

Truth On Fire

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Capitulation

There is a scenario that plays itself out with frequency in the financial arena. Consider the average investor who buys shares of a particular stock with the expectation of selling them for a profit at some future date. Over a period of time, however, the market goes against that investor with the stock price slipping lower and lower. At some point, the pain of stock value decline exceeds any lingering hope of a turnaround. The investor finally throws up his or her hands, and sells the stock to forego additional pain. In the jargon of investing, this sell moment is referred to as capitulation.

The dictionary provides two definitions for capitulation: (1) a set of terms or articles constituting an agreement between governments (e.g., the Japanese agreeing to and signing documents of unconditional surrender at the close of World War II), and (2) the act of surrendering or yielding (e.g., the mixed martial arts fighter who taps out due to a rear naked choke). In each instance, capitulation takes place when some entity is able to impose its will upon the one who capitulates.

Now, while capitulation is not a biblical word, it is most certainly a spiritual concept that is vividly depicted throughout the scriptures. In fact, it can be argued that the favour of God is impossible without it. Moreover, repentance, without which Jesus said men would perish in their sins (Luke 13:1-5), is essentially the capitulation of the sinner's will to the will of God. Consider with me the following examples.

The most prominent illustration of capitulation is found in Saul of Tarsus as he traveled on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-6). Like the aforementioned investor dealing with the pain of stock value loss, Saul was dealing with and kicking against his own internal pain ("pricks") wrought by Holy Ghost conviction. This encounter of the divine kind resulted in Saul's surrender as reflected in these words: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

In like manner, the Philippian jailor ("keeper of the prison") found himself in a disconcerting situation when Paul and Silas, who had had "many stripes" laid upon them and were placed in his charge, got caught up in a late-night praise session (Acts 16:19-34). I am convinced that the great earthquake that shook the prison foundations—indicative of God's imminent presence—caused the jailor, whose entire career was characterized by total alignment with Rome, to realize that alignment with the God of these Spirit-filled men was of far greater import. In his moment of capitulation, the jailor voiced the desire of his heart: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

The need for capitulation is as needful for the saint as it is for the sinner. The patriarch Abraham had long since been justified by faith (Genesis 15:6) when the Lord instructed him to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice (22:1-12). At issue was whether this saved man would hold on to that which was dear to his heart and withhold it from God in the process (22:12). Abraham's fear of (reverence for) his Lord trumped any temptation he might have had to forego obedience.

In his capitulation, Abraham provided an eternal type of the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. And in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus demonstrated that same spirit of capitulation when he prayed: "Father...not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). In

most cases, moments of capitulation have in view the alleviation of pain. In our Lord's case, however, his yieldedness to the Father's will served as a gateway to the most excruciating pain ever endured by a man...for our sins!

On the flip side of the capitulation coin are those who refused to do so when the opportunity was presented to them. Cain is the classic case (Genesis 4:1-16). After rejecting Cain's offering, the Lord reasoned with him regarding acceptance for "doing well" and the danger of sin lying "at the door" if he chose the path of non-capitulation. In his obstinance, Cain opted for sin, murdered his brother, became a marked fugitive, and subsequently "went out from the presence of the LORD."

Mark 10:17-22 tells us of a man with "great possessions" who ran to Jesus, kneeled down before him, and asked: "Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" (10:17). Jesus beholding him loved him, and provided the terms of capitulation: "Go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up thy cross, and follow me" (10:21). Rather than comply with those terms, he was saddened by what he heard and "went away grieved" (10:22). The episode of this rich man demonstrates that the act of capitulation by a sinner necessitates the dethronement of false god(s)—money or otherwise—and the enthronement of the true and living God upon the seat of the heart!

Perhaps the main reason why local churches struggle to be holy and fail to influence a lost and dying world is a membership that consists of too many men and women whose confession with the mouth (i.e., praying the prayer) was never coupled with capitulation of the heart. Judas comes to mind. In spite of his three-year association with the Lord Jesus, his was a capitulation-free ministry that eventually led him to betray the Lord Jesus when the price was right.

In addition to what the scriptures say about those who capitulated to the will of God and others who refused to do so, they reveal that ultimate capitulation is inevitable for every living soul. In Philippians 2:9-11, Paul declared that the exaltation of Christ would have as its result the bowing of every knee and the confessing of every tongue that "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." The wise individual will find a place of capitulation to Christ in this life and prepare him- or herself for the life to come.

I am reminded of the mechanic's closing line in that once-popular Fram Oil Filter commercial: "You can pay me now, or pay me later." And so it is in the spiritual realm. Sinners can capitulate to the will of God in this life with eternal benefit or capitulate at the Great White Throne where all hope of salvation is long gone!

Trace Evidence

The last several years have seen a proliferation of TV shows whose central theme is Crime Scene Investigation (CSI). The first CSI location was Las Vegas. We now have CSI: New York, CSI: Miami, and Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS). I suspect that one reason for their popularity is the intriguing pursuit of trace evidence left at crime scenes that often escapes detection by the human eye. Upon discovery, these often microscopic traces tell an incriminating story that can lead to an indictment and a conviction.

In a very real sense, the human heart is a crime scene that warrants investigation! The prophet Jeremiah tells us that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9), and then follows with “I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins” (17:10). So, to analogize that the heart of man is a spiritual venue with trace evidence of crimes against the Almighty—Who is the only One capable of finding and exposing the criminal evidence—requires no stretching of the truth!

In speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus divided the world into two classes of men—the doers of truth and the doers of evil (John 3:18-21). He drew an instructive distinction between them regarding how they respond to the light of truth. The doer of truth comes to the light on a regular basis. The application of God's template for holiness enables him to know where he stands with God. It affirms his compliance to truth and identifies trace evidence of non-compliance (i.e., spiritual crimes). Contrariwise, the doer of evil loves the darkness and therefore hates the light. He avoids the light at any cost for this reason: “lest his deeds should be reproved” (3:20).

The Greek word for *reproved* is **elegcho**, which signifies (1) a conviction of wrongdoing accompanied by verbal rebuke and a sense of shame, and (2) a finding of fault and calling to account with a view to correction. Deeds of the evil doer are spiritual crimes for which he disallows divine scrutiny. For light may lead to reproof, reproof to shame, shame to corrective action, and correction action to holiness of life. The doer of evil is averse to this kind of outcome! Reproof from the Word of God is what unregenerate men seek to avoid at all costs.

Now, where the doer of evil is concerned, our crime scene analogy breaks down slightly. For when the real-life criminal commits his unlawful deed(s), he typically flees the scene in hopes that he left nothing incriminating behind. But the doer of evil carries the crime scene wherever he goes. He *is* the crime scene! And at the door of his heart is a barricade of unbelief that bars the light of truth from invading the premises.

The doer of truth, on the other hand, knows full well the deceitful nature of his heart. The thought of his heart being a crime scene is troubling to him. He therefore seeks to remove any and all impediments to the infiltration of light. He opens his heart on a regular basis for routine surveillance. If he suspects a spiritual crime has been committed, he calls in the proper authorities (Word and Spirit) to search the premises for trace evidence. If it is discovered, he yields himself to the Master Investigator for prompt and thorough clean up.

Although we seldom think of our hearts as spiritual crime scenes, there is no question that they are exactly that. Every day in the life of a believer should include a routine crime scene investigation via the intrusion of light. But the unbeliever will have none of this. This is the fundamental difference between the two classes regarding the light—an affinity by the one and an aversion by the other. Which of these two is representative of your disposition toward the light?

In the classic Christian hymn *At the Cross*, Isaac Watts penned a set of lyrics that have stood the test of time and endeared themselves to the hearts of millions who have sung them. The second verse reads as follows:

“Was it for crimes that I had done
He groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity, grace unknown,
And love beyond degree!

Thanks be unto God for providing in the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ the cure for our spiritual crimes! A cause for greater rejoicing is the assurance that the trace evidence of our spiritual crimes, having been found and removed by our Lord, will never make its way to an evidence locker as a basis for future prosecution!

On a Collision Course with Compassion

Across the globe at this very hour, there are literally thousands of air traffic controllers monitoring the flight paths of both commercial and general aviation aircraft from their control towers. Their express purpose is to orchestrate the orderly departure and arrival of flights to and from their respective destinations and origins as they fly through the first heaven. A failure to provide accurate airspeed, altitude and course instructions to pilots could result in a catastrophic midair or tarmac collision resulting in an extensive loss of life.

