

Truth On Fire

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Preparation of the Heart

The NFL playoffs are officially underway with all the prognostications that typically accompany this annual event. The pigskin gurus will be providing football junkies with a lot of “expert” opinion about team talent, team stats, player profiles, past performances against common opponents, how teams stack up against each other, etc. But as we all know, talent alone (that is, being the *best* team on the field by reason of pedigrees and statistics) is seldom the critical factor in winning or losing a Super Bowl. The team that wins the big one is—more often than not—the *best-prepared* team!

The same is true for us as believers, especially as we embark upon a new year. Those who flourish in their service for Christ will be those who best prepare themselves to do so. The preparation of which we speak is a preparation of the heart to seek the Lord. Our past accomplishments and failures are now in the rear-view mirror of our lives, and can neither help nor hurt us going forward. Moreover, spiritual gifts tethered to ill- or non-prepared hearts have never won a spiritual battle! In 2004, as in every year that has preceded it since creation, godliness—not giftedness—will be the critical factor! And godliness is achievable only when a believer prepares his or her heart to seek the Lord.

Samuel the prophet spoke to Israel of its importance: “*If ye do return unto the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only; and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines*” (1 Sam. 7:3). It was one of the darkest hours in Israel's history. The Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant, and killed thirty-four thousand Israelis in the process (4:2-11).

They held the Ark for seven months, but arranged for its return after the Lord plagued them. The Lord then smote another fifty thousand and seventy men of Bethshemesh because they had looked into the Ark (6:19). They responded: “*Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God? And to whom shall he go up from us?*” (6:20). Once again, Israel had come to grips with holiness as the crowning attribute of their God, who had been preparing them for a spiritual awakening.

The Ark had been nearly twenty-one years removed from its resting place in Shiloh, and “*all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord*” (7:2). Against that background, Samuel delivered God's word, which was essentially a matter of the heart. The Lord required a whole-hearted return to him as evidenced by a putting away of strange gods, and a preparation of the heart with a view to service.

God's promise for compliance was deliverance; and comply they did! They put away the false gods, gathered for a day of fasting at Mizpeh, and confessed: “*We have sinned against the Lord*” (7:4-6). Samuel offered a sucking lamb as a sacrifice unto the Lord, and continued to pray for the nation (7:9). As the offering was taking place, the Philistines drew near to battle. The Lord thundered a great thunder upon the Philistines, and totally disoriented them. Israel forthwith subdued the Philistines. They did not cross Israel's borders again during Samuel's tenure.

Salvation was the fruit of preparation. The Hebrew word for *prepare* speaks of an erect posture (i.e., to stand perpendicular). It signifies fixation of the heart upon the Lord with no deviation in another direction. If this is the condition of the heart, good things happen; if not, evil things happen. Ezra the scribe was a successful reformer because he “had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it” (Ez. 7:10). But King Rehoboam “did evil, because he prepared not his heart to seek the Lord” (2 Chr. 12:14). Jehu the seer said to Jehoshaphat, king of Judah: “Nevertheless there are good things found in thee, in that thou hast taken away the groves out of the land, and hast prepared thine heart to seek God” (2 Chr. 19:3). But the high places were not taken away during his reign because “the people had not prepared their hearts” unto God (20:33).

Is not the cause-and-effect relationship clear? A preparation of the heart to seek the Lord God tends toward godliness. A lack thereof leads to manifestations of evil. It is also clear that this relationship is as true for a nation as it is for the individual. How much more would (or could) Jehoshaphat have accomplished in terms of godly reforms if the people of Israel had shared his preparation of heart? The sad reality in America today is heart-prepared pastors with non-prepared congregations; heart-prepared congregations with ill-prepared pastors; and churches where neither pastor nor people share a burning desire for God!

We can be sure that the coming year will be filled with both opportunity and opposition as the spiritual battle continues to rage. Our victories and defeats will be determined by our preparation of heart to seek the Lord or the lack thereof. So how is that spiritual posture? Are you and I fixated upon the Lord Jesus? Or have we deviated? And in our churches, may God enable us to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem!

The Playboy Philosophy Exposed

Epicureans within our nation (and around the world for that matter) recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of Playboy magazine. A liberal media that has repeatedly demonstrated a disdain for biblical morality was more than willing to aid and abet the celebration. Secularists have anointed its founder Hugh Hefner as a moral liberator who single-handedly set in motion the movement to free both male and female Americans from their sexual inhibitions. But there is a dark side to sexual promiscuity that the media seldom reports.

In an article published December 17, 2003 entitled “The Playboy philosophy at 50”, conservative columnist Cal Thomas weighed in on the celebration, and asked: “Where were the stories on venereal diseases, broken marriages and shattered lives of the women who were ‘bunnies’ and ‘playmates’ in Hefner's fantasy world?” He added: “The progeny of the Playboy philosophy—which said men did not have to limit their sex drive to their wives but could plunder whatever woman would allow them—is brokenness, depression, addiction and, in some cases, suicide. What Hefner thought would liberate has, in fact, enslaved.” He concluded with this observation: “Hefner has said he freed Americans from their uptight attitudes about sex. Given what replaced it, restraint, fidelity, character and chivalry never looked so good.” Amen to that!

The student of scripture is aware that the Playboy philosophy is much older than 50. Three thousand years ago God inspired the playboy of playboys to write the definitive analysis of the hedonistic life, and preserved it for the generations that would follow, including ours. The man is Solomon; the book is Ecclesiastes. It begins: “*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem*” (Eccles. 1:1). If there was ever a man who “had it all” as we often say, Solomon was that man! But as Jesus would later affirm, he found that life does not consist in the abundance of things that a man possesses, including unfettered access to sex. So Solomon’s recurring refrain regarding “things” *apart* from God is: “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (1:2).

In his earlier years, Solomon was the epitome of moral and spiritual virtue. God appeared to him personally on two different occasions, and endowed him with wisdom beyond the purview of mere mortals. But as he grew older, Solomon became intoxicated with power—a power he abused in amassing a sexual harem that consisted of “seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines” (1 Kings 11:3). International prowess coupled with insatiable lust proved to be a lethal mix. These idol-worshipping wives and assorted mistresses were responsible for turning his heart away from God (11:3-4). As a result, the Lord was angry with Solomon because “*he kept not that which the Lord commanded*” (11:9-10).

In the short term, Solomon’s sin cost his son Rehoboam the kingdom (11:11-13). In the long term, his sin served as a national example of what *not* to do. Some 550 years later in his rebuke of the post-exilic Jews, Nehemiah cited Solomon’s sin with these “outlandish women,” and physically manhandled some of them to get his point across (Nehemiah 13:25-26). Solomon was a great king whom God blessed in an extraordinary

manner, but failure to control his lust for women drove him and his posterity into some cavernous ditches.

Solomon the playboy had a predecessor of sorts who likewise found it well nigh impossible to resist sexual exploits with ungodly women that he found attractive. He is Samson. It began with a Philistine woman from Timnath that pleased him well, and whom he married (Judges 14:1-4). But God in his providence used this occasion for his own purposes to provoke the Philistines. Then it was a harlot in Gaza that was apparently just a one-night stand for Israel's judge (16:1-3). Again, God worked in spite of Samson's sexual promiscuity to provoke and punish the Philistines. And finally there was Delilah from the valley of Sorek, with whom he fell in love (16:4).

We can see God's champion walking deeper and deeper into the morass of undisciplined sexual desire. The ill-conceived relationship seduced him to disclose the secret of his strength, and a blinded and humiliated slave he became! Samson discovered the hard way that sweet sexual pleasures can become bitter and deadly poisons if they displease God in the process. Unfortunately, he came to his spiritual and physical senses too late!

The Playboy philosophy as a means to self-improvement is an illusion. It openly advocates disobedience to the revealed will of God, and therefore enslaves its disciples to the baser lusts. It is touted as the good life, but is in reality the pathway to spiritual (and in some cases physical) ruin. If you doubt that statement, just ask a couple of former playboys, who I suppose would give anything to take back those impulsive acts, the wasted years, and their tarnished reputations!

More of Christ

It is an election year, which means that once the Democrats have chosen their nominee, and the campaign moves into full swing, we can at some point expect to hear the familiar refrain about “the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.” The scriptures certainly instruct us to have compassion on the poor, and to provide for them when it is in our power to do so. But too often political operatives demagogue the issue as a pretext for raising taxes, funding government programs, and redistributing tax revenue.

In a recent op-ed piece entitled “Are the poor really getting poorer?” columnist Walter E. Williams offered this perspective: “Contrary to that nonsense, the fact of the matter is that some of the rich are getting poorer, and many of the poorer are getting richer.” In a bevy of supporting statistics he cited a recent Census Bureau report stating that 35 million Americans are now living in poverty, but added: “While ‘poor’ Americans don’t live in opulence, they are surely not poor either by international or historical standards in our own country. I’m betting if God condemned an unborn spirit to a lifetime of poverty but left him free to choose the country in which to be poor, he’d choose the United States.” That’s a pretty good bet! Most of us understand that the poverty level set by our government has no relationship whatsoever to real poverty in third-world countries.

A biblical survey of its statements about the rich and poor would support the following perspective: Being poor may not be such a bad thing, and being rich may not be such a good thing. In fact, the grace of God toward sinners is often found in places where poverty abounds. No verse of scripture affirms that truth more than 2 Cor. 8:9: “*For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.*” The creator of our universe and owner of all its intrinsic wealth—including the glories of heaven itself—set it all aside and assumed a position of abject poverty in order to redeem its most valuable commodity—the lost souls of humanity! What was good for Jesus was apparently good enough for Paul, for he described his apostolic ministry in these words: “*As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things*” (6:10).

The poor of Israel represented the key target audience for Jesus during his ministry. In the synagogue on a Sabbath day in Nazareth, Jesus stood and read these words from Isa. 61:1: “*The Spirit of the Lord...hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor*” (Lk. 4:18). When a jailed and soon-to-be-beheaded John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus to authenticate his Messianic mission, Jesus reaffirmed Isaiah’s signpost: “*To the poor the gospel is preached*” (7:22). And throughout our Lord’s ministry, it was “the common people” that “heard him gladly” (Mk.12:37). As we can see, being among the poor or common folk in Israel during the ministry of Christ was not such a bad thing. Thousands of poor folk were endowed with spiritual riches beyond their wildest dreams by embracing the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!

The rich of this world are often plagued with a spirit of self-sufficiency born of covetousness that makes faith in the Lord Jesus (as an exercise in humble dependence) well nigh impossible. Perhaps the biblical passage that best illustrates that truth is Luke 18:18-25. A certain rich ruler approached Jesus with the query, “Good Master, what shall

I do to inherit eternal life?" Since only God himself is good, Jesus questioned whether the ruler's use of the word "good" in addressing him was coupled with an awareness that he was in the very presence of God. And what "things" in this world constitute greater riches than the One who created those things by the word of his power? This is absolutely critical, because the soon-to-be-issued command of "come, follow me" (where "me" represents the greatest of all treasures) would likely have been obeyed if its recipient had properly esteemed the Christ who issued it. Esteeming the reproach of Christ to be greater riches than the treasures in Egypt is exactly what led Moses to forsake Pharaoh's palaces (Heb. 11:26).

The ruler arrived at no such estimation of Christ, and walked away both "very rich" and "very sorrowful." As unseemly as it may appear, riches and sorrow often go hand-in-hand. In fact, the scripture instructs us that those who are driven by the love of money and a desire to be rich will fall into temptations, snares, foolish and hurtful lusts, destruction and perdition. Men who covet after riches and money err from the faith, and as a result pierce themselves through with many sorrows (1 Tim. 6:9-10). This reality is all the more reason to keep a vigil on our hearts where the treasures of this earth are concerned.

Yes, the campaign rhetoric about the richest and poorest among us is about to heat up again with politicians of every stripe promising more of this or that to their poorer constituents at the expense of the rich. But we believers understand that, in spiritual terms, being poor can be advantageous while being rich can be a severe handicap. For us, it is not more of this or that that is needed, but rather more of Christ!

The Greatest of Associations

The First Amendment to the Constitution reads as follows: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." At one time or another, every court in the American judicial system—from local jurisdictions to the Supreme Court—has served as an ideological battleground over the extent to which the framers of the Constitution intended to guarantee these rights. Decisions rendered during the 1950's and '60's established what is now called the Right of Association—the freedom to engage in association for the advancement of beliefs and ideas. The local churches we attend are protected—at least for now—by this very freedom!

The Right of Association means we have the right to build an ideological alliance that includes some and, by its very nature and or the edicts of its constituents, excludes others. For the church, it means that God's people are at liberty to build theological alliances under the same protections. And the scriptures are very clear about the kinds of alliances the people of God should or should not be building!

Let's begin with the kinds of folks with whom the church should form no alliance. First are those who will not submit to baptism. After Philip had "preached Jesus" to the Ethiopian eunuch from Isaiah 53, the two came upon a body of water (Acts 8:26-40). The eunuch asked, "What doth hinder me to be baptized?" Philip responded, "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." The eunuch affirmed, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." His public statement of faith was all Philip needed to seal the eunuch's association with the church via the baptismal waters. As one popular preacher said, a profession that won't baptize isn't worth a plug nickel. In regard to biblical evangelism, the only way Philip could have preached Jesus unto the eunuch as the One who suffered for *his* iniquity was a conviction that the "all we" and "us all" of Isaiah 53:6 was inclusive of all mankind. No Calvinist could have applied that truth with a good conscience!

Second are those whose lives lack moral transformation. In addressing the moral issues afflicting the church at Corinth, Paul identified ten types of individuals with whom they should disassociate or refuse to be allied (1 Cor. 6:9-11). They are *fornicators* (sexually promiscuous as unmarried), *idolaters* (worshippers of false gods), *adulterers* (violators of marital fidelity), *effeminate* (addicts to sensual pleasures to include male homosexuals), *abusers of themselves with mankind* (practitioners of anal intercourse to include men with boys), *thieves* (those who violate the property rights of others), *covetous* (addicts to the self life and material things), *drunkards* (addicts to strong drink to include all intoxicants), *revilers* (practitioners of verbal assassination), *extortioners* (*those who steal by swindling*). Paul reasons that if these kinds of unrighteous individuals have no inheritance in God's kingdom, why should they be granted association or alliance with God's church?

Let's now move on to the kinds of folks with whom we ought to associate and ally ourselves as members of the church. Actually, that group is the inverse of the

disassociation list. That is, those that profess faith in the Lord Jesus with evidence that their lives are undergoing a moral transformation in righteousness ought to be the recipients of our embrace as the people of God. No, they do not have to be perfect. But they should be “in process” as should all of us be! In fact, we can reduce our basis for association down to just one word—faith! In this matter, God’s people should have no respect of persons! If our spiritual association is based on an allegiance to Christ, why should any of us stand in judgment of others over external appearances?

Men and women alike have always tended to associate themselves with those who occupy the same rung on the economic and social ladder. It is an expected behavior in the world, but unacceptable in the church. The believer who disassociates him- or herself from another brother or sister for reasons of status or appearance is a respecter of persons, and contradicts the very gospel that forms the basis of our association in Christ!

In his epistle, James exposed the practice of partiality by those who despised the poor. He wrote: “*Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom he hath promised to them that love him?*” (Jas. 2:6). James argues that if faith is the basis of God’s election of men, why is it not good enough for you as a basis of impartial association? Moreover, if faith in Jesus is good enough for God to consider them rich, on what basis do you consider them poor?

