Twelve minus Judas. If those phrases were intended to include more than the eleven, then what we have is unbelief and disobedience on a broader scale. Thirdly, Peter's declaration "*I go a fishing*" (21:3) was issued in Galilee, not Jerusalem. My sense is that Peter, after a season of premeditation prior to seeing Jesus, had decided to brush up on his angling skills in anticipation of resuming his fishing career.

Therefore the question "*Lovest thou me more than these?*" must have had a poignant impact upon Peter! *Lovest* is from the Greek **agapao**, signifying sacrificial love. When Jesus said *these*, I believe He gestured toward the fish that were still within the net on the shore. The comparative *more than* gave Peter's love for Christ the benefit of the doubt, but questioned the degree to which it would influence his life relative to other interests; namely, fishing! After all, he had just spent twelve dark hours in pursuit of fish when days earlier he was unable to spend one hour in the prayerful pursuit of spiritual power during the darkest hours of His Lord's ministry!

In every response, Peter used the Greek word **phileo** to affirm his love for Jesus (21:15-17). It refers to an affectionate familial love, such as one might have for a brother. Peter apparently had determined that he would never again climb out on the limb of sacrificial or heroic predictions! Once was enough! He was perfectly willing to affirm that he loved Jesus like a brother, but refused to commit to a level of love that was self-sacrificial in nature. Jesus, however, went on to predict that Peter would indeed make the ultimate

sacrifice of love in his service for the Lord, and would glorify God in the process (21:18-19).

So why was Jesus so confident that Peter would succeed in the future where he had failed in the past? The answer is two-fold: the penitence that Peter had endured, and the Pentecost that he would soon enjoy! The bitter weeping that followed his denial of Jesus had no doubt wrought in him a fresh sense of brokenness and humility (Luke 22:62). Ten days of prayer after the Ascension set the stage for Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon Peter and the others like a mighty rushing wind, filling them with power to proclaim the Gospel without fear of man or regard for the consequences!

Brethren, as we approach another Christmas and the New Year beyond it, the time is right for each of us to consider whether we are engaged in any life pursuit for which we are spending more of ourselves than we are for those things that pertain to the Lord Jesus and His kingdom. Moreover, we should seek the Lord daily for fresh infusions of humility and power to face the spiritual challenges of the coming year, so that we might answer "Yes, Lord!" when He asks "*Lovest thou me more than these?*"

It's All about Emmanuel

Matthew's Gospel contains the classic text regarding the birth of Jesus Christ (1:18-25). The inspired narrative provided to us by the former tax collector is succinct, straightforward, and supercharged with critical data that is both prophetic and supernatural in nature. In the first seventeen verses, Matthew sets forth the genealogical credentials that establish Jesus' indisputable claim to the throne of David and His historical identity as the promised seed of Abraham. Since Matthew's target audience is primarily Jewish, he presents Jesus as the complete Messiah—Israel's Sovereign King and Sinless Prophet who, by virtue of His vicarious death and resurrection, is the High Priest for every one who believes.

There are three prominent themes that emerge effortlessly from our text. The first is the purity of an engagement. In describing the manner in which Jesus Christ was born, Matthew employs three different perspectives to affirm the sexual purity of Joseph and Mary. He states that the Holy Ghost impregnated her "*before they came together*" in physical union (1:18). He cites the prophet Isaiah, who predicted "*a virgin shall be with child*" (1:23). Following the angelic encounter, he reminds us that Joseph "*knew her not*" until after the birth of Jesus had taken place (1:25). While most Christmas missives are weighted toward the virginity of Mary, the sexual purity of the relationship is equally attributable to Joseph.

Matthew described Joseph as a "*just*" man (1:19). In the words of Jesus spoken thirty years later, he was one who was hungry and thirsty for righteousness (5:6). The context for this reference has to do with his reluctance to cause Mary any public embarrassment. In the larger context of life, it may be said that Joseph was predisposed to do right, which would have included conformity to the sexual guidelines set forth in the law of God. Joseph was a just man whose fiancée was a just woman. Both were sexually pure! A strong argument can be made that a direct link exists between sexual purity and spiritual privilege!

The second is the sanctity of a conception. The phrase "*of the Holy Ghost*" teaches us that God Himself impregnated Mary (1:18, 20). The Spirit of God instigated the pregnancy, and planted the Divine seed in her womb. Joseph was an innocent bystander. Again, Isaiah predicted, "*Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son...*" (Isaiah 7:14). Did you notice the two-fold nature of the sign? The woman would both conceive and give birth as a virgin! In order to be correct theologically, every doctrinal creed written for recitation should state, "I believe in the virgin conception and virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ!"