Seated on his throne in the third heaven, the Controller of the heavens and earth, on a daily, hourly and minute-by-minute basis, orchestrates the paths and circumstances of sinners, both saved and lost, for the express purpose of ensuring that collisions of a different sort do indeed take place. These would be collisions with compassion!

In Mark 5:1-20, we find the story of one who is often referred to as the Gadarene Maniac. While the word "maniac" is found nowhere in Scripture, it is, by strict definition, a fitting description of this man—one who displayed excessive enthusiasm beyond the limits of sanity. He was demon-possessed, lived in a graveyard, derived abnormal strength from a band of demons that rendered him uncontrollable by his fellow man, inflicted bodily harm to himself on a regular basis, and cried continually as an expression of his pathetic sadness. Here was a man in desperate need of compassion!

Now, the self-righteous among us might be inclined to be dismissive of this man inasmuch as his pathetic state in no way represents them in terms of sin depth and degree. But I would remind them of the difference between those who are infected with the HIV virus and those that present with full-blown AIDS. Both are infected by the same lethal virus and by-and-by will end up dead. In like manner, every sinner suffers under the abiding principle of sin without regard for the presence of full-blown depravity and or desecration.

With the words "*there met him*"(v.2), Mark confirms the meeting (i.e., collision) between Jesus and the maniac. He paints a stark contrast by stating that Jesus came "*out of the ship*" (a picture of life and service in the will of God) and that the maniac came "*out of the tombs*" (a picture of death and servitude in the will of Satan). What we have here is nothing less than a head-on collision between two opposing forces. The maniac had no idea that he was on a collision course with compassion! The change that resulted from this collision represents perhaps the most spectacular transformation of life recorded in scripture.

In 5:19, Jesus said it was *compassion* that had made the difference. The Greek is **splangna** (the viscera, vital organs, the seat of emotions that compels one to render aid in proportion to the need). The same compassion was responsible for the following transformative collisions: the wounded half-dead man found by the good Samaritan on the road to Jericho (Luke 10:30-37); the Samaritan woman whom Jesus encountered at the well (John 4:4-30); the life-long lame man whom Peter and John met at the temple gate (Acts 3:1-11); the Ethiopian eunuch returning from Jerusalem whom Philip

evangelized in the Gaza desert (Acts 8:26-40); the Roman jailor at Philippi whom Paul and Silas encountered in prison (Acts 16:23-34); and the runaway slave Onesimus whom Paul won to Christ in a Roman jail (Philemon 10-12). All of these collisions were brought to pass by a gracious God who reigns over his universe! And he's still in the business of doing so!

At this point, it is instructive to consider the petitions in our text. First, Legion requested that Jesus would not send them out of the country (v.10), and followed that up with a second request to be sent into the swine (v.12). Jesus granted both requests (v.13). Secondly, after the swine drowned, the citizenry requested that Jesus depart from their coast (v.17), and forthwith Jesus got into the ship to depart, granting their request (v.18). Thirdly, the maniac, having been freed from the bondage of sin, prayed that he might accompany Jesus in the boat and beyond (v.18). Jesus denied his request, but rather gave him other instructions, which he obeyed. (v.19-20). The important lesson we learn from these observations is that answered prayer alone is never an ironclad proof of spiritual transformation! Obedience is!

In closing, two questions come to mind. The first: have you had a collision with compassion that has washed you from your sins and set you on a course of obedience to Christ? The second: are you and I living in such a spiritual state that God can bring lost sinners into close enough proximity to us that collisions take place, the compassion of Jesus is heard and felt, and lives are transformed as a result? I am quite certain that there are lost sinners in each of our neighborhoods, places of employment and other locals we frequent with whom God would have us collide for the purpose of evangelism. It must break his heart when we are so spiritually dull and powerless that we fail to discern the compassionate collisions he has orchestrated!

The Power of a Preposition

The preposition is a part of speech that plays a key role in sentence structure. It is “pre-positioned” before its object(s) in a prepositional phrase for the purpose of describing and or augmenting the noun or verb that it modifies. And while they typically consist of few letters, they can pack a powerful punch!

The two-letter preposition “in” is a prime example. It is extremely versatile, and can have several meanings depending on its object. It can be used as a reference to location (e.g., in Florida), condition (e.g., in trouble, in debt, in love), position (e.g., in office), direction (e.g., in route) or dispensation of time (e.g., in the summer).

There are 9,526 verses in the King James Bible (1611 KJV) where “in” is used a total of 12,674 times. In fact, it is the very first word of scripture: “IN the beginning, God...” (Genesis 1:1). Consider its five-fold usage in describing the “Blessed” man, who “walketh not IN the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth IN the way of sinners, nor sitteth IN the seat of the scornful. But his delight is IN the law of the LORD; and IN his law doth he meditate day and night” (Psalm 1:1-2). And in terms of one’s eternal destiny, position is everything: “For as IN Adam all die, even so IN Christ shall all be made alive” (I Corinthians 15:22).

In John 8:20-24, the apostle records for us a verbal exchange that took place *in* the treasury between Jesus and Israel’s elite religious leadership as he taught *in* the temple. Jesus utilized the phrase “ye shall die IN your sins” three times both to affirm their spiritual condition and to predict their spiritual end if they persisted in unbelief. To be IN one’s sins is the ultimate trouble; and to die IN one’s sins is the ultimate disaster.

Now, one might find him- or herself IN debt, IN foreclosure, IN a divorce, IN jail, IN the hospital, IN bankruptcy, or IN a fight for life with a dreaded illness. But none of these distasteful conditions can be compared to the peril incurred by a persistent state of unbelief that leaves the unbeliever IN his or her sins until death and hell claim them. The human mind is incapable of imagining a more tragic end of a life!

A few observations are in order. The first is the admonition of Jesus. The warning to the scribes and Pharisees regarding their sins was spoken by One who was Sinless from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet (i.e., he packed the spiritual and moral authority to do so). The word “sins” (plural) was indicative of multiple indictments, and the pronoun “your” made the warning intensely personal in nature. Sin is always a personal matter for which men are singularly accountable!

The second is the response of the self-righteous. They were viscerally irritated by our Lord’s analysis of their condition. If you’re a member of the religious elite, and you’ve just been confronted with “your sins”, it’s not going to sit too well! So, in response to “*whither I go, ye cannot come*” (v.21), they concluded (based on the assumption that they were bound for glory) that Jesus was going to commit suicide—a one-way ticket to hell in their minds (v.22). These critics of our Lord, who were operating IN their sins, demonstrated that it is possible to be in the presence of Deity and misconstrue it for darkness! They

were masters of making the right wrong and the wrong right, turning virtue into vice and vice into virtue!

This same phenomenon is currently on display in our national leadership. The Bible affirms the sanctity of human life (Psalm 139:13-17), but President Barack Obama (and his liberal cohorts) treat abortion as a virtue. Obama virtually endorsed infanticide as a member of the Illinois senate, and is perhaps the most passionate proponent of abortion to have ever held elected office. The Bible advocates freedom from debt (Romans 13:8) and avoidance of surety for others (Proverbs 17:18), but Obama, unlike any of his predecessors, has authorized multiple trillions in unfunded spending that will balloon the national debt and make us surety to the Chinese, who already own half of that debt. The Bible condemns the homosexual lifestyle as an abomination (Leviticus 18:22) that is against nature itself (Romans 1:26-27), but Obama recently granted benefits to the same-sex partners of federal employees.

President Obama and his minions are clearly masters of making the right wrong and the wrong right. As the elites of old, they appear to be operating **IN** their sins! We should therefore pray earnestly for our national leaders! The future of America hangs in the balance!

The third is a subtle reference to redemption from sins. In my mind, when Jesus said, "*I go my way*" (v.21), he was referring to the way of the Cross—a way that he alone would and could travel—that would ultimately take him back to the Father's right hand as the One Mediator between God and men! In believing the gospel truths regarding his precious atoning blood and triumphant resurrection from the dead, those who are **IN** their sins can get **OUT OF** their sins and **INTO** Christ!

All of us at this hour are in any number of conditions—some good and some not so good. In whatever state (or states) we happen to we find ourselves, let's be sure that "**IN** our sins" is not one of them! Faith **IN** the Lord Jesus is the only way **OUT** of our sins! Such is the power of a preposition!

Thank You Dubya!