Faith, love, and a kingdom inheritance are riches held in common by all of God’s elect. The doctrine of election, if properly understood, is a spiritual adhesive to bind God’s people together. Biblical election has nothing to do with an eternal decree to save some and damn others. It has everything to do with the family of believers—those whom God has chosen in Christ Jesus to comprise the greatest of associations!

The Anonymous Man

How would you answer the following true or false question? Jesus and his apostles were the only ones who preformed miracles while he was on this earth. If we were to insert that question on a standard Bible quiz, I dare say that a high percentage of participants would give "True" as their answer. But they would be wrong! In the Gospel that bears his name, Mark records an incident involving an anonymous man who was casting out devils in Jesus' name. Its significance is both instructive and encouraging.

The apostle John brought up the incident during a private house meeting, saying, "*Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followed not us: and we forbad him, because he followeth not us*" (Mark 9:38). The verb tenses paint a colorful picture of the encounter. The verb "casting out" is a present participle, signifying that John and his cohorts likely witnessed not one but several exorcisms. The verb "forbad" means "to hinder or restrain" with a view to curtailing or stopping the activity. The tense is the imperfect—continuous action in past time. In other words, the anonymous man continued to cast out demons from his beleaguered countrymen while the apostles kept on insisting that he curtail his ministry and join their ranks. The anonymous man apparently considered the emancipation of sinners of greater import than a token association with John and the boys, and therefore went about his business to their chagrin.

Now we know two things to be true of any man or woman who is casting out devils in Jesus' name. First, that individual is operating in faith. Secondly, he or she is operating in the power of the Spirit! Or to say it another way, they live as did Stephen, a man "full of faith, and of the Holy Ghost" who "did great wonders and miracles among the people" (Acts 6:5, 8). Or as Barnabas, who was a "good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith" (11:23-24). Barnabas was a preacher par excellence. He "exhorted" the disciples at Antioch to "cleave unto the Lord with purpose of heart" with the result that "much people was added unto the Lord." (11:23). That, my friend, is effective ministry—an effectiveness that is absent from the great majority of churches across America!

Could it be that the faith and Holy Ghost power that accentuated the ministries of Stephen, Barnabas, and the anonymous man are absent from ours? The reason sinners are not being added to the Lord is probably because saints are not cleaving to the Lord! The point is this unnamed man, while an annoyance to the apostles and anonymous to us, shared a kindred spirit with Stephen and Barnabas!

Two questions come to mind. First, what made the apostles think that this man would be better off in their company? This is the same crowd that Jesus had referred to as "faithless" and admonished for their lack of spiritual discipline in the areas of "prayer and fasting" (9:19, 29). Moreover, they had been engaged in a petty, self-serving squabble about "who should be the greatest" (9:34). Our anonymous man was operating on a higher spiritual plane than the apostles, and did well to reject their offer. He had already learned what the apostles had yet to learn at Pentecost—that experiencing and enjoying God's presence and power was not restricted to the physical presence of Christ!

Secondly, when did the anonymous man establish his faith connection with the Lord Jesus? While there is no definitive answer, Mark appears to have provided a hint in the same chapter. Remember the earlier dialogue that Jesus had with the father of the demon-possessed son from whom the disciples were unable to cast out the dumb spirit? The father asked, "*If thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us*" (9:22). Jesus rejoined: "*If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth*" (9:23). Jesus was telling the father in no uncertain terms that faith in him and the power of his name was the trump card for apostolic impotence! In other words, your faith could have gotten the job done without my personal presence or any help from my personal assistants. I believe our man was in the crowd that day, heard our Lord's words about the primacy of faith, and ventured out with an unfettered vision founded upon the word of Christ!

Do you and I have a problem being anonymous? Are we willing to be anonymous with men while being approved of God? Living by faith and being filled with Holy Ghost power is not an apostolic privilege. It is as readily available to those of us who labor in obscurity as it is to those who appear to be pillars in the church. That unnamed man was an outsider from an apostolic perspective, but an insider from the only perspective that really counts—God's!

It is said that prayer is the key to heaven, and faith unlocks the door. May the Lord Jesus grant us grace to embrace faith afresh, and to open as many kingdom doors for God's glory as did Stephen, Barnabas, and the anonymous man!

Public Indecency

Hollywood and MTV have once again conspired to bring their own version of Shock and Awe into the family rooms of America. The violation of public decency that took place during the 2004 Super Bowl half-time show is another example of the corruption (and the corrupting influence) of the modern-day pop culture. The fact that segments of our population are either defending or minimizing the salacious behavior of Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson is further evidence that our nation is drifting steadily toward decadence!

Both Jackson and Timberlake have taken an apologetic tone of sorts. Jackson said: "I'm really sorry if I offended anyone. That was truly not my intention." In an opinion piece titled, "Sorry, but will anything change?" syndicated columnist Mona Charen stated: "I think she is so sunk in the putrid culture we call pop that she cannot adequately judge how her behavior will be perceived by those in the ordinary world." And to her point, Timberlake was bewildered when his own family admitted to being offended by his conduct.

The Bible has a word to describe the morally offensive acts that the likes of Jackson and Timberlake foist upon their public audiences—lasciviousness. The Greek word is **aselgeia** (*a* = without, and *selgeia* = moral restraint or decency). It signifies indecent or shameless conduct that includes a wide range of ideas—sexual license, excess, debauchery, perversion, open brutality, insatiable desires, and absence of moral restraint.

The OT contains numerous examples of lascivious conduct and its subsequent toll on society. Does anyone doubt that a lack of moral restraint was largely responsible for God's destruction of the world by the Flood? The Bible says: "*the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose*" (Gen. 6:2). That is, the godly line of Seth (or believers) began to be driven by physical more than spiritual desires. The result was a marital intermingling of Sethites with Cainites (or unbelievers).

The dilution of the godly seed led to the pollution of society. The pollution resulted in a world where "*the wickedness of man was great*" (6:5), and set that pre-Flood world on an unavoidable collision course with the judgment of God. If the Church in our day represents the godly seed, and she dilutes herself with this world, what then will avail to assuage the rising tide of public pollution and defer God's judgment?

Perhaps the most flagrant OT example of lascivious behavior was that of Hophni and Phinehas. These sons of Eli "abhorred the offering of the Lord" by using strong-arm tactics to defraud worshippers and secure for themselves the best cuts of meat, and further compounded their sin by fornicating with "*the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation*" (1 Sam. 2:17, 22). How much worse can things get for a nation? These two "preacher's kids" turned out to be perverts in the priestly office and shameless abusers of their authority. The Lord put an end to their foolishness with a couple of Philistine swords.

The NT has quite a bit to say about lasciviousness. In Mark 7:20-23, the Lord Jesus identified lasciviousness as one of many “evil things” that can proceed from within a man’s heart and defile him. Paul expressed to the church at Corinth a fear that he would find lasciviousness among the sins that plagued them, and for which they had not yet repented (2 Cor. 12:20-21). In Paul’s epistle to the Galatians, lasciviousness was mentioned as the fourth of seventeen “works of the flesh” that are contrary to the Spirit of God (Gal. 5:19). In Ephesians 4:19, Paul said that men commit lascivious acts because they are “past feeling” in terms of conscience. What that tells me is that men are shameless in their habits because they are remorseless in their hearts!

In the case of Jackson and Timberlake, do not mistake public apology for restoration of conscience. The only remedy for a numbed conscience is the gospel of Jesus Christ applied to the sinner’s heart by the power of the Spirit of God! God’s grace alone can produce conviction of sin and resurrect a conscience from the dead. Public embarrassment or rebuke has its merits, but restoration of conscience is not among them. Charen has it right in suggesting that nothing is likely to change with these culprits. Like an afternoon thundershower, the outrage will run its course, and leave them free from any pangs of conscience that might deter them from future shameless acts.

The Super Bowl half-time incident of 2004 was not the first to offend our moral sensitivities, and we can be certain it will not be the last. But when these shameless events and their perpetrators appear on the national radar screen, believers would do well to judge (in the proper sense of that word) those behaviors in the light of scripture, and put a biblical name to them. In so doing, we facilitate that mind transformation of which Paul wrote that inculcates within us the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God, and inoculates us against conformity to this world—including public indecency.

The Killing of Christ

Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" is scheduled for a February 25, 2004 release in movie theatres across America. Many evangelicals are embracing it as the work of God. The Baptist Press and Maranatha Christian Journal report that a Texas couple—members of the Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas—has purchased 6,000 tickets (at a cost of \$42,000) for distribution to fellow church members, seminary students, preachers, and friends (<http://www.mcjonline.com>). Secularists are excoriating the movie, claiming it places too much blame on the Jews, and therefore fans the flame of anti-Semitism.

On its February 9, 2004 cover, *Newsweek* magazine revived one of the most controversial questions that has ever been asked: "Who Really Killed Jesus?" The backdrop depicts an emaciated Jesus hanging from a cross upon which the Roman soldiers had nailed him. Managing editor Jon Meacham, in writing the feature article, said: "Billy Graham was so moved by a screening that he wept." He attributed the response of the evangelist to the fact that "much of [Gibson's] movie is a literal-minded rendering of the most dramatic passages scattered through the four Gospels."

But Meacham went on to offer his own liberal-minded bias: "The Bible can be a problematic source. Though countless believers take it as the immutable word of God, Scripture is not always a faithful record of historical events; the Bible is the product of human authors who were writing in particular times and places with particular points to make and visions to advance. And the roots of Christian anti-Semitism lie in overly literal readings—which are, in fact, misreadings—of many New Testament texts."

Meacham is totally mistaken on two points. First, the phrase "Christian anti-Semitism" is an oxymoron of the first order! How it is possible for a genuine Christian—one who is enamored with a Middle-Eastern Jew who walked this earth 2,000 years ago—to harbor disdain for a Jewish population he came to save? Secondly, the New Testament canon is more than the mere "product of human authors" as Meacham avers. It is the product of *Jewish* authors who were inspired by the Holy Ghost to pen accurate and authoritative accounts of gospel events and their doctrinal offspring. So when we read the words, "Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas," as well as "Crucify him, crucify him," we can be sure they represent the unfiltered sentiments of the hostile Jewish crowd that sanctioned the death of the Lord Jesus Christ (Lk 23:18, 21).

Now back to the question. Who did kill Christ? Ask any Orthodox Jew, and he or she will probably tell you that Jesus alone bears the blame for his death. They loathe to think of him as Christ. In their mind, Jesus was rightfully executed for his blasphemous claims, and got what he deserved. That is, the death of Jesus was a matter of justice, not murder. Ask the historians, and they will likely tell you that both the Jewish and Roman authorities were equally culpable in the deed. And from a purely historical perspective, they are correct.

Ask any literal-minded theologian, and the answer will be that Christ's death was a matter of both justice and murder—justice as executed by God, and murder as

perpetrated by man. The cross of Christ was an overt display of God's need to extract a penalty for sin as well as provide atonement for sinners. It was perfect justice—a full satisfaction for our transgressions against God's law. God the Father was the executioner in this act of divine justice. According to Isaiah, the Father found pleasure in bruising his Son, putting him to grief, and making his soul an offering for sin because of the seed (ransomed sinners) his death would produce (Isa. 53:10). As for the murder aspect, you and I may not have been physically present on that day, but our sins were there, because the Father laid upon Christ the iniquity of us all (53:6). That makes us all culpable!

If we accept that the Jews and Romans bear the historical blame for killing Christ, it is entirely proper to ask: Will God will hold these killers of Christ accountable for that act? The answer is "No!" It was for these same killers that Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). There can be no doubt that the Father granted that petition, which means that neither Jews, nor Romans, nor any of us by extrapolation, will be held liable before God for that specific act. God in his mercy blotted that particular sin from the record of every sinner without regard for his or her eternal destiny. What a gracious God!

The story of Christ's agonizing death on behalf of sinners and his resurrection from the dead is one that will continue through the ages to both fascinate and infuriate its audiences. How can there possibly be a middle ground of reaction? The message of the cross—that Jesus suffered and atoned for the sins of all mankind—is either the most glorious news ever to breach the ears of a lost sinner or the most subversive lie ever told. I'll take my place among the fascinated, and echo the sentiments of songwriter Charles Gabriel: "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, and wonder how he could love me, a sinner condemned, unclean!"

The Christ of Passion and Power

We are now just a few days away from the much-anticipated premier of "The Passion of the Christ." Mel Gibson invested \$25 million of his own money to produce the film in order to ensure total control of its content and message. Initial reviews are virtually unanimous in lauding it as one of the most powerful films ever produced. If it becomes the box office blockbuster that publicity portends, perhaps Gibson will finish the gospel story by investing another \$25 million to produce its sequel—"The Power of the Christ."

The focus of the *Passion* is the last 12 hours in the pre-cross life of the Lord Jesus. The *Power* would focus upon his post-cross resurrection life before ascending to the right hand of the Father. The final scene might depict the risen Christ—in a spectacular display of special effects—ascending and disappearing into a cloud, followed by two men in white apparel declaring: "*Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven*" (Acts 1:11). The ascension of the resurrected Christ, as he was received into his former glory, is without question the crowning validation of his person, his words, and his work!

How do you think the movie-going public would react to that? The *Passion* is certain to leave every patron stirred with emotion, and perhaps awestruck, by the horrific rigors of our Lord's suffering and death as they are portrayed on the screen. The *Power*, however, would have a slightly different effect. While the believer would tend to leave the theatre with a sense of hope and rejoicing, the unbeliever might very well exit with a sense of fear and trembling. The *Passion* has raised the issue of accountability for the killing of Christ 2,000 years ago—exclusive of all but Jews and Romans. But the *Power* would raise the issue of accountability to the Lord Jesus Christ at the Judgment and beyond—inclusive of all humanity!

In his oratorical masterpiece on Mars' Hill, Paul proclaimed: "*God...now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead*" (Acts 17:30-31). Paul affirmed that the resurrection of Christ brings assurance of righteous judgment to come for all men every where. The reaction was three-fold. Some mocked the message, others took a rain check for another hearing of the matter, and some believed (17:32-34). The full-orbed gospel is a message of passion plus power! If Paul had preached passion alone to the superstitious Athenians, my sense is the reaction would have been quite different. He may have found a more receptive crowd.

The problem with disconnecting passion from power is that many non-Christian sects revere Jesus for his purity of life and magnanimity in death while rejecting his deity. They adhere to a moral influence gospel. That is, the hope of salvation for sinners lies in replicating his life of love and forgiveness—especially as it was displayed in his last hours—and earning the reward of resurrection. This is the gospel of every Mormon and Jehovah's Witness who knocks on your door, where the resurrection is not about the God-Man raising himself from the dead in power, but about God raising a good man

from the dead to exemplify what every man who follows his example may expect to obtain (earn) from God. This is the religion of Cain.

As Paul began his epistle to the Romans, he proclaimed himself to be a servant of Jesus Christ and separated unto the gospel of God—a gospel that concerned his Son Jesus Christ, who was “*declared to be the Son of God with power...by the resurrection from the dead*” (Rom. 1:1-4). Thus the resurrection was a declaration of Christ’s deity, and his omnipotence as commensurate with his person! This post-resurrection truth is consistent with the pre-cross words of Christ spoken to an audience of Pharisees: “*Therefore doth the Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again*” (Jn. 10:17-18). And he would later reiterate this truth to Pilate: “*Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above*” (19:11). The Christ of the gospel is the Christ of both passion and power! It is that Christ that we must proclaim to a lost and dying world!