The third is the royalty of a Son. *Emmanuel* is his name (1:23). God with us! He is the royalty of heaven come down to endure the rigors of a sin-smitten earth out of love for His fallen creatures. Since there is no Saviour except Jehovah, nor salvation in any other entity, Jesus must be Jehovah in the flesh, for "*he shall save his people from their sins*" (1:21). The name JESUS is synonymous with deliverance, and the salvation of *his people* is the stated mission of the God-Man! Who are His people? Well, some say that *his people* in this context is a reference to the elect nation of Israel. Others interpret it as

a reference to the elect who were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Both of these views have merit. In the final analysis, it is a reference to believers. If someone were to ask me, "Am I one of his people? Am I one of the elect?", my rejoinder would simply be, "Have you believed on the Lord Jesus Christ?" The answer to that question would resolve the issue raised by the first two!

The message of Christmas is timeless in its veracity and limitless in its applicability! The need for sexual purity as a requisite for spiritual power and privilege has never been more acute than it is in America today! I am convinced that sexual impurity is the second greatest danger faced by the Church and our nation in this hour! The greatest threat is the vicious and relentless attacks upon the Lord Jesus that would make Him less than God in the minds of the masses!

If Jesus is neither God Almighty nor Jehovah Incarnate, then bowing the knee to Him constitutes the most repugnant form of false worship and idolatry known to mankind! But Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us! He is eternal God robbed in humanity! He is the virgin-conceived and virgin-born Son of the Living God, the King of kings and Lord of lords! He is worthy of the highest worship and the holiest walk! Christmas, my friend, is all about Emmanuel!

Prayer and Its Proper Exercise

Who could fault James and John, the sons of Zebedee, for desiring a prominent position in the kingdom of their Lord? They knew from its inception on the banks of the river Jordan that the ministry of Jesus was something special. The passage of time had further confirmed that conviction. I suppose most of us would likewise have considered ourselves to be in the privileged inner circle of consorts if we had been made privy to His transfiguration while others were excluded. So as Jesus and the disciples worked their way south toward Jerusalem, the two brothers came to Jesus with a bold request, saying, "*Master, we would that thou shouldst do for us whatsoever we shall desire*" (Mark 10:35).

We learn from the ensuing discourse that James and John had approached the Lord from a self-serving perspective (10:38-45). Their petition evoked the displeasure of the other ten who overheard it. After all, what were they, chopped liver? Jesus proceeded to teach them that the sine qua non of His kingdom was the spirit of servitude rather than the quest for personal attainments. The kingdom model would exemplify leadership through personal humility rather than the exercise of lordship through a political hierarchy (10:42-44). Jesus set forth Himself as the prime example of these principles, inasmuch as "*the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many*" (10:45).

A few observations are in order. The first is our Lord's initial response to the request. He replied, "*What would ye that I should do for you?*" (10:36). They had essentially asked Him for a blank check, as if they were setting Him up to honor their selfish desires by securing a verbal commitment for something more general in nature. The ploy was nothing short of an attempt at entrapment, and had the same foul odor as those techniques employed by the scribes to trip Him up on matters of the law.

The Lord was no doubt troubled by the fact that these two brothers, in whom He had invested three years of painstaking labor, would replicate the tactics of His enemies even though their motives may have been quite different. But the Lord Jesus—ever gracious, benevolent, and longsuffering with His own—refused to cut them off at the knees, but rather afforded them an audience to make known the specifics of their request.

The second is the inseparable connection between glory and suffering. In the preceding verses, Mark tells us that Jesus had engaged them in serious dialogue concerning what was about to happen in Jerusalem. He would be condemned to death, mocked, scourged, spit upon, and killed, followed by a resurrection on the third day (10:32-34). Jesus would come into His glory via the path of suffering. What the disciples failed to realize is that glory shared is the fruit of suffering shared. So the reply "*Ye know not what ye ask...*" was intended to identify this blind spot in their thinking (10:38). He asked whether they could endure a similar baptism of suffering, and they affirmed, "*We can*" (10:39). Jesus went a step further to assure them that they would indeed experience the same baptism of suffering, but that the positions they had requested were not His to give. These would *be given to them for whom it is prepared* (10:39-40).

The advantage of hindsight prompts an intriguing challenge for you and me. What if we were to rephrase the bold request of James and John so that it reflected a proper motivation? Such a request might sound like this: *“Lord Jesus, I would that thou shouldest do for me whatsoever I shall desire that is agreeable with your will and good pleasure!”* The joy of joys would be to hear Him say, *“What would ye that I should do for you?”* which would constitute a blank check for all things within the stated parameters of agreeability! In fact, one of these two brothers was later inspired to give us exactly that formula. He wrote, *“And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight”* (I John 3:22). Again, *“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him”* (I John 5:14-15).

Brethren, the New Year that lies before us will serve up a smorgasbord of spiritual challenges. None of these will be more important than prayer and its proper exercise! Sometimes it's difficult to sift through our motivations, but we should nevertheless come boldly and regularly to the throne of grace! If we are motivationally amiss in our petitions, we can be assured that our gracious and longsuffering Lord Jesus will give us an audience, help us to work through our frailties, and lead us into those avenues of desire that are agreeable to His will and good pleasure! Amen!