We are now approaching the six-month mark in the Obama administration, which continues to play the Blame-My-Predecessor game. The way things are going we can expect the Obama administration to blame George W. Bush for America's economic ills through the Fall of 2012, when it will then announce that they have finally stopped the hemorrhaging and need another four years to restore the patient to health. This prediction assumes that the United States will survive as a Representative Republic—and not as a Banana Republic—for another three-and-a-half years!

The scriptures affirm that our rulers (i.e., those who wield political power and authority over us) are ordained of God (Romans 13:1-7). They are his ministers, who serve as a terror to evil works and supporter of good works (v.3). As his ministers, they have the authority to execute wrath against the doers of evil (v.4), and collect tribute (taxes) for the function of government (v.6). We should therefore render to our leaders the tribute, custom, fear and honor that is due them (v.7). So, at this point in time, I would like to extend a little honor and thanks to our forty-third president, George W. Bush, whom many affectionately (or not so affectionately) refer to as “Dubya”.

First, thank you for your commitment to the sanctity of life, and for providing a speed bump to abortion—the premeditated murder of the unborn. By precluding the use of federal funds for the finance of abortions, you kept tens of millions of folks like me from being party to this heinous act. And by likewise disallowing the use of tax dollars for embryonic stem cell research, you impeded the wicked desires of those who would readily justify the destruction of one human life for the alleged saving or improving of another.

Secondly, thank you for lowering our tax rates. The Economic Growth and Tax Reform Reconciliation Act of 2001 (EGTRRA), the Job Creation and Workers Assistance Act of 2002 (JCWA), and The Jobs and Growth Tax Relief and Reconciliation Act of 2003 (JGTRRA) provided critical and timely boosts for our economy, which was reeling from the financial aftermath of 9/11/01. While often referred to as “Tax Cuts for the Rich” by the prevaricating practitioners of class warfare, they actually shifted a greater share of tax liability to the so-called “Rich” by virtue of their positive effect on total tax revenue. Under your tax cuts, tax liability for the bottom 20% of taxpayers *declined* from .50% to .30%; the second 20% from 2.30% to 1.90%; the third 20% from 5.90% to 5.20%; and the fourth 20% from 12.60% to 11.60%. The top 20% of taxpayers (\$68,300+ per year) saw their share of tax liability *increase* from 78.70% to 81.00% (taxliability.org). Ironically enough, allowing your tax cuts to expire, as the current administration has advocated, will increase tax liability for all but the top 20% of wage earners. Such is the bankrupt class-warfare logic of the liberal mind! Go figure!

Thirdly, thank you for nominating (with subsequent appointment) Supreme Court justices John Roberts and Samuel Alito. This will be perhaps your greatest and most lasting legacy. These men are what many might call strict constructionists and or originalists. In other words, they neither make law (public policy) from the bench nor appeal to international law as a point of reference, but rather seek to apply the Constitution and its

precepts to pending litigation on a case-by-case basis to arrive at a just outcome. Again, these two originalists will serve as speed bumps to a liberal element that thinks its job is to create new law rather than interpret existing law!

Fourthly, thank you for keeping America safe from foreign terror attacks during your last seven years. You took the steps necessary to fulfill what you properly understood to be your number one job—protecting the America people! Historians and policy wonks will continue to debate whether the actions taken by your administration reached a little too far into the privacy of citizens. That is not my concern here. The fact is none can gainsay your attack-free track record since 9/11/01.

Now, having offered my heart-felt thanks for the aforementioned achievements, I must say that you were a source of great frustration to me as a Bible-believing conservative. How could anyone in his or her right mind refer to Islam as a “great religion” (as you did) that was being hijacked by radical Muslims? Allah is a fiction, a demonic fraud dragging billions into the flames of Hell. Why give credence to a religious hoax? In addition, you initiated budget-busting entitlement programs, such as No Child Left Behind (2002) and the Medicare Drug Bill (2003), which expanded the role of and dependence upon government for millions of Americans. We appreciate your intent, but rue the unintended consequences of bigger and more intrusive government.

Mr. Bush, I speak for millions when I say that your oft-practiced silence in the face of distortions by your critics left me totally bewildered. I wish you could have made better arguments for those things that you did right on behalf of America. But I think I understand...at least a little. Despite your imperfections and shortcomings as a leader, you conducted yourself with both character and class, and refused to be dragged into the political and moral cesspool within which secularism and liberalism continue to operate. So, on balance, let me say: “Thank You, Dubya!”

Angering the Almighty

Moses is one of the greatest figures to have graced the pages of scripture. He was reputed to have spoken with God face-to-face on a regular basis as a man would speak with a friend (Exodus 33:11). His meekness was unmatched by any of his fellow mortals (Numbers 12:3). In his gospel message to the Jewish council, Stephen affirmed that Moses was a “learned” man who was “mighty in words and in deeds” (Acts 7:22). And the writer of Hebrews tells us that Moses, as a man of faith, had his spiritual priorities in perfect order (11:24-26).

Moses was without doubt the spiritual man's man. It is difficult to imagine the Old Testament scriptures without his ministry included within its pages. Yet all his miraculous service, spiritual prowess, and sterling example of faith were nearly lost over a single act of disobedience. Moses found himself on God's Death Row with his life and future ministry hanging in the balance!

Our story begins at the burning bush where the Angel of the Lord appeared to him (Exodus 3:1-6). As he turned aside to behold the display, the words “Moses, Moses” emanated from the bush, to which he responded: “Here am I.” God's supernatural presence had sanctified the desert sand, and so Moses, upon instruction regarding the holiness of the ground upon which he stood, removed his shoes from his feet, and hid his face in fear as the Lord further identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So far, so good! Moses responded perfectly.

The Lord continued the dialogue by explaining to Moses the purpose behind his appearance—the “affliction”, “sorrows” and “oppression” of his people over a four-hundred-year period (3:7-10). The Lord had seen enough! It was time for him to bring his people out of Egypt. He called upon Moses to get the job done, and confirmed that call with these words: “I will send thee unto Pharaoh.”

I suspect that that phrase struck trepidation in the heart of this shepherd who had found safety and contentment far removed from his Egyptian past. This commission meant an inevitable confrontation with the political forces than once sought to take his life. Moreover, it represented a major disruption to his routine as well as dislocation and relocation of his family to a hostile environment. How many of us would have replied: “Okay, Lord! When do we get started?” Not many...and neither did Moses. But he is not yet in spiritual trouble notwithstanding his less-than-enthusiastic response, as we shall now examine in phase two of our story.

Moses responded by disqualifying himself for the mission, citing a four-fold list of inadequacies. Shall we call them excuses? I can identify with Moses on the matter of inadequacy. After God called me to preach, I spent the next three months trying to convince him that he made a big mistake. I finally saw things his way and made my call public. Now let's consider the excuses offered by Moses as reasons for God to reconsider his selection.

Excuse 1: No Reputation (3:11-12). Moses declared: “Who am I?” He was basically appealing to the passage of time as that which had erased any remembrance of his

former formidable stature in Egypt. But now, in his mind, he that was once somebody is a virtual nobody. God's rejoinder: "I will be with thee." Blessed is that individual who comes to embrace the presence of God as the solitary source from which to derive significance for ministry.

Excuse 2: No Message (3:13-22). Moses asked: "What shall I say unto them?" Moses claims to be unequipped in terms of message and therefore unable to make the case. God's rejoinder: "I AM THAT I AM" and "I AM hath sent me." He assures Moses that they will listen to and follow his message based on an authoritative word from their God. And every God-called preacher in this age has sixty-six inspired, infallible and preserved books of unadulterated truth with which to feed the people of God so they might believe and follow HIM!

Excuse 3: No Credentials (4:1-9). Moses openly contradicts the Lord with: "But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, 'The Lord hath not appeared unto thee.'" He claims it will be his word against theirs...that he lacks the credentials to win the day. Moses actually questioned the veracity of God's prophetic word, yet the Lord continued to deal patiently with him. God's rejoinder: Three displays of transformative power—(1) The rod that transformed into a serpent, (2) The hand that transformed into a leprous one, and (3) The water from the river transformed into blood when poured upon dry land. Brethren, if we fail to preach the Word in power with the result that lives are overtly transformed for a lost world to see, are not our ministries failures? Is transformative power on display in your church? If not, it's your word against theirs!

Excuse 4: No Talent (4:10-12). Moses declares: "O my Lord, I am not eloquent...but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." He claims to have had a speech impediment long before the burning bush caught his attention and that nothing had occurred since their meeting began to alter his articulative handicap. God's rejoinder: "Go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say." The Lord appealed to Moses on the basis of his creative ability to enable him for ministry. And so he appeals to us...never sending any servant on a mission without providing the talent—gifts and abilities—to get the job done! Now to phase three.