As the people of God, let’s pray together that God will use *The Passion* to stir the hearts of sinners and saints alike for his glory! Perhaps we can pray as well for that all-important sequel that will declare Christ to be the Son of God with power! In that film, Christ Jesus will ascend to the Father’s right hand, and descend in the same glorious manner as he ascended—an exhilarating experience for believers, but an excruciating one for all who reject the Christ of passion and power!

The Passion of the Christ—A Review

The *Passion of the Christ* begins with a prophetic utterance from Isaiah emboldened across the screen: “*But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his strips we are healed*” (Isa. 53:5). As the film unfolds, it becomes evident to viewers that Mel Gibson intended those words to be more than a mere theme, or a statement of the biblical context. These words of scripture clearly constituted a mission statement! If and when you see this film, I believe you will agree that Gibson accomplished his mission!

The Christ of *The Passion* was wounded, bruised, and chastised in the extreme! The viewer is left to wonder how any man could endure such a bloodletting at the hands of his tormentors without succumbing to death before reaching the hill called Calvary. Isaiah wrote these words as well: “*His visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men*” (52:14). In reading that passage of scripture, I had often asked myself, “What would a man look like if his visage was so marred?” Now I know! Through the wizardly of film, Gibson has served up visual images of physical disfigurement that are...well...stunning!

But there is one aspect of Christ's suffering that no film artisan could ever capture—the spiritual trauma he endured while bearing the iniquities of all mankind! The severing of eternal communion between Father and Son is a disaster beyond the purview of the sinners whose iniquities brought it to pass. It was a three-hour period of incomprehensible grief that none of the gospel writers try to explain. They simply document what transpired, and leave it at that. Mark states: “*And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour*” (Mk. 15:33). Luke tells us this darkness was “over all the earth” and that “*the sun was darkened*” (Lk. 23:44). Indeed, how could the sun shine while the Sun of Righteousness was laden with the blackness of our sin? The best Gibson can produce is some insufficient cloud cover—hardly reflective of the biblical narrative or the spiritual reality behind the God-imposed darkness!

While many evangelicals are praising Mel Gibson for producing such a soul-stirring and poignant film about Christ apart from Hollywood money or sanction, we must remember that he is by admission an old school Catholic who holds to an unbiblical theology of salvation. Gibson is on record as stating that his wife—an “Episcopalian who believes in Jesus and is a better Christian than I am”—will “probably spend eternity in Hell” because she is not a member of the Catholic Church. Gibson weaves this ancient heresy into the film by ensuring that every member of the apostolic inner circle addresses Mary as “Mother.”

As I watched the film, two truths that Jesus uttered came to mind that enabled me to maintain an emotional perspective in the face of all the bloody gore. The first had to do with the way that Christ went. Jesus told the Pharisees: “*I go my way*” (Jn. 8:21). To his disciples, he said: “*But now I go my way to him that sent me*” (16:5). “My way,” said the Christ. It was his alone—a way that could belong to none other than the God-Man!

Yes, you and I deserved all of that hellacious suffering, but for what purpose? Do any of us have the ability to atone for anything? An eternity of suffering by unbelievers in the flames of Hell will fail to provide God with the first iota of satisfaction for sin! Christ Jesus procured that for sinners by going his way! And when Jesus said, "*I go to prepare a place for you*" (14:2), I believe he was referring to the way of suffering that would culminate in the cross. The crucifixion and death of Christ was the consummate act of preparation for entry into the Father's house by every man and woman that would believe the gospel!

The second had to do with Christ's prediction of joy to come after the suffering was completed. Jesus told his disciples: "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy*" (16:20). Jesus illustrated that transformation of sorrow to joy by citing a woman in childbirth: "*As soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembers no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world*" (16:21). So, as the re-enactment unfolded before me, I had a mindset that refused to allow my joy to be turned back into sorrow. If *The Passion* moves you and me to tears, they should be tears of joy for the sacrifice no sinner could hope to make for him- or herself, and for the resurrection that validated the efficaciousness of that suffering both Godward and manward!

The *Passion of the Christ* is a theatrical production consisting of many biblical facts and its share of artistic embellishments that cannot be supported by the scriptures. It may have some yet-to-be-determined impact upon our society, but can never replace God-anointed gospel preaching or Spirit-filled believers who live their lives in holiness and joy before a lost and dying world. See *The Passion* if you must, but do so with a biblical perspective in mind.

In Dire Need of Liberation

Now that Super Tuesday has set in stone the two major contenders for the White House, the nation is bracing itself for eight grueling months of political and polemical combat. I expect that "liberation" will be high on the list of topics debated by President Bush and his Democratic challenger throughout the campaign. By the time Election Day rolls around, Americans will have been reminded ad nauseam of the 26 million Iraqis that our brave military forces set free from the shackles of Saddam Hussein. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Iraqis and their liberators is what to do with, and how to react to, the gift of freedom.

Freedom is a possession we Americans take for granted like the oxygen we breathe. The degree to which the average citizen appears to be willing to sacrifice his or her personal freedom in exchange for the protections offered by government is alarming. If political liberalism had its way, America would be living under the auspices of a centralized government built upon the political tenets of architect Karl Marx. And what would be the price tag for all of the womb-to-the-tomb protections? Our personal freedoms!

The topics of political and personal freedom are subjects worthy of passionate public debate. But they pale in comparison to matters involving spiritual freedom—a topic that will almost certainly fail to make headlines in the presidential debates and the national dialogue. In the current politically correct climate, it is a rarified pulpit that confronts parishioners with the perils of sin and the need for liberation from its clutches. From a biblical perspective, it can be argued that the spiritual setting free of just one sinner from the bondage of sin is greater in magnitude and scope than the political setting free of 26 million Iraqis.

The Lord Jesus lived in a time when hunger for political freedom from Roman tyranny was foremost on the minds of his Jewish audiences. But the Messianic Messenger—to the chagrin of Jewish leaders—stayed on message with the primal need for spiritual liberation. The thinking was this: If a man or woman lives as the servant of sin, what does it matter if he or she becomes the master of everything else, including Rome?

Jesus accentuated this point one day as he taught in the temple treasury. The drama began as the scribes and Pharisees "*brought unto him a woman taken in adultery*" (Jn. 8:3). The plan was to find a basis "to accuse him" (8:6). My sense is they schemed to condemn him for leniency if he granted mercy or for insensitivity if he withheld mercy from the sin-laden harlot. After a period of persistent badgering by his detractors, the Lord Jesus made this offer: "*He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone*" (8:7). Through divine wisdom, Jesus made sin and servitude thereto the central issue of the debate. Having heard these words, they were "convicted by their own conscience" (8:9). One by one the accusers departed, and left Jesus alone with the woman. Then the One who had every right to accuse and condemn her offered these words of liberation: "*Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more*" (8:11). What a merciful act of emancipation!

The sin theme continued. He told the Pharisees they would die in their sins if they refused to believe on him (8:21, 24). And while they scoffed at the idea of being in bondage, Jesus affirmed: "*Whosoever commits sin is the servant of sin*" (8:34). In other words, these religious stalwarts were laboring under a sin bondage that made Rome look like a pussycat.

The solution Jesus proffered to a sin-laden nation followed this logic. I am the Son who speaks the words he hears from the Father (8:26). I speak as I am taught (8:28). If you abide by my words, you will be my disciples indeed (8:31). Discipleship will enable you to know the truth, and that truth will set you free (8:32). And if I the Son set you free, you will be free indeed (8:36). Jesus taught that freedom from sin—the greatest of all freedoms—is obtainable only by those who obey the Word of God!

The biblical record also teaches us those who experience spiritual freedom may well lose their political and personal freedoms in the process. Joseph spent two years in Pharaoh's prison due to a spiritual freedom from sexual lust that led him to flee fornication (Gen. 39:10-20). Daniel faced the loss of political freedom and his very life in the den of lions through consistent exercise of his spiritual liberty in prayer (Dan. 6:10-12). Three of his Hebrew colleagues—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—refused to bow down to an image of gold as an expression of spiritual emancipation, and faced death in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:1-25). The glory of that story is that God, in the midst of their trial, elevated them to a level of spiritual liberty that few if any have experienced since. Stephen, endowed with spiritual freedom known only to Spirit-filled preachers, was stoned to death after delivering a Bible message to the high priest and his council (Acts 7:51-60).

There is no freedom so precious as the spiritual, especially as it pertains to emancipation from sin. Yes, it does matter that 26 million Iraqis are now politically free. But the vast majority are yet spiritual slaves, as are their American liberators. The irony of this election year is that the liberators are in dire need of liberation!

Godless Americans

There is a malignant movement afoot in America called the Godless Americans. While it is no surprise that the godless have lived and worked within civilizations going back to earliest days of earth's existence, it is somewhat alarming that the godless in America—a so-called “Christian” nation—have come to wear that distinction as a badge of honor. Is godlessness now in vogue?

The Godless Americans Political Action Committee (www.godlessamericans.org) was born as a result of a rally held in Washington, D.C., on November 2, 2002. An estimated 2,500 zealots and sympathizers met on the Mall to march toward the Capitol building in a show of atheistic solidarity. The organizations supporting the march included the Council for Secular Humanism, the Campus Freethought Alliance, Secular Student Alliance, Atheistic Alliance, African American Humanists, and Internet Infidels. The website summary of the march offers this observation: “Many referred to their exuberance and state of empowerment by just being surrounded by so many fellow nonbelievers.” That certainly expands the concept of fellowship!

The summary also includes remarks by Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation: “Weyrich also cited the ARIS study, which revealed a growth in the number of Americans describing themselves as having ‘no religion.’ In 1990, this segment represented about 8% of adults, or 14.2 million Americans. That number has swelled to 14.1%, or nearly 30 million people.” If we accept these statistics as reliable, they represent a near doubling of the number of atheists in our nation within the last decade. One has to wonder what has become of the salt and light that Jesus said would characterize his Church. Where is the savour? The brightness?

The dictionary definition of “godless” is “recognizing or worshipping no god.” Although “godless” does not appear in the Authorized Version, its equivalents “ungodly” and “ungodliness” appear 31 times. These words signify “impiety” and “moral defection” respectively because the self-proclaimed godless have disconnected themselves from the one true source of moral perfection—God. Therefore any man or woman who embraces godlessness as a lifestyle has bound him- or herself to a life of moral defection and ultimate damnation.

The Bible sets forth a multi-faceted view of the ungodly. It was David who confessed that floods of ungodly men made him afraid (2 Sam. 22:5). In others words, the godless can be intimidating when they appear in sufficient numbers. But the counsel (advice) of the godless is to be rejected (Ps. 1:1). They are unstable and unfruitful with respect to righteousness. They are like chaff driven by the wind, and will not be able to stand in the judgment to come (1:4-5). While they may prosper in this world (73:12), they shall ultimately perish (1:6). At one point, David referred to Israel as an ungodly nation, and asked God to plead his cause against them (43:1). In one of Job's answers to his three friends, he referred to them as “miserable comforters”, and further acknowledged: “God hath delivered me to the ungodly” (Job 16:1, 11). David and Job both teach us that it is possible to be surrounded by the godless in the midst of profound religiosity!

We all know too well that the idiocy of disclaiming God cannot alter the inevitable. Every human soul will have his or her unavoidable face-to-face meeting with the Almighty. It is the wise man or woman who lives every day of his or her life as a preparation for that meeting. Those who are saved by grace should strive daily to bring their attitudes and actions into conformity to God's will as revealed in his Word. Those who are still lost in their trespasses and sins should seek a place of repentance in order to be justified before God through faith in the Lord Jesus. Peter affirmed: *"If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?"* (1 Pet. 4:18). Both the Judgment Seat of Christ and the Great White Throne will be times of fear and trembling for their respective participants. The Godless Americans will not escape!

Godless Americans, as an emerging political force, present a clear and present danger to our nation. But the greatest threat to America, in my opinion, is not so much political action as it is spiritual inaction. The fact is many who name the name of Christ live out much of their existence in an atheistic manner. Every day we fail to visit the altar of worship (i.e., Bible reading and prayer) before launching out into the world, we affirm the non-existence of God—or at least his limited relevance. And to this fatal omission we can add failure to pray over meals, failure to ascribe glory to God for the benefits with which he loads us daily, failure to seek the Lord for wisdom in all of life's decisions, and failure to speak a word of witness to the godless with whom we interact each and every day—on the job and in the neighborhood. The bane of America at this hour is not the Godless Americans. It is the professing believer who is by default a practicing nonbeliever.

The Ethiopian Eunuchs

What individual comes to mind when you hear the words “Ethiopian eunuch”? For most of us, that would be the man Philip evangelized in the Gaza desert during the eunuch’s return trip from Jerusalem (Acts 8:26-40). Luke was careful to tell us that he held a position of great authority under Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, as the one who had charge of all her treasure; but omits his name. What seems important to Luke is that the eunuch—a Gentile foreigner outside the Jewish fold—was on the receiving end of soul-saving good news delivered by the man of God. The man in whom a queen had placed her absolute trust in things material is now portrayed as entrusting his own eternal soul to the King of kings—a fiduciary act of the highest order!

But there is another Ethiopian eunuch in scripture that was on the giving end of good news where the man of God was concerned. The man of God was Jeremiah. The eunuch’s name is Ebedmelech, which means “royal servant” or “servant of a king” (Jer. 38:1-13). The context in which we find this man involves the unpopular preaching of Jeremiah regarding the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of its inhabitants by the king of Babylon’s army, which had surrounded and besieged Jerusalem. Death was an inevitable outcome for anyone who resisted the Chaldeans, and the Lord would bring it to pass.

In a meeting with king Zedekiah, the princes of Israel argued that the negative preaching of the prophet was demoralizing the military, weakening the citizenry, and hurting the country. In their mind, these were crimes worthy of death. King Zedekiah—a gutless milk toast of a leader—offered no defense for the prophet, but rather abandoned him to their will. So they cast Jeremiah into a miry dungeon void of food and water. The Bible tells us “*they let down Jeremiah with cords*” and “*so Jeremiah sunk in the mire*” (38:6). It was just a matter of time before he starved to death.

There are two points to be made before we zero in on Ebedmelech. First, we are facing a similar situation in America at this hour. It seems that with every passing week, some element of our judiciary is sanctioning and or legalizing immorality and wickedness. The day is fast approaching when the man of God who excoriates homosexual sin (or any sin for that matter) from the pulpit, and links that sanction to the judgment of God, will be guilty of a criminal act punishable by fines and imprisonment. Why? Because his “hate speech” and “homophobic diatribes” are hurting the nation! The church spiritually virile enough to support the preaching of biblical purity will face the same punitive fines and forfeit their favorable tax status. Once that happens, church revenues in the form of tithes and offerings will be subject to federal taxes. Our government has already demonstrated that it has no qualms about seizing the property of churches that refuse to comply.

Secondly, there is a message in the mire. The fact that Jeremiah sank suggests a 50-50 mix of water and dirt. In other words, Jeremiah was surrounded by water unfit for human consumption. Likewise, the water of the Word of God, if mixed with and diluted by philosophy, humanism, and politically correct content, is just as unfit for spiritual

consumption. It causes in those churches that embrace it that same “sinking” effect that Jeremiah experienced.

On Sunday, December 8, 2003 my wife and I decided to attend the morning worship service of the National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C. across from the hotel where we were staying. We are Baptists by conviction, but it seemed innocuous enough for one Sunday. All was well until we saw the listing for “Gay & Lesbian Fellowship” in the bulletin. We exited that miry pit in less than two minutes.

Now Ebedmelech, one of the eunuchs in the king's house, heard about Jeremiah, and pled his case before the king. He was bold enough to accuse the princes of doing “evil” to the prophet. Jeremiah had been sentenced to death by starvation since the siege had left “*no more bread in the city*” (38:9). Ebedmelech persuaded the king to flip-flop on his policy of abandonment. The king commissioned thirty servants to assist Ebedmelech with the successful rescue effort. Jeremiah was sunk by the cords of malice, but saved by the cords of mercy (38:13). This time it was the man of God who was on the receiving end of life-saving good news delivered by an Ethiopian eunuch! Do you suppose God remembered the courage and kindness of Ebedmelech when he dispatched Philip to the Gaza desert?

Ebedmelech's reward for befriending the prophet was the preservation of his own life (39:15-18). Although fearful of the circumstances, he was nonetheless faithful to God. The Lord said to him: “*I will surely deliver thee...thy life shall be for a prey unto thee: because thou hast put thy trust in me*” (39:18). Translation: The Chaldeans will destroy Jerusalem and kill its inhabitants, Ebedmelech, and I will bring my words to pass. But I will preserve your life!

My friend, if and when God's heavy hand of judgment falls upon America, believers in the Lord Jesus Christ may well consider themselves blessed indeed to walk in the shoes of this Ethiopian eunuch!

A Post-"Passion" Reflection upon the Jews

The Passion of the Christ has run its course as king at the box office. The public debate over whether The Passion was anti-Semitic is still alive, but not with the same degree of fervor that ignited it. Bible expositors took the occasion (and rightly so) to identify God the Father as the One who ultimately delivered up his Son on behalf of sinners, and laid upon him the iniquity of us all. Perhaps now is a good time to reflect briefly upon role the Jews have played in the matter of Messiah.

Our authority for such reflection is none other than the apostle Paul—a former Pharisaical firebrand and staunch defender of Jewish tradition. In his first letter to the Thessalonian church, he offered a scathing summation of Jewish hostility toward the Christ and his gospel that, at the time of writing, had spanned three decades. He wrote: “[The Jews] both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men” (1 Thess. 2:15).

What an unenviable track record! Paul did much more than answer the question, “Who Really Killed Jesus?” In addition to killing the Lord Jesus Christ, the Jews killed their own prophets. Why? Because the prophets expounded upon God’s righteousness and exposed unrighteousness in their target audiences! They killed Jesus for the same reasons. In his case, however, they had encountered the impeccable righteousness of God himself, and found him all the more intolerable and expendable!

In the words “and have persecuted us,” Paul links his evangelistic team with Jesus and the prophets, giving real-time meaning to the context of suffering. Through my personal experience, I know that orthodox Jews still detest the name of Jesus and denounce those who take it upon their lips. Most of us either know first hand or have heard about Jewish families that have held mock funerals for sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, husbands or wives, who have embraced the Lord Jesus as Messiah. During the summer of ‘71, while distributing gospel tracts in the heavily Jewish section of Miami Beach, FL, I was cursed and spit at on several occasions by Jews who found the name of Jesus to be repugnant, offensive, and contemptuous.

The sweeping indictments continue: “they please not God” and “are contrary to all men.” That’s pretty comprehensive stuff by any standard. Paul essentially says: “Take the sum total of the attitudes and actions of the Jewish opposition, and you’ll not find the first thought, act, or emotion in which God takes pleasure!” In contrast to these stands Enoch, who “*before his translation...had this testimony, that he pleased God*” (Heb. 11:5), and the Lord Jesus himself, who affirmed: “*I do always those things that please him*” (Jn. 8:29). Inasmuch as pleasing God is the cardinal aim of life and the key criterion by which true success is measured, we therefore conclude that failure to please God in life is equivalent to failing in life. It’s that simple!

The word *contrary* is the Greek **enantios** (*en* = in + *antios* = against). The preposition *en* intensifies the idea of opposition as if it was entrenched. The same word is used in Matt. 14:24 to describe a wind that worked directly against the progress of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. Whether we take the phrase “all men” to mean all without exception, all

without distinction, or all kinds of men, what we have here is an indictment that makes the Jews a universal thorn in the side, which continues to this day. Ask most observers of world affairs what they believe is the main impediment to world peace, and they will answer with virtual unanimity that the Jews (the nation of Israel in particular) are the problem.

Keep in mind that these indictments do not make Paul an anti-Semite. The same man wrote: *"I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh...Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved"* (Rom. 9:3; 10:1). How could Paul desire anything less, knowing that the death of Christ was inclusive of every lost sinner, including the Jews by whom he was persecuted and afflicted. Paul—a former incarcerator of God's people—offered himself as an example of the boundless mercy of God toward his blasphemous opposition (1 Tim. 1:13).

In the same set of chapters, Paul set forth the balanced mindset for believers regarding the nation of Israel: *"As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes"* (11:28). The Jews are our enemies with regard to redemption. But in terms of the election, they are beloved. God chose Abraham to father a nation. That choice extended to Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and eventually to David over his elder brothers. God in mercy chose a lot of seconds (or lasts) to be his firsts, and he has not abandoned his elective plan. The Jews will continue to be enemies of the gospel until they behold the Lord Jesus at his return, at which time all Israel shall be saved (11:26). At that time the Jewish nation will embrace the passion of the Christ, but it will have nothing whatsoever to do with cinematography.

A Brief Overview of Depravity

Depravity is a word used in theological studies to describe the spiritual condition of man following the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Inasmuch as depravity signifies moral corruption, the epithet appears to be appropriate. The word itself—like sovereignty and Trinity—is never used in scripture, but can serve as a useful label if we rely upon biblical contexts to ascertain its true meaning.

The very last resource a believer should consult in his or her quest to formulate a sound theological system is books on systematic theology. While many of these volumes represent the efforts of good and godly men to paint a bull's eye on various aspects of the truth, they are not inspired. Nor can it be assumed that decades of study in the original languages (Hebrew and Greek), ancillary languages (Latin, German, and French), and other theological works give the learned Ph.D. an edge over the average Joe in arriving at a biblical view of depravity. Adjectives like “total” and “radical” as applied to man's depraved condition have probably done more to obfuscate than illuminate the issue.

The evidences and attributes of depravity can be readily extracted from the English version of Genesis 3-4 in your standard King James Bible. According to scripture, the fall of mankind into a depraved state through the sin of Adam (Rom. 5:12) was concurrent with these four words: “and he did eat” (Gen. 3:6). Knowing that Adam and his descendants died spiritually in that moment of time (2:17), we therefore conclude that spiritual death is the *sine qua non*—the essential element—of depravity. Jesus confirmed that essence by affirming that believers are “passed from death unto life” (Jn. 5:24). Paul likewise confirmed it by instructing believers at Ephesus: “And you hath [God brought back to spiritual life], who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). It is the spiritually dead, both small and great, that shall one day stand before God at his great white throne (Rev. 20:11-12). If a man or woman is spiritually dead, he or she is depraved!

The events that transpired immediately after the fall, which include the interaction between the Lord God and the depraved first couple, are very instructive. They identify for us both the trademarks of depravity and the capacities that depravity leaves in tact. The picture painted by the scriptures can differ significantly from what one might find in a theological volume on the subject.

One key trademark of depravity is an aversion for God's presence (Gen. 3:8). Adam and Eve “hid themselves from the presence of God amongst the trees of the garden” upon hearing his voice—a voice that was once the harbinger of intimate fellowship. Another trademark of depravity inherent in this aversion is fear. When the Lord God confronted Adam, he acknowledged: “*I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself*” (3:10). This self-awareness or “open-eyed” condition represents the introduction of conscience—the innate ability to discern good from evil. Adam is now suffering from the pangs of conscience. Adam may have marveled how just one act of disobedience could have so radically altered his perception of God and the manner in which he now chose to respond to his Maker. In popular parlance, perhaps he felt like he had been run over

by a Mack truck. In a sense he was—and worse! Such is the nature of sin and the depravity that's left in its wake!

A third trademark of depravity is the tendency to assign at least partial blame for one's sin to another. In this case, Adam blames Eve for procuring and offering the forbidden fruit. Eve in turn blames the serpent for an act of beguilement that led her astray. None of this accusatory rhetoric, however, was able to deliver either of them from the consequences of their sinful actions. Neither will excuses avail at the great white throne.

It should be noted that the plummet of Adam and Eve into spiritual death and depravity left certain capacities intact. First, these two spiritually dead individuals retained the ability to hear God's voice and communicate with him. There is no evidence that God performed an act of "sovereign grace" in regenerating Adam and Eve before being able to conduct a meaningful dialogue with them. In fact, it can be argued that a God whose hands are so tied is less than sovereign. I have no doubt that Adam and Eve left the garden with spiritual life restored, but not until they received from God's hand the coats of skins from the substitutes that died in their stead. Secondly, they did not lose the ability to speak the truth. Adam may have hid himself initially, but told it like it was when confronted. Eve likewise gave testimony in the divine presence that was consistent with the facts. Yes, depraved men and women tell lies, but depravity does not guarantee that they will.

The salient point of any discussion on depravity is that the depraved must be evangelized if they are to be saved. They are first and foremost spiritually dead. The gospel of Jesus Christ—the story of God incarnate who died for their sins and rose from the dead the third day—is the antidote that can restore them to spiritual life and a relationship with God if it is heard and believed. But they cannot hear without a preacher!

The Resurrection Gospel

Easter season is the time to reflect upon and celebrate afresh the one truth that distinguishes Christianity from every other religion—namely, that its Founder and the Object of its doctrines is alive from the dead and lives evermore! No other so-called “faith” can make such a claim for its object. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ renders impotent any and all pretenders to the affections of lost sinners. Without an object of worship with a resurrection credential, the believer is locked into spiritual death mode. If lost men worship and trust any object other than the resurrected Lord Jesus, they might as well be worshipping a pile of rocks.

On the other hand, if the resurrection of Christ is nothing more than a conspiratorial theory concocted by his followers to perpetuate his legacy, then whatever else men choose to worship and trust as an imagined means of salvation is of no consequence. Perhaps no activity reveals the darkness of men’s minds more than the attempt to explain away and disavow to only hope for their salvation. It is akin to a guilty man spitting in the face of the judge who offers him a pardon, or a man dying from thirst cursing the one who offers him a glass of water. But again, if Christ was not raised from the dead, it really doesn’t matter.

In 1 Corinthians 15—the classic resurrection passage—Paul took the time to deal with a few of the “ifs” of resurrection-free religion. He begins with a practical inconsistency within the ranks of the Corinthian church: “*Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection from the dead?*” (15:12). Paul had already rehearsed the gospel for them: that is, Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day (15:3-4). It was the gospel he preached, that they believed, and by which they were saved. How could they possibly entertain such inconsistency?

Entering into such philosophical speculation about whether or not a resurrection of the dead was historical reality was no mere mental exercise. It was a subtle attack upon the bedrock of the gospel! It follows that if there is no resurrection of the dead, Christ himself could not have been resurrected (15:13). And if Christ be not risen, then both preaching and believing are exercises in futility (15:14). The resurrection is half of the gospel, without which there is no gospel. Moreover, it is the half that provides the vindication for the other half—namely, that the sinless God-Man, upon whom death had no claim, died for the sins of others, and was raised for their justification (Romans 4:25). The bottom line: a resurrection-free gospel is neither fit to preach nor fitting for faith! Most of the world’s 6 billion-plus population is oblivious to this truth.

The personal implications of embracing a resurrection gospel in a resurrection-free world are disconcerting. First, it makes false witnesses (liars) out of all who preach it, because they claim for God that which he could not have done (i.e., raise Christ from the dead) if there is no resurrection (15:15). Secondly, it renders faith an empty and meaningless exercise. Faith is only as viable as its object. An un-resurrected Christ results in believers who have no hope whatsoever of life everlasting. Thirdly, there exists no remedy for our sins (15:17). We are still “in” them, which guarantees that the full brunt of

God's wrath is in our future. Fourthly, our deceased brethren who embraced a resurrection gospel, whom we believed to be sheltered in the arms of God, died in their sins, and are perished (15:18). Fifthly, Christ is merely a temporal example with no after-life implications. In other words, the sinner who indulges in the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the pride of life is no worse off than the saint. For the believer, there is no meaningful reward for denying him- or herself these indulgences. Their self-denial actually becomes a source of misery (15:19).

After painting his hypothetical portrait of a resurrection-free world, Paul introduces one of those blessed "Buts" for which he is well known: "*But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept*" (15:20). Jesus the Christ is indeed alive, and represents the first of many whom God will harvest from this earth in a resurrected glory like unto his! Since a man (Adam) brought sin and death into this world, it is only fitting in the divine economy of things that another man (Christ) should provide an atonement for sin and a resurrection from the dead (15:21). By virtue of his death and resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ freely offers forgiveness of sins and life everlasting to all who will believe the gospel. Those who believe are "in Christ" and have life because of that relationship, while unbelievers are still "in Adam" and lack both spiritual life and the hope of a resurrected one (15:22).

The resurrection gospel is a message for all because Christ died for all. It represents the only hope that God has ever extended to this world. But the fact that God provided any hope whatsoever to us sinners is mercy beyond our comprehension. Thanks be unto God for the resurrection gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Indispensable Man

One of America's greatest citizens is slowly but steadily approaching death's door. He currently occupies an intensive care unit where a handful of committed staff endeavor to keep the oxygen flowing in the hopes that a recovery—if not full, at least in part—is in his future. But the prognosis is not very encouraging. Every improvement in his vital signs seems to be followed by a serious setback, causing well-wishers to be tossed to and fro between the extremes of optimism and discouragement. Those who make it their business to keep tabs on his condition are amazed at his resilience and fortitude in his fight for survival.

Any and all of his would-be biographers will discover what his closest friends already know. He once played a vital role in the founding of this nation, and has been the close companion of many of its presidents. He was once a stalwart in the academic world. His presence has graced the lecterns of higher learning as well as the boardrooms of the corporate world. But his most noble and notable contributions to our American culture have come through the pulpits of its churches. In fact, most if not all Americans have made his acquaintance at one time or another, and many have become the beneficiaries of his benevolence.

It's hard to believe this man could have enemies, but indeed he does. On second thought, perhaps we should expect ill feelings and animosity to rear their ugly heads whenever the sincere collides with the sinister or the genuine meets the disingenuous. It just seems to work that way. Perhaps you've already figured out who this dear man is. Actually, he has gone by many names through the centuries, but there is one all-encompassing name for which he is best known—truth!

In scriptural terms, truth made his entrance onto the historical stage with these words: *"Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth"* (Gen.24:27). These words came from Abraham's eldest servant, whom he sent to fetch a non-Canaanite wife for son Isaac from his country and kindred (24:4). In this case, truth was equivalent to the revealed will of God concerning Isaac's bride. The servant expressed humble gratitude for the providential mercies that had brought the truth to light. The principle of "first mention" as applied to biblical studies tells me that truth and the revealed will of God are virtually synonymous concepts. So, if Jesus had chosen to answer Pilate's question, *"What is truth?"* (Jn. 18:38), the answer might well have consisted of these five words: "The revealed will of God!"

The second appearance of truth bears a strong resemblance to the first. When Jacob received word that Esau his brother was in route to meet him, he was overcome with fear, and prefaced his request for deliverance with these words: *"O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord which saidst unto me, Return to thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee: I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shown unto thy servant"* (Gen. 32:9-12). Again, the truth consisted of all that God had spoken by promise and shown by providence. Jacob perceived that everything God had revealed about his will was an act of mercy—the ever-present companion of truth!