Four excuses were offered and answered with a word of provision. Having reached the end of his excusatorial rope, Moses erupts with this: "O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send" (4:13). Now, it's clear to me that Moses was expressing one of the following sentiments: (1) If you're set on sending me, although I've made it clear that I have no desire to do this, then go ahead and send me! (2) Can't you take a hint? You need to find and send another messenger boy! As a result of this shift in attitude, the "*anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses*" (4:14). He then enlisted his brother Aaron to serve as spokesman (4:14-17).

Point of instruction: God will reason with one of his own with great longsuffering up to the point where a sense of unworthiness shifts to a spirit of unwillingness. When the recipient of special REVELATION responds with RELUCTANCE, he or she will likely anger the Almighty! And RELUCTANCE spawns DISOBEDIENCE!

Our story now moves into the fourth and final phase. Moses returned to Jethro his father-in-law to secure his blessing. Jethro provides it (4:18). The Lord informs Moses that those who sought his life are now dead. With that word of assurance, Moses heads for Egypt with his wife, sons and the “rod of God” in his hand (4:19-20). One detail, however, was left undone—the circumcision of a son. In reading the text of 4:24-26, it is clear to me that wife Zipporah had objected to the circumcision, causing Moses to back down from the Abrahamic rite. He may have reasoned: “Surely the Lord would rather have my family united for ministry than divided by this ritual.” Or as Christian comedian Jeff Allen would say: “Happy Wife, Happy Life.” But no amount of accommodation manward can compensate for disobedience Godward.

Therefore “it came to pass by the way in the inn that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him.” The scripture does not provide the verbal detail of this meeting, but I sense the Lord said something akin to this: “Moses, I want that boy circumcised or you’re a dead man! You are not indispensable to this mission! I will not tolerate disobedience in my leader! Tell your wife that it’s either a circumcised son or widowhood! No other options exist!” Zipporah opted for circumcision, but not without twice expressing her disgust with Moses. Her problem, however, was with God. Nevertheless obedience pleased the Lord and assuaged his anger, so that “he let him go.”

Having therefore exited death row, Moses and his brother Aaron met with the Jewish leaders and enjoyed the measure of success God had predicted (4:27-31). Moses angered the Almighty with his reluctance and faced execution by reason of his disobedience. What set him free to experience all the power and privileges God had in store for his future was obedience to the known will of God! May the Lord enable us to go and do likewise!

An Ageless Imperative

In the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel that bears his name, the apostle John provides for us an instructive glimpse into the post-resurrection ministry of the Lord Jesus as he interacts with Peter (21:1-22). The occasion of our text takes us to the Sea of Galilee (Tiberius) some fifty or so miles north of Jerusalem where seven disciples had spent a fruitless night of fishing. As the morning sun is breaking in the eastern sky, Peter and his associates hear the voice of Jesus emanating from the shore. To their discredit, no one but John perceived its origin.

The last three words of 21:22 constitute an ageless imperative for every believer. In the words "Follow thou me" Jesus issued a directive to Peter that is still applicable. The pursuit of Christ is life's supreme objective, and an intimate knowledge of Christ is life's greatest prize. Obedience to Christ is a life-long quest that is the singular key to purity, joy and power! As a personal directive, Jesus is instructing Peter to avoid any and all future distractions that would jeopardize this most noble of pursuits!

In the companion text of Matthew 28:7, 10, we find both an angel and the risen Lord confirming instructions for Peter to meet Jesus in Galilee. So Peter and six others comply, and head north—two or three days travel time on foot. It is noteworthy that four of the apostles failed to make the journey. Were they mired in unbelief? We know that in another appearance Jesus upbraided the eleven for unbelief and hardness of heart (Mark 16:14).

Our text consists of three distinct segments. First, we have the interruption of service. It appears that Peter, with a revisit to the familiar shores of Galilee, may have considered resuming his fishing career. If there was any "wait" time after their arrival, Peter may have gotten a little antsy. Jesus could very well have used the same strategy he employed with Lazarus, waiting four days after his death to arrive on the scene and set the stage for a greater display of power. Peter may not have abandoned his call, but he was clearly prepared to interrupt it for a season.

The power of Peter's influence upon his peers is captured in these words: "I go a fishing...we go with thee" (21:3). Our influence can be an asset or a liability. We can lift others higher or drag them lower. There's nothing inherently evil about fishing. But it ill serves us if it precludes the greater good of waiting on the Lord Jesus!

In 21:5-6, we find the Lord standing on the shore and engaging the seven. Note the two-fold method employed by Jesus to re-engage them. He begins by calling for an *inventory* of current conditions: "Children, have ye any meat?" The answer: "No." He follows with an *instruction* to be obeyed coupled with expectation: "Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find." They hauled in one hundred fifty-three great fish (21:11). The next time you get disengaged from service, perform a spiritual inventory of your life and obey the next prompting that the Lord Jesus provides. This is the second time Jesus taught the fishing lesson first learned (and apparently forgotten) from Luke 5:1-11—NO GUARANTEES OF VOCATIONAL SUCCESS OUTSIDE THE WILL OF GOD!

Segment two is the invitation to supper. With the words “Come and dine” (21:12), Jesus issued an invitation laced with tenderness and void of rebuke! The Master had prepared a world-class country breakfast laid upon a fire of coals. This was not a buffet. Jesus served them personally. In my mind, this breakfast offering was intended to (1) satisfy their hunger, (2) provide warmth in the cool morning air, and (3) break down any communication barriers. There is no way to overstate the grace of our Lord in this invitation!!!

Let us briefly contrast the fire of coals at which Peter sat in John 18:18 with those now enjoyed by Peter after his morning swim. The former was a fire of resignation that left him bitter and broken; the latter a fire of restoration that settled once for all the issue of life service. At this hour, the Lord Jesus is still ready to engage the wayward saint around his restorative fire where the hungry are fed and the chilled are warmed! A second fitting contrast is found in Daniel 3:13-25 with the three Hebrew children. In that classic text, the pre-incarnate Christ is revealed as the fourth man IN the fire. In John 21, the resurrected Christ is revealed as the eighth man AT the fire! Which of these two manifestations do you think is most needful for the church at this hour?

Segment three is the interrogation of Simon. Jesus asked: “Simon, son of Jonas, Lovest thou me more than these?” (21:15). Jesus was referencing the haul of fish, perhaps with a nod of his head in their direction. For Peter, the fish represented deep occupational roots that previously provided a livelihood and security. Perhaps Jesus knew he was contemplating the revival of his former career...a fallback position, so to speak.

Jesus queried Peter on the love issue three times. Jesus uses the Greek **agapao** (sacrificial love) in the first two instances. Peter responds with the Greek **phileo** (familial love). I'm willing to give Peter a little credit. His mouth got him into trouble when he claimed to be willing to die, and then denied. He is now determined not to climb out on that “die for you” limb again! On the third query, however, Jesus shifts verbs, and uses the verb **phileo** that Peter had used (21:17). Peter is grieved with the change up in verbs, and reaffirms his familial love to Jesus. Again, you cannot fault Peter too much at this point. He was after all in the presence of Jesus when he spoke the following words to a Jewish audience: “For the Father loveth [**phileo**] the Son...” (John 5:20). It's hard to fault a man for claiming to have the same love for the Son that the Father himself was exhibiting.

Furthermore, Jesus tells Peter three times that the outworking of his love for Christ will be the feeding of his sheep. And the same may be said of the modern-day pastor who takes oversight of a local church flock. Describe for me the measure of his expository depth and the degree to which his messages are saturated with truth, and I will give you the measure of his love for Christ! I realize that no two men have exactly the same oratorical and or expository abilities. But feeding the sheep with his best efforts in agreement with his gifts is priority one for the man of God!

Peter had refused to go out on the “die for you” limb again, but Jesus predicted that Peter would indeed succeed in martyrdom where he had formerly failed. Why? Two reasons: (1) Penitence—he was broken and shattered over his former cowardice, which

is always a precursor to cleansing and power, and (2) Pentecost—Spirit fullness was the cure for whatever ailed him in his past! And so it is for us today!

When Peter learned from the Lord the manner of his ultimate demise, he asked concerning John...what would happen to him. Jesus informed Peter that what he chose to do with John was none of his business...even if that meant keeping John alive until he returned. He then issued that personal directive "Follow thou me" that continues to serve as an ageless imperative for those who claim Jesus as their Lord!

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 imperfect—continuous action in past time. So, 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 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!

A Study in Supply Chains

The Recession of 2008-2009 has produced a drastic uptick in the number of unemployed. In fact, the odds are some percentage of Pastor's Pen recipients have become part of that statistic...or know someone who has. One reason for this alarming condition is the domino effect of job losses within the thousands of supply chains tied to the delivery of goods and services.

A supply chain is the sum total of business links required to bring a product from its point-of-origin to the point-of-consumption. Take, for example, the tomatoes you purchase from your favorite market. Here's a high-level look at the tomato supply chain: seed company > greenhouse growers > tomato farmers and truck patchers > pickers > long- and short-haul drivers > warehouse-distribution centers > retail stores > produce staff > you the purchaser > thick slice on a grilled burger.

Now, suppose the Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued a bulletin warning that tomatoes might cause cancer, and mandated a temporary ban on tomato sales pending more research. The domino effect of such action would impact hundreds of businesses and perhaps thousands of workers whose livelihoods depended on tomato consumption. A more real-to-life scenario is the recent bailout of General Motors. One stated objective was to avoid a cataclysmic disruption—if not destruction—of the automotive supply chain, estimated to include millions of workers.

Have you ever considered the supply chains of scripture? As important as the aforementioned examples are to our economy, there are at least two biblical supply chains that, if disrupted, can result in kingdom consequences far more severe than a spike in unemployment. Both involve human instrumentality. Let us first consider a few other supply chains (no human required) as a source of encouragement.

In Exodus 16:11-15, we find several million wilderness-wandering Israelites, who had been cut off from all the former delicacies in Egypt, murmuring about the food supply. So the Lord instituted his own supply chain by providing quails in the evening and manna in the morning for daily gathering. The links were few: God > quail and manna > Israelites. Still they longed for the former Egyptian offerings: *"Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic: But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes"* (Numbers 11:4-6). They murmured against Moses, but ultimately against the Lord. We must remember that our Lord, when setting up a divine supply chain on our behalf, does so with sustenance in mind, not extravagance. There is but one proper response to a divine supply chain--thanksgiving!

In I Kings 17:1-7, we find the Lord instructing Elijah to head east and hide himself by the brook Cherith after he had prophesied to Ahab concerning an absence of rain that would resume only at his command. The drought was three years in duration (18:1). So *"he went and did according to the word of the Lord"* (17:5). And as the Lord had commanded, the *"ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and*

flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook" (17:6). Again, we have few links: God > bread and flesh > ravens > Elijah.

In time, the drought dried up the brook Cherith, Elijah's water source. So the Lord sent his prophet to a widow woman in Zarephath in order to sustain him (17:8-16). Now, sustenance looked suspect when the woman stated that the sum total of her dietary resources consisted of a "*handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse.*" This she was going to *dress* for her and her son, eat as a last meal, and later die of starvation (17:12). In her obedience, however, to feed the prophet first with those same meager vittles, neither the barrel of meal nor the cruse of oil went empty until the Lord sent rain upon the earth (17:14-16). The links were: God > meal and oil > Elijah plus widow and son. The divine supply chain was intended to secure life, not luxury! I am quite certain that the man of God was grateful to his Lord for both. Moreover, in each of the preceding three supply chains, the people of God were the *last* link in the chain as consumers of God's provision.

We now turn our attention to the two biblical supply chains that include human instrumentality. In these cases, the last link is *not* the critical link! They are (1) the feeding of the five thousand, and (2) the pattern of teaching given to Timothy by Paul. If either of these two supply chains incurs a broken link, the negative consequences for the Church and the world at large are incalculable.

In John 6:1-14, we find the account of Jesus feeding five thousand men (plus women and children) with the *five barley loaves and two fishes* provided by a lad in the crowd. The supply chain was: the lad plus bread and fish > Andrew > Jesus > disciples > multitude. This miracle of multiplication is a carbon copy of the meal and oil that sustained Elijah, the widow and her son. Perhaps it was intended as a subtle clue that Jesus of Nazareth and the God of Elijah were one and the same person (for those spiritually intuitive enough to connect the dots). There is no accounting for the abundance, or rather overabundance, other than the supernatural power of the Lord Jesus!

The main purpose for this miraculous display was to provide a credential to Israel regarding his role as Messiah. But they failed to perceive its spiritual significance, seeking rather to install him by force as their temporal king (6:15). A second purpose--the one applicable to our discussion--was to illustrate for the disciples the manner in which they and their successors would handle gospel truth in the post-Pentecostal era. In the present age, it is the responsibility of the Church to distribute gospel bread to the masses so that they might be saved from their sins and experience everlasting life. If and when a disciple fails to engage in this most critical of supply chains, a link between Jesus and lost sinners is broken. As a result, a number of lost men and women, having been deprived of gospel bread, are bound to reap the unavoidable consequences of spiritual ignorance and death. The unavoidable question is: To what degree or extent are you and I engaged in gospel distribution?

In II Timothy 2:2, Paul admonished Timothy as follows: "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." The teaching supply chain is: Christ > Paul > Timothy >

faithful men > others. Both Paul and Timothy are long gone, but we do have the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and men and woman well-acquainted with both who can fuel this supply chain. There is no better formula for qualitative Church growth than for those who are anchored in the things of God to pass them along to those who have exhibited loyalty to Jesus Christ and his Church, who then are able to teach others. I know of no greater joy for a pastor than to see the others in his congregation become faithful men, who then become the teachers of faithful men, as was Timothy!

The supply chain depicted in John 6 has to do with what the Church does for the lost where *evangelism* is in view. The admonition in II Timothy 2 describes what the Church does with its own where *discipleship* is in view! Both of these supply chains are absolutely critical for the lost and saved respectively! Blessed are those churches that achieve a vigorous balance of both!

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"* (Genesis 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 us that truth and the revealed will of God are virtually synonymous concepts. If Jesus had answered Pilate's question *"What is truth?"* (John 18:38), the answer might well have been 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"* (Genesis 32:9-12). Again, 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"* (Exodus 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 (Psalm 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 (John 1:14). Jesus is the truth (14:6). God elects those who believe the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13), but failure to believe the truth brings damnation (2:12). The church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). And while it may seem improbable at the moment, one day Jerusalem will be called a city of truth (Zechariah 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 Legacy of a Fallen Man

It was a bombshell that shook the inner circle to its collective core! It was not the fact that Jesus would suffer betrayal and crucifixion, for he had made that known to the apostles two days prior to the Passover (Matthew 26:2). The shock came when Jesus sat down with the twelve, and said: "*Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me*" (26:20-25). A betrayal from within the apostolic band! Who would have thought it possible?

The announcement produced much sorrow. To a man the pangs of self-doubt began to spring up as each asked: "*Lord, is it I?*" Perhaps that's one reason why any discussion of Judas makes us uneasy, for we all have a Judas potential in our flesh. When Judas finally popped the question, Jesus responded in the affirmative (26:25).

In Acts 1:15-26, Luke records the role of Peter in leading roughly 120 disciples, who were waiting with one accord for the baptism of the Holy Ghost, to pick a replacement for Judas. The group acknowledged in prayer that Judas by transgression fell from the ministry and apostleship (1:25). Those verses therefore encapsulate for us the legacy of a fallen man!

The phrase "*by transgression fell*" is the translation of the Greek verb **parabaino**, meaning "to go away, to go aside, to overstep or violate." After three years of up-close-and-personal observation of God robed in human flesh, Judas knew full well the boundaries of kingdom righteousness and godliness. With eyes wide open, Judas breeched those boundaries and willfully disassociated himself from the God-Man for thirty pieces of silver! In the entirety of human history, there has been no fall so precipitous as that incurred by Judas Iscariot!

The legacy of this fallen man has three distinct components. First is THE ROLE THAT JUDAS PLAYED. Peter stated that Judas was guide to them that took Jesus (1:16). *Guide* in Greek is **hodegos**, a combination of **hodos** (a way) and **hegeomai** (to lead)--literally, one who leads others in the way. And we know that the way of betrayal for Judas was the path that led to the sacred confines of Gethsemane where the Son of God was preparing himself for the blunt force trauma of the cross and our sins! O how sinister was that guiding role that Judas played!

When we think of roles, we usually have in mind those played by actors. Professional and would-be actors alike are reputed to pour over dozens and perhaps hundreds of scripts in search of that one role that will launch and establish a career. But to inject oneself into this role after three years of exposure to personified grace damns the soul. None but the diabolical would contemplate such a role!