Truth is essential to the proper function of government and the political process. Jethro offered these words of wisdom to son-in-law Moses: *“Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens”* (Ex. 18:20-21). Policy makers satiated with truth are men who fear God. Their ability to make sound judgments on behalf of those they lead is tied directly to their refusal to be influenced by the almighty dollar. Contrariwise, politicians void of truth are godless, lack the ability to lead aright, and sell their “ordinances and laws” to the highest bidder. Which of these two political types do you think is now dominating the governmental landscape in Washington, D.C.?

Truth spoken from the heart is a requisite for fellowship with God (Ps. 15:1-2). The God of redemption is a God of truth (31:5). All of his works are done in truth (33:4). Truth preserves God's servants (40:11). Truth is a shield and a buckler (91:4). God's truth endures to all generations (100:5). Jesus was full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14). Jesus is the truth (14:6). God elects those who believe the truth (2 Thess. 2:13), but failure to believe the truth brings damnation (2:12). The church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). And while it may seem improbable at the moment, one day Jerusalem will be called a city of truth (Zech. 8:3).

Truth—as it pertains to individuals and nations—is indispensable! The future viability of America depends on this man called truth. Yet our nation has pummeled him so severely that he is currently on life support. May God encourage our hearts to pray earnestly for his recovery. Our survival is impossible without his!

The Whole-Hearted Pursuit of God

The combat death of former Arizona Cardinal and Army Ranger Pat Tillman in Afghanistan on Thursday, April 22, 2004 has provoked mixed feelings of pride and sorrow for a young man who appeared to have his priorities in order. Of course, his death on the battlefield was no less tragic than any of the several hundred that preceded him both in Afghanistan and Iraq. But the story of his selfless sacrifice has reminded us afresh of what is great about America. As a Viet-Nam veteran, I still harbor admiration and appreciation for our military personnel who demonstrate a willingness to die in order to protect and preserve our freedoms!

NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue offered these words of tribute: "He was an achiever and leader on many levels who always put his team, his community and his country ahead of his personal interests." Former Cardinals GM Bob Ferguson said: "In today's world of instant gratification and selfishness, here is a man that was defined by words like loyalty, honor, passion, courage, strength and nobility." Arizona senator John McCain cited Tillman's "unexpected choice of duty to his country over the riches and other comforts of celebrity." And former teammate David Barrett asked: "What other person do you know would give up a life in the NFL to defend what he believes in with his own life?"

Barrett's remarks about defending what one believes in with his own life capture perhaps the key lesson to be drawn from Pat Tillman—wholeheartedness! The dictionary defines wholeheartedness as the combination of sincerity and energy. Tillman embodied both qualities. As a man who pursued his patriotic objectives with his whole heart, he mirrored what ought to be true of every true believer regarding his or her pursuit of God!

The scriptures provide numerous examples of such men and women—Abel, Enoch, Noah, Moses, Joshua, Ruth, Samuel, Elizabeth, Mary, John the Baptist, et al. But no biblical personality is more identified with the concept of wholeheartedness than David, the sweet psalmist of Israel (2 Sam. 23:1). And no Psalm has more to say about the wholehearted pursuit of God than does the one hundred-nineteenth. In this longest chapter of the Bible, David makes six mentions of the "whole heart" as it relates to his relationship with God!

In the first reference, a blessing (of spiritual prosperity) is pronounced upon those who "keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart" (119:2). The verb *seek* is from the Hebrew **darash**, meaning *to tread* or *frequent*. It signifies the repetitive pursuit of or search for someone or something within the context of worship. The blessing of which David speaks is the expectation of all who sincerely adore the Lord and focus their energies Godward. The wholehearted are both single-hearted and single-minded. There is no room in the heart for any affection that competes with or supplants that which God alone deserves. The curse of modern Christendom is the curse of multiple affections—a curse that only heaven-sent revival can cure! Bob Jones III said it best: "Our problem is not that we do not love God; it is that we do not love him only."

In 119:10, David affirms that he followed the precept: “*With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.*” His sincerity is backed up by energy—the tangible pursuit of his God, especially as it relates to the written Word. David understood the heart’s fragile nature, and asked for God’s mercies to keep him from wandering. We’re all prone to wander, but God’s ability to constrain is greater!

Furthermore, David expresses a determination to observe the law of God with his whole heart (119:34). He recounts in the divine presence that he has wholeheartedly entreated (prayed earnestly for) the Lord’s favor as an expression of his mercies as promised in the scriptures (119:58). He reaffirms his desire to keep the precepts of God in a wholehearted manner in contradistinction to the proud who have forged lies against him (119:69). In other words, he desires to be governed by the truth at all times even though at times he might be tempted to stoop to the level of his spiritual opponents.

Lastly, he reveals to us that a wholehearted pursuit of God can produce desperation and urgency in one’s prayer life: “*I cried with my whole heart; hear me, O Lord; I will keep thy statutes*” (119:145). Is it any wonder that he is known as the man after God’s own heart? I suspect that all of us could use a hefty dose of such urgency in these perilous times!

Pat Tillman was a man who pursued with his whole heart those selfless objectives for which he ultimately sacrificed his life. For the true believer, the wholehearted pursuit of God and his will is predicated upon our yieldedness to him as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2). At this point, it is not clear to me whether Pat Tillman was a believer in the Lord Jesus. But his story ought to provide inspiration enough for every child of God to ask him- or herself the following question: “Am I pursuing the Lord with my whole heart, or is my heart the seat of multiple and cross-purposed affections?”

Insights from John Flavel

For those who harbor a deep affinity for the Puritans, John Flavel (1630-1691) is most certainly on the short list of favorites. He was the eldest son of Richard Flavel, a gospel minister, who had a profound impact on John in the areas of reading and biblical studies. John Flavel excelled as a student at Oxford University, and was ordained to the ministry on October 17, 1650. Throughout his years as a pastor, John Flavel exemplified practical wisdom, a fervent prayer life (both privately and publicly), and a thorough grasp on the theological controversies of his day. Perhaps the greatest tribute paid to him in biographical works is that he was a man who loved his people, speaking the truth to them in love, and was therefore loved by his people in return.

John Flavel was a voluminous writer in the Puritan tradition. His works include *Fountain of Life Opened Up*, *Method of Grace in the Gospel Redemption*, *Christ Altogether Lovely*, and *On Keeping the Heart*.

Included below is a collection of wise and insightful sayings from his writings. Enjoy!

- “The revealed will of God is either manifested to us in His Word, or in His works. The former is His *commanding* will, the latter His *affecting* or *permitting* will.”
- “Complain to God you may, but to complain of God, you must not!”
- “The heart of a Christian, like the moon, commonly suffers an eclipse when it is at the full, and that by the interposition of the earth.”
- “Some providences, like Hebrew letters, must be read backwards.”
- “It is better to be as low as hell with a promise, than in Paradise without one.”
- “An hot iron [in the matter of preaching], though blunt, will pierce sooner than a cold one, though sharper.”
- “God may deny your wantonness, but not your wants.”
- “If you [as parents] neglect to instruct them [your children] in the way of holiness, will the devil neglect to instruct them in the way of wickedness? No; if you will not teach them to pray, he will [teach them] to curse, swear, and lie; if ground be uncultivated, weeds will spring.”
- “It is not with us [preachers] as with other laborers: they find their work as they leave it, so do not we. Sin and Satan unravel almost all we do, the impressions we make on our people’s souls in one sermon, vanish before the next.”
- “Brethren [fellow preachers], it is easier to declaim against a thousand sins of others, than to mortify one sin in ourselves.”
- “It is a greater mercy to have a heart willing to refer all to God, and be at his disposal, than to enjoy presently the mercy we are most eager and impatient for [and which appears to be delayed]; for in that God pleases you, in this you please God.”

- “Sin brought in sweat (Genesis 3:19), but now, not to sweat [as a by-product of idleness] increases sin.”
- “We [preachers] preach and pray, and you hear; but there is no motion Christward until the Spirit of God blows upon them.”
- “What health is to the heart that holiness is to the soul.”
- “The most signal demonstrations of Providence are not to be accepted against a Scripture-rule.”
- “If therefore, in doubtful cases, you would discover God’s will, govern yourselves in your search after it by these rules:
- Get the true fear of God upon your hearts; be really afraid of offending Him.
- Study the Word more, and the concerns and interests of the world less.
- Reduce what you know into practice, and you shall know what is your duty to practice.
- Pray for illumination and direction in the way that you should go. And this being done, follow Providence as far as it agrees with the Word, and no farther.”

Bad Manners

Two itinerate preachers had traveled from one Antioch to another—about 300 miles as the crow flies—on what is commonly referred to as The First Missionary Journey. After a Sabbath-day reading of “the law and the prophets”, the rulers of the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia extended to Paul and Barnabas an invitation to share with the attendees any text-related “word of exhortation” (Acts 13:14-41). Well, preachers always appreciate these kinds of courtesies, and Paul was no exception. He proceeded to deliver a high-level review of Hebrew history that culminated with the Lord Jesus Christ. In so doing, he ensured that his word of exhortation would double as a word of salvation (13:26).

Paul transversed from Abraham to Joshua with these words: “*The God of this people of Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an high arm brought them out of it. And about the time of forty years suffered he their manners in the wilderness. And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Chanaan, he divided their land to them by lot*” (Acts 13:17-19). Please observe that Paul’s introduction was all about God! He is One who chose, exalted, brought out, suffered, destroyed, and divided! All six of Paul’s verb choices regarding Israel were positive in nature. Especially intriguing to me is the fact that God suffered their manners in the wilderness!

It goes without saying that the manners to which Paul referred were bad manners! Paul may have coined the word “suffered” as he used it in the synagogue, for it is found nowhere else in the NT. It is the Greek word **trophoreo**, a combination of **tropos** (manners or ways) and **phoreo** (to bear or endure). It means: “to be patient with the difficult or idiosyncratic manners and conduct of others (Zodiates, *Word Dictionary of the New Testament*, p. 1396). That is exactly what God did in time past for Israel, and what he continues to do in the present for ill-mannered saints. Yes, the people of God are still prone to wander in spiritual wildernesses of their own making due to bad manners.

What were some of the bad manners that God suffered at Israel’s hand? The first was murmuring. The Jews were just a few days removed from a victorious songfest on the Red Sea’s shores when they encountered the bitter waters of Marah (Ex. 15:23-27). The issue was one of thirst. God sweetened the bitter waters [of life’s unsavory events] with a tree [that pre-figured the cross of Christ] (15:25). The bellyaching erupted again in the wilderness of Sin (Ex. 16:1-3). Now the issue was one of hunger as they longed out loud for the “flesh pots” of Egypt. God fed them with quail in the evening and manna in the morning to meet their need (16:13-15). The critical truth about murmurings (i.e., spewing forth a litany of complaint when life throws us a few unexpected curve balls) is that they are against the Lord, and an affront to him (16:8). It’s a direct insult to the One who has promised to provide for his own!

The second was the chiding that took place at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1-7). The issue was thirst. The verb *chide* signifies a grappling or wrangling between two parties—a contest. It is murmuring kicked up a few notches. The problem with chiding is that it challenges the very existence or presence of God (17:7). It is the severest of provocations, and

amounts to tempting God by throwing the veracity of his promises back in his face. In their case: "Is the Lord with us, or not?" None of us is shocked when the secular world chides the Living God by writing him off the scene. But for a child of God to do so reflects the worst of manners.

The third was idolatry that paved the way for sensual excess (Ex. 32:19-25). Joshua heard what he thought were the sounds of war (either victory or defeat) as he and Moses descended from Mount Sinai with God's Law graven on two tablets of stone. But what they heard were the sounds of licentious frolic in the context of false worship. The bad manners kept getting worse. The golden calf episode teaches us that false worship always breeds a flesh-centered life. If a child of God goes wrong in his or her worship, it is impossible for that individual to live aright until that bad manner is corrected! In our religiously correct culture, it is high time for churches to realize afresh that no worship of God that begins in the realm of the sensational can end in the realm of the supernatural, which may explain the absence of God's supernatural power in so many.

As calamitous as bad manners were for Israel, there is a measure of encouragement to be derived from our text. The forty years God endured neither diminished his faithfulness nor deterred him from getting them to the promised land. Sometimes believers develop bad manners, forfeit God's power in their lives, and wonder whether the land of spiritual victory can ever be theirs again. But how much suffering of bad manners is too much? Forty years? Forty months? Forty days? The fact is it's never too late to abandon bad manners for that which is right! Why give up on the God who has determined he will never give up on you?

The Supplication in David's Song

The current election-year landscape in America is reminding us that the quest for political power can be a treacherous business. But should that surprise us? The history of this world is largely a compilation of political battles as they have played themselves out over the centuries from one generation to another. The tactics we observe in our nation are tame compared to others, but share many of the same attributes. One of the more sinister tactical strategies employed by candidates is the false accusation. A lie sandwiched between a few slices of truth or a true statement dislodged from its historical context can be a formidable weapon. If delivered at the right time to the right demographic, its damage can be virtually irreversible.

The Bible contains its share of political battles. Perhaps the best known among them is the jealously ridden campaign that king Saul fomented against David, who oftentimes fell victim to false accusations. The Psalms are littered with instances of David requesting God's help in defending him against political lies. The seventh Psalm is a case in point. Cush the Benjamite, whom many scholars believe was a trusted colleague, secured the ear of Saul—a fellow Benjamite—with slanderous words about David's alleged motives and aspirations for the throne. But David was not running for political office. Samuel had anointed him to be king on behalf of the God of Israel, who had single-handedly conducted his own election.

Psalm 7 is a song David sang unto his Lord with musical accompaniment (Shiggaion)—a stringed instrument of some kind. If David sang Psalm 7 today, he might well be packing a vintage Gibson flat top guitar. You really have to be impressed with David! Here is a young man who has received word that one he considered his friend has just sold him out, and put his life in further jeopardy with falsehoods (7:14). How does David respond? No, he does not form a political action committee. He writes a song to his Lord wherein he makes a case for his integrity (7:8), pleads for divine defense (7:1, 10), and renders praise to the One he trusts (7:17). Included within that trust is an awareness that the iniquity of Saul, Cush, et al has not escaped the notice of God, who is angry with them on a daily basis (7:11). There is therefore no need for David to harbor anger against these men since God's righteous anger is sufficient for them both. David reckons the "ordained" arrows in God's bent bow to be as sure to strike his "persecutors" as he is to sit on the throne (7:12-13). What a perspective!

David's song contains a supplication that is worthy to be voiced by every believer at all times, especially during the political season: "*Oh let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end; but establish the just; for the righteous God trieth the hearts and reins*" (7:9). The supplication divides itself into three segments. The first reflects a desire for the cessation of wickedness on the part of the wicked. I believe David's petition for an end to wickedness had little to do with the fact that he was its object. Wickedness wrought in high places was dishonoring to God and polluting the nation from the top down. That was the greater pain! Moreover, in David's mind there is an inseparable link between the wicked and their wickedness. While there is a measure of truth in the adage "God loves the sinner but hates the sin", it is also true that God prepares "instruments of death" for

the wicked in response to their wickedness—a doctrine that is out of vogue in modern-day pulpits.