In addition to Judas as a *diabolical* guide, scripture identifies three other guide types: (1) the *hypocritical* guides of Israel consisting of the scribes and Pharisees--Matthew 23:16, 24, (2) the *supernatural* guide of God's people in the person of the Holy Spirit--John 16:13, and (3) the *evangelical* guides of lost men as represented in Philip who evangelized and baptized the Ethiopian eunuch--Acts 8:30-31. All of us play a guiding

role in this life to one extent or another! In most cases, we will find ourselves to be either a Philip or a Pharisee!

The second is THE RESUME THAT JUDAS BUILT. Judas had some hefty credentials—credentials that were afforded to him by the grace of Christ and that would have made him a prime pastoral candidate for your average Baptist church. He was *chosen* (elected) by the Lord Jesus to be an apostle (Luke 6:13). Again, biblical election has to do with privileges bestowed upon those elected, not personal salvation. Judas *obtained* part of this ministry, one aspect of which was a *bishoprick* that involved a measure of spiritual and pastoral oversight (1:17, 20).

This man Judas was an object of election, recipient of an apostolic commission, and a bishop ordained by the Lord Jesus himself! There are many pulpit committees that would readily recommend him as a candidate for pastor. But they would be recommending a lost man! Judas confirms to us the well-known truth that it takes more than a powerful resume to fit one for spiritual ministry. It takes a personal and dynamic relationship with the Lord Jesus--one that eluded our fallen man.

The third is THE RETRIBUTION THAT JUDAS EARNED. We are told that Judas went to *his own place* (1:25). The phrase in Greek is **ton topon ton idion** (literally, “the place, the one that was his very own”). The dual use of the definite article **ton** teaches us that Judas went to a place uniquely his and his alone (i.e., isolation in Hell as retribution for his singularly wicked act of betrayal). It's no wonder Jesus said that it would have been good for the betrayer if he had never been born (Matthew 26:24).

It is suggested in some theological circles that the Antichrist will actually be Judas Iscariot brought back from the preparatory torments of Hell to resume his diabolical role. This postulation is arrived at by the use of the phrase “*son of perdition*” to describe both Judas (John 17:12) and Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Moreover, the Greek phrases are identical with dual use of the definite article (literally, “the son of the perdition”). The grammatical evidence strongly suggests that Judas will indeed re-enter the historical stage as an imposter to carry out the final satanic assault against the truth and those who believe it.

A second possibility is that Antichrist will be Judas-like in his mode of operation. In Malachi 4:5, the prophet predicted that God would send Elijah before the great day of the Lord. In Matthew 11:14, Jesus confirmed that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. Jesus clearly meant to say that John the Baptist was Elijah-like in his ministry. Since John did no miracles, the likely reference was to the authoritative, robust and piercing oratory with which both Elijah and John delivered the word of the Lord! Would to God the pulpits of America were filled with these kinds of preachers!

So, whether Antichrist turns out to be Judas returning as his diabolical self or another individual who is Judas-like in credentials and behavior, we know he will appear to walk within prescribed kingdom boundaries for a season, and then deliberately violate those lines after three and a half years of pretense. The legacy of our fallen man Judas is sad indeed. Sadder still is the knowledge that it will be repeated in the yet-to-come son of perdition whose guidance many will follow to their own destruction!

Are You Content with an Ishmael?

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

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

No rocket scientist was needed to predict the contentious relationship that would ensue between these two wives—one barren and the other blessed! It is interesting that Abram, after hearing the complaint of Sarai, more or less washed his hands of the matter, saying: “*Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee*” (16:6). As a result, Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar, and she fled from her face into the wilderness (16:6-7).

No mention is made of Abram being bothered by this first departure of Hagar even though she was carrying his seed in her womb (16:6-7). He appeared to have been somewhat indifferent! Perhaps he considered the restoration of harmony to his household a result he could live with despite the cost! I realize that an argument for indifference based upon silence has its weaknesses, but the stark emotional contrast between this first departure and the final departure some fourteen years later is undeniable! And there are valid reasons for this emotional difference!

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

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

Thirteen years later, at age ninety-nine, God provided Abram with that one missing piece of information regarding the womb from which the promised seed would come. It is at this time that Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, and a son to be named Isaac is promised as the fruit of Sarah's womb and the fulfillment of the covenant promise.

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

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

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

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

The Power of Collective Prayer

If you are a political conservative, the phrases “collective good” and “shared prosperity” are certain to raise red flags in your mind. These are code words for the redistribution of wealth, which ultimately equates to an assault on *your* wealth if you're one of the fortunate that still has some. Candidate Obama's “spread the wealth around” comment to Joe the Plumber during the 2008 presidential campaign was a harbinger of things to come for those who were paying attention.

In the spiritual realm, however, these phrases have a positive connotation for the local church and the body of Christ at large. Inasmuch as all believers are indwelt by the Spirit of God, they are, in a collective sense, a *holy temple in the Lord* and a *habitation of God through the Spirit* (Ephesians 2:21-22). The prosperity they share comes from God's riches in glory by Christ Jesus, not from some finite earthly source. Our Lord therefore redistributes nothing, but rather distributes freely to his people from his own infinite resources. Even the poor of this world who believe in the Lord Jesus are considered rich because they are heirs of the kingdom (James 2:5).

One of the teachable moments in scripture is the ten-day preparation that preceded the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. What we learn from that waiting period is this: the church that immerses itself in the practice of collective prayer will be, at some point in time, the benefactor of heaven-sent Holy Ghost power!

A summation of that collective prayer activity is found in Acts 1:14: “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.” What we find here, as in other scriptures, is spiritual profundity wrapped in elegant simplicity! There are several attributes of this collective prayer meeting that are worthy of note.

The first is diversity. The phrase “*these all*” is comprehensive in scope, signifying all without exception and or distinction. No insiders or outsiders, no first-class or second-class believers. Is this not the beauty of the gospel? Is this not indicative of the equal footing established by the cross of Christ? On one end of the spectrum was Mary, the mother of Jesus--a woman renowned for her sexual purity, virgin conception, and unflinching loyalty to her Son's ministry. On the other was Matthew, the former tax collector--a man despised for his corruption by the rank-and-file citizenry but transformed by the grace of Christ. So diverse in background was this band of believers!

The second is tenacity. The word “*continued*” is the Greek **proskatereo**, meaning “to be strong towards, to persevere.” It is a present participle, speaking of an ongoing action. A literal translation of the Greek is: “these all were the ones who were continuing (persevering).” This group was determined to maintain the prayer vigil until the Lord delivered the promised endowment of Spirit power (Luke 24:49). The continuance (persistence) exhibited in prayer before Pentecost spilled over into *doctrine, fellowship, and daily meetings in the temple* after the Spirit of God fell upon them (2:42, 46). Show me a man or woman tenacious in prayer, and I will show you an individual that loves to study the scriptures and meet together regularly with a local body of believers!

It should be noted that there is a direct relationship between persistency in prayer and the promises of God. If you and I find ourselves fainting in prayer, it is likely because we have relinquished our grip upon the promise that motivated us to pray in the first place. God's promises are the foundation for our persistency, and his tenets the fuel for our tenacity!

The third is unity. The phrase "*with one accord*" signifies oneness of mind, soul and spirit. As with diversity, it is both because of what they had in common and in spite of the points at which they differed. The incentives that pulled these folks together were greater than the differences that might have pulled them apart! One could liken this to a service-oriented company where a "satisfy the customer" mandate becomes the overriding theme that pulls employees together at the expense of individual opinions and differences! Should not the mandate to win the lost and disciple the saved in the power of the Holy Spirit be enough to unite God's people?

The fourth is urgency. The phrase "*in prayer and supplication*" denotes the seriousness with which this embryonic group of disciples conducted its most sacred business! *Prayer* is the general word for an approach to God. *Supplication* is the Greek **deesis**, which speaks of an urgent need to be met. While prayer affirms that God is sufficiently *worthy* to warrant our humble approach, supplication affirms that he is sufficiently *wealthy* to meet our needs from his incalculable resources! And there is scarcely a more urgent need for the people of God at this hour than enduement with Spirit power for holiness of life and the bearing of spiritual fruit!

I agree with every pulpiter through the centuries that has reminded us that no man or woman is greater than his or her prayer life! If that truth is applicable to the individual, it is certainly true for the local church. In these last days, may our Lord enable his churches to rediscover the power of collective prayer with similar result!