The second was a request based on David's integrity. The phrase "establish the just" might be paraphrased as follows: "Lord, I refuse to resort to self-serving tactics to secure the kingship for which you anointed me. I have behaved myself in a just manner up to this point and will continue to do so. You are the One who will set me in place at a time of your choosing, and I am perfectly content to let you be God in this matter." How do you suppose America would respond to two political candidates who exhibited this kind of integrity? Do you not agree that this would go a long way toward solving the problem of political pollution in our land?

The third was an acknowledgement that life lived successfully as God reckons success is primarily a matter of the heart. A righteous God knows every thought, and every motive behind every act. The "reins" speak of control (i.e., what drives us to do what we do; what controls us). What a man may attempt to hide from other men is fully disclosed to the eyes of God. David is perfectly willing to undergo that degree of scrutiny! He is a man with nothing to hide! Better to be in a low place with integrity than in a high place without it!

As election year 2004 rolls along, may we as God's people adopt David's supplication as our own. Let's pray for an end of wickedness on the part of the wicked. Let's ask God to establish just men and women in high places. Let's understand that what's good for the politician is good for us as well. That is, integrity begins at home! Let's keep our hearts and reins clean before a righteous God. How can we expect from our leaders what we are unwilling to do ourselves? In a word, let's embrace the supplication in David's song!

A Spiritual Biohazard

Do you still have your wisdom teeth? My upper and lower right third molars were extracted at age 24. On Friday, May 21, 2004—some 32 years later—my upper and lower left wisdom teeth suffered the same fate. I arrived at the dentist's office at 8 a.m., and walked out with empty sockets at 9 a.m. Those 60 or so minutes consisted of 15 minutes for paperwork, 43 minutes for pre- and post-op activities in the infamous chair, and a mere 2 minutes or less to pry those teeth loose from their long-time duty station.

Many of us can remember a time when we could have kept those teeth as a sort of souvenir. That thought had crossed my mind. So, a few seconds after the deed was done, I asked the dentist if I could see the teeth. He said, "I think Gail [his assistant] has already disposed of them." I responded, "That was quick!" He said, "I'll go check," and returned shortly to confirm the disposal. The assistant later explained that OSHA regulations require immediate and proper disposal of extracted teeth because they are now considered to be biohazards. I rejoined, "That's really amazing! They were assets in my mouth, but have now become biohazards!"

My reflections upon that rapid change of status found a spiritual application. What was the critical event that brought about the status change? The extraction—the moment at which the dentist detached the teeth from their bony moorings in my jaw. There is a striking parallel between what happens to the extracted tooth and the believer who is out of fellowship with his or her Lord. It has nothing to do with our *union* with Christ. The biblical doctrine of predestination affirms that union to be eternal and indissoluble. It rather has to do with our *communion* with Christ. The believer who allows him- or herself to be detached from the moorings of intimate communion with the Lord Jesus because of personal sin undergoes an immediate change of status from being a salt-and-light asset to becoming a spiritual biohazard. Make no mistake! Spiritual environments are every bit as real as the physical, and far more critical in their impact upon the inhabitants.

If there is one biblical character that stands out in terms of becoming a spiritual biohazard, it's Jonah. It is reasonable to assume that God called upon Jonah for the Nineveh mission because he was an asset rather than a liability. But Jonah's distaste for the Assyrians combined with his knowledge of God's great kindness toward sinners (Jonah 4:2) brought about a change of status when he set out in disobedience to book passage on a ship bound for Tarshish (1:3). As the vessel left port and headed out to the open sea, its captain had no idea that hazardous material had made its way down into the sides of the ship (1:5). But the derelict preacher had become exactly that, and jeopardized the well being of every one on board. I wonder how many pulpits in America are filled each Sunday by spiritual biohazards? If the man of God lacks the anointing of the Spirit of God to preach the Word of God in power due to an unclean life, that is exactly what he has become!

In the hours immediately preceding his death, the Lord Jesus shared these words with the eleven: "*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the*

branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned' (Jn. 15:4-6). The concept of branches abiding in (remaining attached to) the vine was clearly intended to teach the critical nature of our relationship to him in terms of bearing fruit (i.e., a positive impact upon our spiritual environment to include righteous conduct as well as converts). Detachment from the vine robs the branches of life-giving resources and the ability to bear fruit, rendering a former asset useless.

Abraham's nephew Lot comes to mind. Although a righteous man by virtue of faith (2 Pet. 2:7-8), a life of compromise had wreaked havoc upon his influence with his sons in law and married daughters (Gen. 19:14). The two messengers made clear God's intent to get Lot's entire family out of Sodom (19:12), but Lot's attempt to persuade them failed. Our last glimpse of Lot finds him drunk inside a cave committing incest with two virgin daughters (19:31-35). As a result, Lot the spiritual biohazard fathered Moab and Ammon, progenitors of the Moabites and Ammonites, which were eventually a thorny problem for Israel (19:36-38).

Fortunately, the parallel between detached wisdom teeth and out-of-fellowship believers is not a perfect one. My wisdom teeth are permanently gone. But such is not the case with the believer who is detached from the Vine. Communion can be restored through the Word of God and prayer coupled with genuine confession and forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9). If you happen to be a once-upon-a-time asset that has somehow become a spiritual biohazard, I would encourage you to seek earnestly a change of status that will once again attach you to the stony moorings of your spiritual Rock—the Lord Jesus Christ!

Times of Memorial

Memorial Day is a cherished national holiday, as well it should be. While many have relegated this day of remembrance to a paid day off from work, it continues to focus our attention upon the millions of brave men and women who served honorably in the armed forces of our nation, and gave the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms we hold dear. On Saturday, May 29, 2004, our World War II veterans finally received the well-deserved recognition they earned for defending the free world against Nazi and Japanese aggression.

Times of memorial are meaningful, especially in biblical terms, which is why God through the scriptures has taught us to remember certain personages and events as a standard routine in our Christian walk. This does not equate to living in the past. It rather serves to remind us how past events can have a direct bearing upon the present...and the future as well!

Remembering is a worthy activity because it is God-like (or godly) to do so. In fact, the first biblical mention of remembering finds the Lord declaring: *"And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth"* (Gen. 9:15-16). The God who remembers his covenants is the One who first establishes them (9:9, 11, 17). They are a matter of sovereign determination! If God chooses to establish a covenant with mankind, he never forgets it! He always remembers!

Moses, as God's spokesperson, called upon Israel to "Remember this [Passover] day" in which they came out from Egypt and the house of bondage by the Lord's strong hand (Ex. 13:3). In the giving of the law at Sinai, the Lord said: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (20:8). If they had diligently remembered these basic statutes, and observed them, it would have spared them a lot of self-inflicted trouble, and perhaps saved an entire generation from death in the wilderness. Unfortunately, that multitude was mixed, and often found themselves lusting after the things of old, as evidenced by this confession: *"We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, besides this manna, before our eyes"* (Num. 11:5-6). The memories of "good eats" in Egypt were harmless. But the context in which they summoned them called into question God's ability to provide and make good on his promise to deliver a land flowing with milk and honey. That mixed multitude died before seeing the first acre of promised land.

Before they entered the land of promise, God charged Israel to remember the manner in which he led and kept them through forty years in the wilderness (Deut. 8:2). And again: *"But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day"* (8:19). The price tag for forgetting was perishing (8:19-20).

The Lord Jesus gave one of the more powerful admonitions for remembering: *"Remember Lot's wife"* (Lk. 17:32). The context was the revelation of the Son of man in the last days. The warning underlined the danger of having one's heartstrings so entwined with earthly possessions (i.e., materialism) that it obscures that which is truly substantive in life—being in the will of God and pleasing him in the process. In violation of the messenger's command, Lot's wife looked back, and became a pillar of salt. In looking back, I believe Lot's wife displayed the same mindset as did Eve when she ate the forbidden fruit: that is, the will of God was deemed counterproductive to what they thought was in their best interests at the time. This same mindset has sabotaged many a ministerial career, and led to much heartache. Remember Lot's wife!

In his last words to Timothy, Paul said: *"Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel"* (2 Tim. 2:8). It was an important reminder to a young preacher from a war-torn veteran who was about to die for that gospel. In his pastoral work, Timothy would be subjected to many trials and tribulations—many of which would not rival death. But what if they did? Was Timothy any better than his mentor? Was either any better than the Christ they preached? The gospel of the resurrected Christ, if kept in the forefront of the young preacher's thinking, would suffice to sustain him in any and every trial!

Let's take this time of memorial to reflect upon those things that really matter. These would include Christ our Passover Lamb, our deliverance from sin's bondage, God's commitment to his covenants, the dangers of being entangled with the things of this world, and the death-defeating gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Number One Enemy

One of the few points of agreement between incumbent George Bush and challenger John Kerry during the first Presidential Debate held on Thursday, September 30, 2004 was that a nuclear weapon in the hands of terrorists constitutes the greatest threat to America's security and to that of the world at large. That point is valid enough when restricted to a purely geopolitical context. And for a world mired in secularism, there is little outside the realm of geopolitical concerns or consequences that merits its attention.

But the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ understands that all matters geopolitical are subservient to those of the spiritual. The spiritual realm (concerning which the scriptures deal in exhaustive detail) is inclusive of the hearts of men, which harbor the most devastating force on the planet—sin! Any who doubt that assertion need only to ponder what took place on Golgotha's hill outside the Jerusalem gates some two millennia ago. It was there that God Incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ, bore the collective sins of humanity in his own body upon the cross. In a twist of irony, the Jews unwittingly crucified Jesus the Christ to provide a remedy for their own sins while their primary reason for doing so was geopolitical. That is, Jesus was adept enough at conquering demons and disease, but apparently lacked the wherewithal to deliver them from Rome!

The apostle Paul so succinctly stated the issue in these terms: "*Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned*" (Romans 5:12). One act of disobedience by humanity's federal head allowed the lethal tandem of sin and death to invade the pristine confines of time and space to wreak inestimable damage upon mankind! They continue to stroll through the corridors of history to this day, and currently dominate the news headlines.

When sin rules in the heart of a man, there are two inevitable and predictable outcomes. The first is a visceral hatred of righteousness (i.e., the righteous and the unrighteous just don't get along well). The second is an aversion for the presence of God. Cain—the first man to enter this world through the womb—exemplified both of these traits, and serves as a spiritual prototype. With regard to righteousness, Cain killed Abel "because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12). And after the Lord pronounced upon Cain the consequences of his sin, he "*went out from the presence of the Lord*" (Gen. 4:16). There is perhaps no phrase in scripture that conveys a more foreboding finality to a life! Thus Cain provides for us an infallible rule: men and women whose hearts are ruled by sin will express contempt for righteousness, and avoid like the plague any situation where the presence of God is prominent!

The President has reminded us on several occasions that the terrorists have not hit America since September 11, 2001, as evidence that we are safer as a nation. John Kerry has accused the President of taking his eye off the ball in the war against terror—a mistake he says he would never have made or make if elected. The fact is sin continues to hit our nation repeatedly with its savage blows. Since 9-11, another 4-5 million innocent babies have met their murderous fate in abortion clinics; civic and religious leaders continue to perform gay marriages [sic]; infants are being born out of wedlock in staggering numbers; and the divorce rate still hovers at around 50 percent. With the

exception of a godly remnant, the entire world has taken its eye off the ball, assigning the blame for chaotic world conditions to everything but sin in the human heart! Even the biblical prophet, whose pulpit task is to cry forth and spare not regarding sin and its consequences, is a dying breed.

The ruinous impact of sin upon the heart of man is seen in David's own prayer of confession following an adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. He cried: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me*" (Psalm 51:10). David's heart was in such pitiful condition as a result of personal sin that nothing less than the creative power of God—the same power that spoke the world and a larger universe into existence—would be required to repair the damage! The bad news is that all sin is devastating to the human spirit without regard for its magnitude in man's estimation. The good news is that there is no human heart, no matter the degree to which sin has pummeled it, that is beyond God's creative ability to make it both clean and right in his sight!

The political atmosphere is charged these days with concerns about national security and weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists. We should uphold our leaders in prayer, that they might be endowed with wisdom in identifying and eliminating threats. But we should never forget that our worst enemy—both nationally and personally—is sin. Frankly, there's not a nickel's worth of difference between the terrorist who beheads a captive in Baghdad and the physician who butchers an unborn fetus in a Supreme Court-protected abortion clinic!

High Tech and High Touch

The implementation of technical advances within the business world during the last decade or so has led to the widespread depersonalization of service. Consumer advocate Clark Howard often talks about customer service that has become customer "no" service. Personal computers coupled with web technology now make it possible for millions of Americans to buy and sell products and services on a daily basis without the first interaction with another human being.

At the outset of this technical revolution, business owners reasoned that streamlining the business process would create efficiencies, reduce operating costs, and increase profits. That reasoning was and is correct to a point. But the problem is customers have feelings, and enjoy being treated like a real person from time to time rather than a number on an electronic invoice. So now the pendulum is swinging back toward a more personalized way of doing business aimed at those who have come to feel alienated by the companies with whom they deal. The claim being made by many businesses to attract the alienated consists of these four words: "High Tech, High Touch!" The meaning is clear: In addition to using state-of-the-art technology to get the job done (high tech), they will do so in a manner that is very warm and personal (high touch).

One day last week on my drive to work, I heard a radio ad where the spokesperson used that exact phrase to appeal to potential customers. Immediately my mind began to consider whether the tandem concepts of high tech and high touch could be found in a biblical context. It appears that they can.

Consider the Lord Jesus Christ. Was his not a high tech and high touch ministry? How many times do we see him in the gospels expounding upon the eternal truth of God to thousands (high tech), and then augmenting that preaching ministry with the healing touch of his gentle hands upon the physically infirmed (high touch). In my thinking, the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane is classic. There we see the Son of God agonizing in prayer as he anticipated the qualitative and quantitative suffering he would soon endure for the collective sin of humanity (high tech), and shortly thereafter touched and healed Malchus, the high priest's servant, after Peter had severed his right ear with a sword (Luke 22:50-51; John 18:10). Yes, the Lord Jesus is indeed the embodiment of eternal truth (high tech) as well as a reservoir of boundless mercy for sinners (high touch).

The apostle Paul once found himself in a high tech high touch situation at Troas (Acts 20:7-12). During a preaching episode (high tech) that lasted until midnight, the young man named Eutychus fell into a deep sleep, fell from the third loft in the upper chamber, and had apparently died. Paul went down, fell on him, embraced him (high touch), and announced that the young man was alive. The Bible says they took a break for some midnight rations, after which Paul proceeded to speak until the break of day.

On a more personal note, should not every believer's life be one of high tech and high touch? Should we not strive to master the content of scripture with a view to applying it to our lives on a daily basis? Contrary to what some may say, it is a most noble task for

every disciple to indulge him- or herself into the intricacies of the original languages (Hebrew and Greek), grammar, syntax, word meanings, etc. where the Bible is concerned. These activities are not the exclusive domain of seminary professors and their students. Nor is God more knowable by certain groups than by others. The knowledge of God is nested within the pages of Holy Writ, and is discoverable by all who are persistent in their study and humble in their hearts. If the knowledge of the Most High is not high tech, the concept is meaningless.

Space will not allow us to talk at length about the high touch nature of the Christian family, but scriptures like Romans 12:10, 15 affirm that the Lord intends for his church to be high touch: *“Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another...Rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with them that weep.”* According to Ephesians 4:15, one of the spiritual keys to growth in Christ is speaking the truth (high tech) in love (high touch) as we interact with one another.