A Time for Sober Reflection

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

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

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

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

The second is the potential death of a nation. Is there any doubt in the minds of God’s people that the window of opportunity seized by the terrorists was related to a purposeful slackening of God’s providential care? If our nation refuses to cease from its rebellion against the Almighty—the legalization of infanticide via abortion rights and the legitimization of homosexual perversion as two glaring examples, what additional judgments can we expect? Will they be more severe?

Many recoiled in disgust when President Obama’s former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, invoked God’s damnation upon America following the 9/11 attacks (i.e., chickens coming home to roost). Now, I may not agree with Mr. Wright regarding his causal assertions, but do believe that our God-blessed nation has transitioned into a phase of judgment

wherein the 9/11 attacks and the election of Barrack Obama—a Christian in name only and Marxist at his core—are notable indicators.

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

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

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

A Mentor for the Men of God

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Where Is the "What If" Man?

If Tiger Woods is an unfamiliar name, perhaps you just arrived from another planet. This soon-to-be 34 year-old sports phenomenon has redefined the standard of golf excellence. His superior and enviable ball-striking performances over a decade-and-a-half career have yielded 14 Major championships on his way to 71 PGA Tour victories. Only Sam Snead (82) and Jack Nicklaus (73) have more wins. In all likelihood, he will blow past Nicklaus next year and surpass Snead before his 38th birthday. On a routine basis he continues to punctuate his prowess as the world's number one player. Tom Watson once stated that Tiger had "raised the golfing standard to a level only he can reach." Anyone care to dispute that statement?

The man who set the previous standard, based on his 18 Major titles, was Jack Nicklaus. For two decades it was assumed that no other golfer would ever match or surpass either his playing record or domination of the game. Speculation as to the possibility of that actually happening would always be couched in "What if...?" statements. For example, what if someone could consistently split the fairways with drives that were longer and straighter? What if someone possessed the precision ball-striking skills necessary to land approach shots relatively close to the pin for legitimate birdie putts. What if someone had such a deft putting stroke that he was able to drain the majority of putts within 15 feet? What if someone was able to produce at will the optimum ball flight for any weather condition? You get the idea. If all these skills were ever to be embodied in one person, perhaps a greater than Nicklaus would emerge!

During the third round of the 2000 U.S. Open at Pebble Beach, with Tiger Woods holding a double-digit stroke lead on the field in severe weather conditions, on-course commentator Judy Rankin stated: "Tiger Woods is the 'What if...?' man!" And since hearing her pronouncement, my thought processes have often transposed this concept into the realm of the heavenly. I considered the spiritual giants that preceded us (the Abraham's, the David's, the Elijah's, the Paul's, etc.) and concluded that their track records of spiritual and historical achievement seem to be out of the realm of duplication for most of us. But are they?

Upon further reflection, I find myself engaged in the "What if...?" speculations that surrounded legendary Nicklaus. That is, what if God had a man whose effectual fervent praying produced Elijah-like results? What if God had a man whose spirit exemplified the meekness and gentleness of Christ? What if God had a man who resisted the devil with the Word in every season of temptation? What if God had a man who had become all things to all men, that by all means he might save some? What if God had a man who loved his wife as Christ loved the Church? What if God had a man who was filled with all the fullness of God? What if God had a man like Moses, whose frequent appearances in the Divine presence left the glory of God emanating from his countenance and established him as God's friend?

Brethren, I wonder if any one of us is willing to be the "What if...?" man, the "What if...?" woman, or the "What if...?" church? The current engineers of the train we call America have set us on a track that will end in a Marxist-Communist train wreck if allowed to

travel undeterred. Like many of you, I long and pray for a resurgence of conservatism and free-market capitalism in the Congress (2010) and White House (2012). But such gains will be truncated without a corresponding emergence of "What if..." men and women from within the ranks of God's kingdom! In fact, better to have a "What if...?" revival in the midst of a national train wreck than to experience a rightward political shift without one!

God is no doubt looking for "What if...?" men and women with whom He can get things done in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation! Our world—yea, the whole of creation—is crying out for those kinds of individuals to emerge! Will it be you...or me? In the event you're contemplating the possibility, I offer these words of encouragement from evangelist Bill Chapman: "What *has been* done *can be* done!" So, where are the "What if...?" men and women who *will become* for the spiritual giants of scripture what Tiger *has become* for Jack?

Falling Out of Rhythm

The PBS investigative series Frontline aired a program last week entitled "Close to Home." The focus was the current economic downturn that has impacted an area once thought to be impervious to such a decline—Manhattan's Upper East Side. Streets littered with once-thriving specialty shops catering to upper class clientele are now approaching a fifty percent vacancy rate. One resident shook her head repeatedly in disbelief, saying: "It's just not supposed to happen here!"

An opportunistic interviewee had launched a website providing services for the unemployed. Most of its users are over the age of 40. He observed: "It used to be that, when a man or woman was not working, it was their own fault. But in the current economic climate there are millions of highly-skilled individuals with a great work ethic who find themselves unemployed through no fault of their own."

A man named Rob—a twenty-year veteran of corporate Human Resources management and responsible for 7,300 employees—got a knock on his office door back in 2008. It was his boss, who was there to deliver his severance paperwork and request that he have his office cleared out in ten minutes. He found it difficult to articulate his bewilderment over such an abrupt dismissal after two decades of loyalty. With the exception of a one-month contract, he has spent the last sixteen months unemployed...and looking.

Another named Mike was gainfully employed as a carpenter when things began to go downhill. His wife was diagnosed with cancer, and entered hospice care. He then lost his job, and fell two months behind on his mortgage. He applied for a hardship grant, and received tacit approval contingent on employment. He found carpentry work, but was denied the grant. Three days after his wife died, the bank repossessed his home and dumped all his belongings on the curb. The house for which he and his wife had paid \$125,000 was sold by the bank for \$55,000. He now lives in a rented room with his dog. In an interview, he stated: "When you fall out of rhythm, things can get tough."

The phrase "falling out of rhythm" as expressed by Mike encapsulates an almost indescribable profundity. Yet we all know exactly what it means in context. I dare say that all (if not most) of us have experienced a falling out of rhythm at some point in our lives when routine turned to rigor, calm to calamity, and peace to peril. The overriding issue, however, for any child of God who is falling out of rhythm with respect to things earthly is whether he or she will allow that downhill trajectory to spill over into and govern things heavenly. The biblical evidence suggests that the former does not necessitate the latter!

Consider Joseph as an example. He was a tender-hearted young man who was the apple of Jacob's eye and the recipient of heavenly visions. He was an exemplary youth living a blessed life (i.e., one that was in rhythm) up until the day his father sent him to Shechem to visit his brethren and bring back a report (Genesis 37:11-36). He finally found them at Dothan, and it was there that he began to fall out of rhythm. A first plot to kill him was foiled by Reuben; a second by Judah. They stripped him of his many-

colored coat, cast him into a pit, and sold him to Midianites for twenty pieces of silver. The Midianites took him down to Egypt, and sold him to Potiphar—an officer in and captain of Pharaoh's guard—who became his Egyptian master (39:2). Now that's falling out of rhythm!

The scriptures, however, tell us that Potiphar was cognizant of the Lord's hand upon Joseph, so that he made Joseph overseer of all his house and possessions. Potiphar ultimately entrusted Joseph with every aspect of his life, and he prospered (39:2-6). Joseph had regained a rhythm of sorts...up until the day that Potiphar's wife solicited him for a sexual tryst. Joseph refused to "*do this great wickedness, and sin against God*" (39:9). The rebuffed solicitations continued until finally the scorned wife falsely accused Joseph to Potiphar, and to prison he went (39:20). We now have a second falling out of rhythm.

It is critical to observe in both of these fallings that "*the Lord was with Joseph*" (39:2, 21). No loss of favour on the part of man can ever disannul the favor of God upon those that trust him! Joseph regained his rhythm once again in the prison inasmuch as the keeper of the prison turned over the entire prison operation (and apparently that of his household) to Joseph "*because the Lord was with him*" (39:23).

Joseph's prison rhythm continued for another two years up until the time that Pharaoh had his enigmatic dream on the Nile River. When no one was able to interpret it, the chief butler, a former prison inmate whom Joseph had befriended some two years earlier, recommended to Pharaoh that he summon Joseph for dream interpretation (41:9-13). You know the rest of the story. So at age thirty (41:46), and after more than a decade of rhythm changes, Joseph stood before Pharaoh as his most trusted advisor and the most powerful political figure in the land...and perhaps the world!