How would you rate your church? Some churches are low-no tech and low-no touch. You've been in these churches—shallow preaching full of frivolous anecdotes coupled with lethargy so thick you could cut it with a knife. Some are high tech/low-no touch (substance without warmth) and others are low-no tech/high touch (warmth without substance). Frankly, I'm not sure which of the latter two is the worst. The first seems to know what it believes, but is not moved by it. The second appears to be moved, but cannot define exactly what it is that moves them. Blessed is the church that is both high tech and high touch—the only kind of church that can impact a lost world for the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Election of Grace

As we approach the election of 2004, perhaps it's an appropriate time to consider the election of grace. The scriptures depict a sovereign God making several choices before the foundation of the world for which he neither required nor solicited input outside of himself. These divine "elections" are weightier by far than those conducted by governments. When interpreted within the contexts crafted by the inspired writers, they enable us to understand God's redemptive plan, and provide a source of rejoicing and comfort for believers.

Any meaningful study of election must begin with the Elect One, the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter identifies the One to whom believers have come as "a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious" (1 Peter 2:4). He then cites Isaiah 28:16 as validation: "Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious" (2:6). The fact that God Incarnate—who needed no saving but was rather the Saviour—was the cardinal object of divine election confirms that the doctrine has nothing to do with the personal salvation of sinners but rather everything to do with the unique positions, roles, and privileges bestowed by God upon those elected. In the case of Christ, he was chosen to be the One and Only Redeemer of lost sinners, which accounts for both his personal preciousness and that of his blood shed for their sins!

The nation Israel was and is an object of divine election. The Lord refers to his people as "mine elect" (Isaiah 42:1, 4; 65:9, 22). In Romans 9:4-5, Paul identifies several of the roles and privileges with which God endowed them by virtue of his sovereign choice: "Who are Israelites, to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen." By virtue of physical birth and subsequent national membership, every Jewish child obtained an elect status, and assumed a responsibility to fulfill the God-ordained roles and privileges inherent in that election. Therefore the purpose of God according to election (9:11) was to bring the elected Lord Jesus into this world through the elected Israel through the lines of second-born Isaac and second-born Jacob. By his sovereign choice, the Lord denied this privilege to first-borns Ishmael and Esau—an election that had nothing whatsoever to do with the personal salvation of these four men.

Paul is careful to point out that being an elect one in the physical and national realms was no guarantee of personal salvation in the spiritual realm. He affirms: "For they are not all Israel [spiritual seed], which are of Israel [physical seed] (9:6). What we have is an election within an election, so that every born again Jew can claim to be twice elected by God. John expressed it in these terms: "He came unto his own [Israel as the elect nation], and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God [the elect within the elect nation], even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:11-12). So the single differentiating factor between a lost elected Jew and a twice-elected Jew is faith in Christ Jesus!

In Romans 11:1-9, Paul further expounds on this theme: "Even so at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (11:5). Paul segued into that

conclusion based on Elijah's experience. In his intercession, Elijah complained of being "left alone" as a hunted man. But God reminded him that he had reserved to himself seven thousand men that had not bowed their knees to the image of Baal (i.e., a trait that was indicative of steadfast faith). In like manner, there is today a body of believers that God has reserved to himself, and endowed with an elect status. It is contingent upon grace as opposed to works. And since Paul so painstakingly excluded faith from the works category as the companion of grace (4:13-16), it can be said with confidence that the election of grace is an election of grace through faith. The believer who affirms that he or she was saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9) may affirm with equal certitude that his or her election was obtained by grace through faith.

Israel as a whole did not obtain the righteousness he was seeking, because he sought it by works rather than faith (10:2-3; 11:7). But the election obtained it. In the context, the election is that born-again body of believing Jews, who, as John said, received the Lord Jesus Christ. The rest were blinded because they rejected the light Jesus gave them (John 12:35-41). Currently, that body consists of both Jewish and Gentile believers whom God has both justified and elected by grace through faith. It is therefore biblically illiterate to say that the elect "shall" obtain it, for the scriptures reveal that God's elect, at any given moment in time, already have a righteous standing before God...which is why nothing can be laid to their charge (8:33).

The election of 2004 is perhaps the most critical election our nation has faced. As believers, we have both a civic and moral obligation to vote for those individuals who best line up with the Word of God. But as you walk into your voting station, take a moment to reflect upon the election of grace that has secured your eternal destiny apart from the workings of government and its elective outcomes.

Post-Election Thoughts

The apostle Paul wrote these words to the church at Philippi: "For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). In the afterglow of what I consider to have been a demonstration of God's mercy toward America in the re-election of George "W" Bush and the defeat of the arch-secularist John Kerry, it is good for us as believers to pass the glory on to our gracious Lord, and maintain an other-worldly perspective.

Yes, we are Americans, but, more than that, we are the circumcised of heart. And every believer understands that circumcision of the heart is an operation that only God can perform. No sinner has ever circumcised his or her own heart, and time will expire before that ever transpires. The Great Physician alone has the surgical tools to pare away callousness of conscience and restore long-lost tenderness to the soul. Our nation may have dodged a bullet, but America at large remains uncircumcised and in spiritual peril.

The worship of God in spirit stands in contrast to all that is tangible and touchable. The secret dwelling place of God on this earth is within the hearts of the circumcised. If you've ever visited the various monuments in Washington, D.C. you're well aware that "God" is chiseled on many ceilings, walls, and facades. But by and large that's about as far as the chiseling goes. God engages those whose adoration of him proceeds from the heart. Symbolism carved in stone is light years removed from genuine worship.

We rejoice in Christ Jesus because ultimately he is the One who calls the electoral shots. Asaph said it this way: "Lift not up your horn on high: speak not with a stiff neck. For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another" (Psalm 75:5-7). It has been amusing to watch the secularists on the losing side conduct the postmortem on their defeat. I can guarantee that the prayers of God's people and the God who answers prayer are two blips that will never appear on that radar screen. The fact is God puts presidents in place to accomplish his will and purpose for the ages. "W" will stay in office for no other reason than God willed it so. And I rejoice in him for that good grace!

I believe George "W" Bush is a good man with a good heart. But in the final analysis, he, like us all, is just a flesh-and-blood man. My confidence is not in President Bush. My confidence is in the Lord who can renew the strength of those who wait upon him, and cause them to mount up with wings as eagles (Isaiah 40:31). Let's hold up this good man daily with prayer. He's got a lot of running and walking to do, and can ill afford to become weary or faint. Lord Jesus, grant to our President grace sufficient for the grind!

Continuing in the Grace of God

The word of exhortation delivered by Paul to those gathered in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia contains many of the essential elements of apostolic preaching (Acts 13:14-52). There was the historical linkage that began with the fathers (13:17), transitioned through Egypt and the wilderness, (13:17-18), brought Israel into the land of promise (13:19), led to the Judges and Samuel (13:20), and then king David (13:22), from whose seed he raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus (13:23). This Jesus is portrayed as the One in whom there was no cause of death, but crucified nonetheless by an elect nation that condemned him (13:27-28). In so doing, they fulfilled the prophetic scriptures by nailing him to a tree (13:29). But God raised him from the dead (13:30).

According to Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ had now become the basis for forgiveness of sins (13:38). It is worth noting that this synagogue crowd consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, all of which were recipients of the word of salvation (13:26). Paul clearly believed that the death of Christ was inclusive of all men without exception or distinction. If Paul had believed in a limited atonement, there is no way (with good conscience) he could have preached the forgiveness of sins to every man in that synagogue. But when Paul preached the cross, he made a universal application of its merits, and excluded no one in his appeal! If the cross and empty tomb do not represent hope and good news for every sinner, then who can know with certainty (apart from a subjective experience) whether there is a value in that cross for them?

There are two observations to be made from our text. The first is from Paul's opening remarks, and the second from Paul's interaction with the hearers after the meeting broke up. Both of them provide valuable insight into the mind of Paul regarding his perspective on grace.

In his introduction, Paul referred to his audience as "Men of Israel, and ye that fear God" (13:16). Mid-way through his message, he addressed them as "children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God" (13:26). Now, this is the same man who wrote: "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). Is Paul contradicting himself? What could have caused Paul to attribute the fear of God to men in this crowd and deny it to the entire race of sinners in his epistle to the Romans? The answer lies in what Paul immediately perceived as he sized up the congregation prior to speaking—the grace of God was at work in Antioch of Pisidia long before he arrived! God's drawing grace alone could account for both Jewish and Gentile hearts ready to receive the Word with reverence and awe. And as the apostle to the Gentiles, it must have thrilled Paul's heart to see so many Gentiles hungering for the truth of God. This was grace at work!

The second observation finds these same God-fearing Gentiles begging for another dose of the gospel on the next Sabbath day (13:42-43). This is grace in durative action. God prepared their hearts before Paul came on the scene, and continued to stir their souls by his Spirit regarding his Son after the preaching had ended. Many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who "persuaded them to continue in the grace of God." Paul was aware of what God was up to with his grace, and

convinced these men that they should remain open to the truth they had heard until it bore the fruit of salvation in their souls!

Now, we can call this grace of God drawing grace, illuminating grace, or quickening grace (that awakens the soul that is dead in trespasses and sins to the light of gospel truth so that the will is able to respond to it in faith). Paul discerned the work of God in their midst, but also realized it was possible for them to discontinue the journey toward gospel truth, and frustrate the grace of God.

The manner in which Paul dealt with these men is totally inconsistent with the philosophical notions of “unconditional election” and “irresistible grace.” If Paul had been a “sovereign grace” preacher, as some have mislabeled him, he would have been content to let God regenerate his elect without regard for their continuance in grace or the lack thereof. In fact, the seekers would have had no choice in the matter. But Paul appealed to them as one who knew they had a responsibility to cooperate with the grace of God, knowing that eternal danger was close at hand for those who rejected the work of grace (13:40-41).

During my years as a pastor, I witnessed on many occasions the grace of God working in the hearts of lost sinners. They would often come back to church Sunday after Sunday with an apparent hunger for the truth. It was always my prayer that they would continue in the grace of God, and during visits to their homes I would try to encourage them to do so. At times I would say, “The church cannot get you to heaven, but it’s a great place to catch the bus that can.” The metaphorical bus of which I spoke is the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have a lost friend, loved one, or acquaintance that is searching, then know that the grace of God is at work within them. Do all you can to persuade them to continue in that precious grace!

Ordained to Eternal Life

When we last left the apostle Paul in Antioch of Pisidia, he and Barnabas had persuaded many of the Jews and religious proselytes to continue in the grace of God. If Paul had been carrying a DayMinder business calendar, he might have already flipped over to the page for the next Sabbath day, and penciled in: "Preach again at synagogue by popular demand! God is moving!" These men had issued a bonafide invitation to Paul and his team, and the invite was accepted. So, like yeast in a batch of bread dough, the gospel of forgiveness through faith in Jesus—the One who died and rose again for Jews and Gentiles alike—had seven days to permeate the city...and permeate it did!

Think for a moment about the conversations that must have taken place that week at the work place, in the houses of friends as they visited, around dinner tables, and between attendees of the previous meeting who occasioned to meet. Those that took place between Gentiles must have been especially riveting. They were no doubt overwhelmed by the fact that a merciful God had included them in the offering up of his Son for the sins of the world. No more outcasts! No longer strangers to the promises! No longer relegated to proselyte status! It was an open door afforded to them by grace to stand justified by faith before a Holy God, and on equal footing with the Jews! Oh, that gospel must have been to them like a river of refreshing water in the midst of a dry and thirsty land. It is inconceivable to me that those Gentiles who heard it could have kept silent for a full week. By the way, how is it that we who have tasted grace of God are able to keep silent?

Luke tells us that "almost the whole city" came together on the next Sabbath day to hear the Word of God (Acts 13:44). That phrase does indeed make the case for permeation! A key omission is any mention of the synagogue. Since the entire city (minus a citizen or two) showed up, the meeting was most likely held outdoors. It's always a sure sign of God's grace and power at work when the gospel message actually breaks out from behind the meeting place walls and into the streets of the city!

The Jews did not respond well to this break out (13:45). I can see them leaving home for the synagogue as they had done many times before, expecting one more time to hear the itinerant Jewish evangelist speak of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. Upon their arrival at the meeting place, they were "filled with envy" when they saw the multitudes (plural) of Gentiles that had congregated. God was on the scene, and had messed up their solemn and predictable routine. I suppose what really stuck in their craw was the fact that God was extending his grace to Gentiles, and willing to by-pass the "chosen" in the process. So envy in the heart transformed these previously respectful men into blaspheming combatants. In my mind, the blasphemy was an accusation that Paul was speaking lies and operating under the power of Satan. There is no greater crime against heaven than that of standing between a lost sinner and the gospel that can save his or her soul!

Paul and Barnabas responded boldly to the verbal attacks (13:46-47). First, they affirmed the primacy of preaching to the Jews. It was necessary as a matter of election. Jesus had come to his chosen people even though they received him not. Secondly,

they pulled no punches in spelling out what the Jews were in the process of doing—rejecting the Word of the very God they claimed to worship! Thirdly, they pronounced a self-imposed sentence upon the Jews—unworthy of everlasting life! God imposes such a sentence on those who impose it upon themselves! Eternal life in the Lord Jesus Christ was theirs for the believing, but they chose to remain in unbelief. Fourthly, they informed the Jews that they could expect to see more of the same with respect to the Gentiles and salvation.

Those words reassured the Gentiles concerning God's good grace toward them (13:48). They were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. Expositor G. Campbell Morgan is correct when he states: "the word ordained has no reference whatsoever to any act of God" (*The Acts of The Apostles*, p. 334). He further cites the rendering of Rotherham's *Emphasized Bible*, which reads: "they that were *disposed* to eternal life." Any Greek lexicon will confirm that "to dispose" is a perfectly legitimate meaning of the Greek word. Nothing in Luke's inspired record suggests an act of Divine election that took place before the world began. The context makes absolutely clear what ordained (disposed) them to life eternal. It was the Word of God working on their open minds and hearts as they continued in the grace of God! A week of continuance in grace finally turned desire into disposition, and faith in Jesus was the result! The unbelieving Jews might have been ordained in like manner if they had continued in the same grace. But envy born of prejudice cut that continuance short, and sealed their eternal fate. Thanks be unto God for his matchless grace!

No Gospel in a Limited Atonement

The gospel from the days of its inception has been under attack. Satan will continue to do everything within his subtle and deceptive power to destroy or diminish it. He has no qualms about whom he uses to do his dirty work. He will use a secularist to assail the historicity of the resurrection, and create doubts about the authenticity of the message. He will use the religionist to argue that the cross represents the consummate act of an exemplary life, demonstrating what it takes to earn a resurrection from the dead rather than what it really is—a vicarious substitution for sinners and the payment for their sins. Perhaps his greatest delight is to use the Christian theologian for the purpose of limiting that atonement. If he cannot destroy the message, he is certainly willing to take what he can get to diminish its appeal or application to a lost and dying world.

What exactly is the gospel? Well, in 1 Corinthians 15:1-6, Paul declared to the church at Corinth the same message he preached to them while they were still lost in their sins—a message they received and by which they were saved through faith in the Christ who suffered in their stead. Paul delivered to them what he had first received from the Lord, that “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: and that he was seen...” (15:3-5). The good news Paul preached was that God in Christ had provided a remedy for (i.e., had done something about) their sins, and attested to the nature and value of Christ’s death by raising him from the dead on the third day.

Paul believed without equivocation that Jesus Christ died for all men without distinction or exception, and therefore could look with confidence into the eye of any man anywhere on the planet, and declare, “Christ died for your sins!” No pulpiteer who lacks that confidence has any right to call himself a gospel preacher, because the cross is the crux of the gospel. Earlier in the epistle, Paul affirmed that preaching the cross of Christ was equivalent to preaching the gospel (1:17-18). Preaching the gospel is preaching Christ crucified (1:23). Preaching Christ crucified is to declare to every sinner that Christ died for his or her sins, and that his precious blood was shed for them. According to Jesus, Paul’s boss, the gospel was meant to infiltrate “all the world” and to be heard by “every creature” (Mark 16:15). So much for limitations!

Preachers of a limited atonement will find themselves at odds with Paul and his gospel. Intellectual honesty will require of them to declare the following to their congregations: “Christ may or may not have died for your sins! Call upon the Lord Jesus and cross your fingers! If he died and rose again for you, he will save you. If you were excluded from that limited number for whom Christ died, he has neither the desire nor the ability to save you!” Few if any limited atonement preachers will ever display that kind of honesty, but it is exactly the dilemma they face when they attempt to limit to a select number what Paul openly applied to all!

In an effort to mask the aforementioned dilemma, limited atonement preachers typically resort to redefining the gospel. Charles Haddon Spurgeon is an example. In a sermon entitled “Election No Discouragement To Seeking Souls”, Spurgeon made this statement: “Furthermore, if we understand *the gospel* at all, the gospel lies in a nutshell.

It is this: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.'... This promise is the gospel" (*Spurgeon's Sermons*, Vol. 8, p. 233). Well, it is clear that Paul understood the gospel, and would have this to say to Spurgeon: "That promise, brother Charles, is *not* the gospel. It is the *offer* (or promise) of forgiveness and life eternal *based upon* the gospel that Christ died for our sins!" Because Spurgeon embraced the false doctrine of limited atonement, it was impossible for him to declare the gospel that Paul articulated. He was forced to redefine it because of the limited value and scope he placed upon the death of Christ.

In the same message, Spurgeon declared: "If any man who ever lived, or ever shall live, believes in Jesus Christ, he hath eternal life. Election or no election, if you are resting upon the rock of ages, you are saved. If you, as a guilty sinner, take the righteousness of Christ—if, all black and foul and filthy, you come to wash in the fountain filled with blood—sovereignty or no sovereignty, rest assured of this, that you are redeemed from the wrath to come" (*Ibid*, p. 233). Now, these words are commendable, but hypocritical. Spurgeon's theology taught him that there was neither effectual grace nor a fountain filled with blood for those excluded from the atonement. Spurgeon's words are indicative of his intellectual dishonesty in this area. Moreover, they enable us to understand that the great success of Spurgeon's ministry can be largely attributed to his inconsistencies with the tenets of Calvinism rather than his embrace of them.

The false doctrine of limited atonement has no place in gospel preaching for there is little or no gospel in it. Yet many good men of God fall prey to its philosophical appeal. If you are attending a church with a limited atonement pastor, then your church is virtually gospel-free. Lost sinners will never hear the good news that Christ died for their sins unless the pastor's preaching is inconsistent with his doctrine, as was Spurgeon's. If such is the case, may his inconsistencies abound to the glory of God!

The God That Keeps on Coming

For the first couple it was yet another pristine day in the paradise that was the Garden of Eden. There were no thorns or thistles to avoid, no weeds to pull, no environmental pollution, no aches or pains to distract from the day's work, no sin in the heart to disrupt their fellowship with God. Their world was perfection in every sense of the word. Jesus told the multitudes on the mount that "Solomon in all his glory" was not arrayed like a single lily in the field (Matt. 6:28-29). Nor was he arrayed like Adam and Eve in their sinless brilliance!

We are all well aware of the tempter's wiles as he solicited and deceived Eve with a promise of betterment for eating the God-forbidden fruit. Disobedient Eve was battered rather than bettered, and Adam joined her in their precipitous fall from innocence. The entire creation must have let out a collective groan laden with anguish as the stench of death began to permeate God's handiwork. The first couple found themselves hiding from the presence of God instead of basking in it. Did they really think they could hide themselves from the Lord God? If so, it reveals how rapidly satanic deception can lead to and foster self-deception!

The Bible says: "they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8-9). After they had hidden themselves, the "Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, 'Where art thou?'" Do you see the time lapse between the voice and the call? The scripture is clear as to what Adam heard in the post-hiding call, but silent concerning what he heard in the pre-hiding voice. In my mind, the content of voice and call were different, but the tone was the same. My sense is that the voice Adam and Eve heard was the lament of a father who arrives at the crash scene and finds his son's mangled body inside the wreckage. It would have been comparable to David mourning the death Absalom (2 Sam. 18:32-19:4). David cried, "O my son Absalom...Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" But that window of opportunity had passed for David. Ironically, in the fullness of time the Lord God would indeed die for Adam and his descendants outside the gates of Jerusalem. The "Where art thou?" that came from the Lord God must have been one of brokenness and pity over those that bore, and had now corrupted, his image!

The "Where art thou?" issued to Adam signifies something more glorious...and that is grace! We observe that, while fallen man is moving away from God, the Lord God keeps moving toward fallen man! The sinner continued to hide, but the Lord God continued to seek! So the first link in the chain of redemptive history reveals a God of grace and mercy whose nature it is to pursue sinners—and to keep on coming after them—in spite of their efforts to avoid him! This is fundamental to the character of God! Where would any of us be if God had abandoned his pursuit, and allowed us to continue hiding in our shame and nakedness?

If we were to ask Jacob why he ended up a saved man, he would tell us it was because the Lord God kept coming after him! We know Jacob's track record. Brother Esau and uncle Laban both bore the brunt of his trickery and deception, which accounts for him spending a good part of his adult life on the run. But God kept tracking him down! As he

used stones for pillows on his way to Haran, the Lord revealed himself to Jacob in a dream at the top of a ladder stretched between heaven and earth, promising him the land on which he slept and personal safety along the way (Gen. 28:10-19). Jacob called the place Bethel—the house of God. The Lord was ever present in Jacob's affairs during his twenty years in Haran. At the end of his tenure, God instructed him to return to the land of his fathers, warning Laban to take care how he spoke to Jacob (31:3, 13, 24). At last came the face-to-face wrestling match with the God-Man at Peniel. The limp he took away from that encounter was a permanent reminder of grace that would not let him go!

If we were to ask Paul how he ended up a saved man and an apostle, he would likewise tell us it was because the Lord God refused to abandon his pursuit! The words “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” came to the Tarsus-born Pharisee with the same impact as they came to Adam. After revealing himself to Saul as Jesus, the One he was persecuting, the Lord added: “it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:4-5). With every arrest—witnessing the glory of God displayed on the countenances of those he imprisoned—the Holy Ghost was pricking him with conviction. Saul kept kicking, but the Lord kept pricking! Saul kept running, but the Lord God kept coming! The words, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” signaled a capitulation and surrender to the will of God. Saul of Tarsus was transformed into Paul the apostle, and rest is history!

It is true that there are none that seek after God in their unregenerate state (Rom. 3:11). But it is also true that the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). It is the initiative of a merciful God that accounts for the salvation of any sinner who finds forgiveness and life eternal through the Lord Jesus! Thank you, Lord Jesus, for being the God who keeps on coming!

His Dear Son

In Colossians 1:13, the apostle Paul captured the very essence of the Christmas season when he penned these three words: “His dear Son.” In the context, Paul was attributing praise to the Father, who, by his grace, had made us believers fit to partake of an incomprehensible inheritance, having delivered us from the power of darkness, and having translated us into his dear Son’s kingdom. Christmas is all about the dear Son who came to seek and save that which was lost, and to deliver and translate believers into his eternal kingdom.

Christmas is all about the child that was born, and the son that was given (Isaiah 9:6). It was impossible for the son to be born, for he is eternal. The child, however, was born of a virgin maiden named Mary, and the body of that child fused with the second person of the triune Godhead by the power of Holy Spirit. Jehovah as Jesus tabernacled in that body for thirty-three years prior to his crucifixion, wherein he shed the blood required to deliver and to translate the aforementioned believers. The glory of glories is that the body God used to make himself both visible and observable to mankind is now—by virtue of the resurrection—eternal as well. God Almighty in the person of Christ Jesus fused himself with that glorified body for eternity. No human mind can comprehend the grace that fomented this kind of commitment on God’s part.

The blood that pulsated through the arteries and veins of Jesus constituted the purchasing power necessary to redeem and forgive sinners (Col. 1:14). Those who are “in him” by virtue of a spiritual (or second) birth from above have redemption and the forgiveness of sins as current and permanent possessions. Any and all gifts ever exchanged between men—in their cumulative value—pale in comparison to that which God has chosen to bestow upon those men, women, and young folk alike who entrust their eternal souls to his dear Son. As you gather ‘round your Christmas tree for the opening of gifts, why not take a few moments to acknowledge the great gifts of redemption and forgiveness that God in his grace has lavished upon us.

The dear Son is also “the image of the invisible God” (1:15). *Image* is the Greek **eikon**, which signifies an exact representation as opposed to a mere resemblance. Jesus used it to refer to the image of Caesar on the Roman coinage of his day. With a penny in hand, Jesus asked: “Whose is this image and inscription?” (Matt. 22:20). They responded, “Caesar’s” (22:21). The point is that no one in the Roman Empire, in looking at the image on that coin and the inscription that accompanied it, could possibly mistake it for someone other than Caesar. Paul’s inspired use of the word to describe the Lord Jesus is meant to convey this sense of assurance to all men, especially believers—seeing his dear Son in action is equivalent to seeing God in action! And if the Christmas season has any meaning at all, it surely means that God in the person of his dear Son took an action only he could take—the incarnation of himself—to provide redemption and the forgiveness of sins to a lost humanity for which he was willing to die.

The secular minds of our nation (especially those in positions of leadership and influence) are doing all they can to transform the Christmas Season into the Holiday Season. That they have a visceral disdain for the kingdom of Christ is obvious to the

most casual observer. I remember watching C-SPAN last year when Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert was sharing a few dedicatory remarks regarding the "Tree" on the Capitol Building grounds. In a slip of the tongue, he made mention of the "Christmas" tree, then abruptly corrected himself by using the politically correct "Holiday" to describe it. That turned out to be his only mention of the word "Christmas." Now, Dennis Hastert is a good man, and my sense is that the "Christmas" slip came from his heart. But the pervasive pressures of political correctness (i.e., spiritual wrongness) that are dominating the dialogue in Washington, D.C. these days caused the governmental leader to immediately assume a "non-offensive" posture under the scrutiny of the cameras.

It will be interesting to observe how many times "Holiday" is used instead of "Christmas" to describe the blessed season that is upon us. For those of us who know and love the truth, it is and always will be about God's dear Son. Christmas signifies the good will of God toward men—all men—in the person of his dear Son! Christmas is the season to celebrate the redemption and forgiveness of sins secured through the blood of his dear Son! Christmas is the time to reflect afresh upon our deliverance from the power of darkness and translation into the kingdom of his dear Son! For those who embrace the concept of Holiday and reject the Christ of Christmas, the power of darkness shall be an integral part of their future.

The Mighty Grace of God

Paul wrote his epistle to Titus at about the same time he penned his first epistle to Timothy. According to Paul, he left Titus on the island of Crete to “set in order” the organizational structure that was lacking in the churches (Titus 1:5). In the first chapter, Paul laid down the qualifications for bishops (pastors) who would have the spiritual oversight of the congregations (1:6-16). In chapter two, he spelled out the spiritual and moral attributes that should characterize every believer within their memberships (2:1-10). In its closing verses, Paul set forth what ought to be our motivation for holiness of life—the grace of God (2:11-14).

Grace has been variously defined in an effort to get a grip on an incomprehensible concept. Some say it is God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Others say it is God doing something for sinners that they cannot do for themselves. Others opt for the timeless standard—the unmerited favor of God. All of us would agree that grace is the free, unmerited favor of God that flows from his merciful being towards undeserving and needy sinners! And at the Christmas season, the story of the babe in a manger (when reduced to its lowest common denominator) is indeed the story of the mighty grace of God toward sinful men!

The “mighty grace of God” is a phrase derived from connecting *the grace of God* (2:11) with *the great God* (2:13). The reasoning is that any grace that proceeds from a great God must of necessity be great (mighty) in its essence! The post-Pentecostal church in Jerusalem understood this connection rather well. After Peter and John had preached the “None Other Name” gospel in the temple (Acts 4:12), and had been threatened by the religious authorities for doing so (4:17-29), they left to share their experience with the company of believers. The result was a building-shaking prayer meeting, a fresh filling of the Holy Ghost, and bold outspokenness regarding the Word of God (4:31). This exhibition of “great power” was due directly to the “great grace” that was operative on the scene (4:33). Has any era of the church needed a dose of mighty grace more than ours?

As we consider the grace of God as our motivation for holiness of life, we discover that it consists of three distinct features. First, the mighty grace of God is an enabling grace. The phrase “that bringeth salvation” is adjectival in nature, and is literally “a salvation-bringing kind of grace.” It is a grace that can bring both deliverance and enablement to those who embrace it. Its “appearance” on the world stage is a reference to the incarnation of God himself as Jesus of Nazareth. As to his person, Jesus is the Bread of life, the Light of the world, the Door of the sheepfold and the Shepherd of the sheep, the Resurrection and the Life, and the Vine from whom believers draw life-giving sustenance and fruit-bearing ability. As to his work, Jesus is the Lamb of God that took away the sin of the world (John 1:29); who, on the cross, became sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Corinthians 5:21). The grace of God that appeared to all men (without distinction or exception) reached its crescendo at the cross of Christ!

Secondly, the mighty grace of God is an educating grace. It teaches us how we should live. *Teaching* is from the Greek **paideuo**, signifying the training and discipline of

children. The grace of God teaches the child of God how he or she should live within the family of God before a lost world. The “how” of our living is described by three adverbs and two participles. The adverbs are: 1) *soberly*—with a soundness of mind that is marked by self-restraint; 2) *righteously*—with an uprightness of conduct that is neither crooked nor slanted; and 3) *godly*—with a God-consciousness that leads to conduct that he approves. The participles are: 1) *denying*—an ongoing repudiation of ungodliness and worldly lusts; and 2) *looking*—an ongoing expectancy of seeing the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ at any time. Any pastor whose preaching targets these five areas will find himself loved by the sheep and loathed by the goats.

Thirdly, the mighty grace of God is an emancipating grace. *Redeem* is from the Greek **lutroo**, signifying the release or rescue from bondage by payment of a ransom. It speaks of freedom for the ransomed! The thing we are released from is “all iniquity.” *Iniquity* is from the Greek **anomia**, signifying lawlessness (a refusal to be bound by the dictates of a higher authority). It is the same spirit exemplified by those who opposed God’s anointed: “Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us” (Psalm 2:3). One of the key indicators of redemption is submission to the authority of the Redeemer. The work of emancipating grace is to *purify* its objects (cleanse from any and all admixture of evil), and to produce a people who are *peculiar* (the unique possession of their conquering King) by virtue of their being *zealous of good works* (a desire that burns from within to do that which is right in the sight of God and men).

The grace of God is a mighty grace, having the power to enable, educate, and emancipate. The mighty grace of God appeared in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and is an ongoing resource for believers to serve him with purity and zeal until they see him face-to-face. And all God’s people said, “Amen!”