The timeless lesson we learn from Joseph is that falling out of rhythm in our earthly sojourn is no basis for doing so in matters heavenly! Joseph fell out of rhythm twice—pit and prison—but at no time allowed himself to be deprived of the assurance of God's presence. He was persuaded that his God was working while he was falling! In like manner must you and I embrace afresh the truth of God's operational presence at a time when falling out of rhythm is a potential reality for so many!

For All the Little Guys

Matthew 8:1-4 records the cleansing of a leper who had made his appeal to Jesus contingent upon his will. In response to the leper's "*if thou wilt*" came an "*I will*" affirmation from our Lord. In my mind, this leper could be classified as one of the little guys. We know neither his name nor pedigree. As a leper, he lived on the bottom rung of the societal ladder—shunned, forgotten by most, and hopeless. Yet we learn that (1) Jesus is never so caught up in the affairs of ministry that He has no time for the insignificant man (by worldly standards), and (2) Jesus always responds to worship and faith without regard for the status of those who exercise it!

Matthew 4:23-5:1 provides the backdrop for the healing of this little guy. Sandwiched in between 5:1 and 8:1 are the teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, giving 5:1 and 8:1 a logical connection. That text describes for us our Lord's *activity* (teaching, preaching, and healing) and his *popularity* (fame and crowds). The same "*great multitudes*" that followed Him up the mountain are still in tow as he comes down from the mountain. Throngs are moving across the countryside to soak up the teachings and miracles of our Lord. And in the midst of this success, a leper (one of the little guys) approaches Him, and makes a request for cleansing. Jesus responds, and the man is made clean. It is indeed an event to be cherished by all the little guys in this life!

Three observations are in order. The first is the worship of the leper. Note the contrast between the two phrases "*great multitudes followed*" (8:1) and "*a leper worshipped*" (8:2). True worship will always separate the adorer from the crowd. Those who *followed* Jesus recognized his *eminence* as a man of God. The one who *worshipped* Him, however, understood His *preeminence* as the Son of God—a big difference in terms of worship!

The leper's statement to our Lord reveals two things about him: (1) His own willingness to be clean. There are sinners aplenty who desire God's blessing but have no desire to be clean. The desire for cleanliness cannot be separated from genuine worship. (2) His conviction concerning Christ's ability to bring healing to pass. The recognition of Christ's sovereignty had dissolved any and all doubt from this little guy's mind.

True worship does not stop at *adoration*, but contemplates *provision* as well. We see that the little guy who pondered the Lord's worthiness also petitioned His willingness to grant mercy and grace according to his need. The same is true for us. How's your worship of late?

The second is the will of the Lord. In response to "*if thou wilt*," the Lord said "*I will*." True worship longs to hear these two words from the Lord Jesus! True worship understands that the will of God is the only thing that stands between the supplicant and an infinite supply of grace! Oh the grand and infinite potential of these words!

In connection with the Lord's will, notice that this leper's healing was: (1) Initialized by his touch. The Lord's word was sufficient of itself to bring healing to pass. But the touch signifies something special and tender about the Lord's compassion for this man. (2) Actualized by the Word. There is power in His pronouncements, unction in His utterings,

and awesomeness in His assertions! Even as the spoken Word brought creation into being, so also does it rectify the little guy's infirmity. (3) Visualized by the crowd. There was an instantaneous reversal of the effects of the disease. These changes were readily observable by eyewitnesses. So also are the effects of grace upon all who repent and believe the Gospel. These kinds of immediate and observable reversals of disease (and of sin as well) are strangely absent from the so-called "anointed" healers of our day. There is scant resemblance between Jesus' ministry and the modern-day imposters.

The third is the way of the liberated. Jesus instructed the former leper to "*tell no man*" what had happened (8:4). This was basically a request designed to limit the size of an already burgeoning crowd. He was told rather to shew himself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses had commanded for a testimony unto them. And that testimony is that Jesus came not to do away with the law, but rather to fulfil it. His instruction to this leper for compliance to that law is a testimony to His righteous intent. Regarding Moses' law, Jesus was its essence, not its enemy! He was the fulness of the law, not its foe!

The way of the liberated is one of priesthood and priestly activity. That for which this leper would have been required to approach the priest had already been accomplished. It was the role of the priest to perform the offering of sacrifice, the ceremony of blood, and the anointing of oil. After these had been done, the priest would pronounce the leper clean. By proclaiming "*Be thou clean*" to this leper, Jesus served notice to all within hearing range that He Himself was God's royal priest with all powers of the office!

All the little guys can take consolation from this text. Genuine worship is sufficient to separate the petitioner from the crowd, and secure the undivided attention of the Lord Jesus. Even little guys understand that the will of God and his limitless power can be unleashed in any life that is rooted in true worship and faith!

Instruments

The sixth chapter of Romans provides for us a detailed spiritual analysis of the effects of the gospel upon those who believe it. Inasmuch as the gospel of Christ is a declaration of his all-inclusive substitutionary death for sinners and triumphant resurrection, its inward effects upon the believer are (1) a corresponding death unto sin, and (2) an impartation of spiritual life that was lost due to Adam's disobedience (5:12).

These effects are both static and dynamic. That is, they do far more than simply reposition the believer with respect to his or her standing with God. They totally alter the manner in which a life is lived out on a day-to-day basis with respect to sinning against God. Thus the apostle rhetorically enquires: "*How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?*" (6:2). The built-in answer to "how shall we..." is "there is no way we can!"

In 6:12, the apostle inserts a "*therefore*" within his "*let not sin reign*" admonition to link the imperative to its bedrock "*dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God*" foundation (6:11). The word *alive* is the translation of a present active participle (literally, "ones who are continuously living"). It suggests a pattern of life where the believer is a willing and active participant. The body remains mortal (subject to decay and death due to sin), but is capable of supernatural vitality in the midst of that mortality because of gospel truth and Spirit power!

In 6:13, Paul adds a corresponding "*yield*" imperative to augment its "*let not sin reign*" predecessor. *Yield* is from the Greek **paristemi**, meaning "to present" or "stand beside." The object of yielding is our "*members as instruments of righteousness.*" Paul uses the same word in 12:1 ("*present*") in terms of our bodies as a living sacrifice. Both texts depict the believer, who is alive unto God, making his or her approach as a living sacrifice with a view to dedicating (or rededicating) every member of the body as an instrument to carry out the will of God. And the will of God will always reflect the righteousness of God!

The Greek for *instruments* is **hoplon**, meaning "any tool or implement for preparing a thing." An instrument is never an end in itself, but exists to serve a higher end. The end for which our instruments (body members) were created is the pursuit of the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33). The yielding that a believer performs is not a one-time-for-all-time event. It must take place daily...and perhaps hourly...and preferably in the early hours of the day! The temptations to engage our members as instruments in some unrighteous deed intersect our paths continuously like streaming audio and or video. The will that presents itself to God in the morning is best equipped to remain steadfast when temptations present themselves throughout the day!

In the context of our members as instruments, consider Eve and how her instruments came into play during the first temptation (Genesis 3:1-6). The fact that the serpent was "*more subtle*" (3:1) than all the beasts of the field tells me that her eyes perceived no real threat in his approach. Once her eyes gave a green light for further exposure, her ears entertained the suggestive language of the tempter to consume what God had put off

limits (3:4-5). Her eyes finally convinced her mind that the fruit was good for food and desirable for wisdom (3:6). The eyes and ears, finding themselves in agreement with the lie, enlisted the hand to pick the fruit, the mouth to execute the fatal bite, and the tongue to savor the bitter taste of disobedience and death. What we learn from the Garden is that sin is almost always multi-instrumental and hideously complex by its very nature.

The first mention of *instruments* in scripture is an ominous one. The occasion is the gathering together by Jacob of his sons for a series of prophetic pronouncements prior to his death. For sons Simeon and Levi the prediction was bleak. Jacob said: "*Simeon and Levi are brethren; instruments of cruelty are in their habitations*" (49:5). In calling them brethren, Jacob goes beyond the obvious to say they were peas from the same pod. Collaboration in cruelty was facilitated by a similarity in temperament. In addition, ill-tempered men with the same capacity for cruelty would appear in their offspring...like a cancer that the passage of time could not filter out.

Simeon and Levi earned this distinction by retaliating against Shechem the son of Hamor for sexually defiling their sister Dinah (Genesis 34:1-31). As a matter of deceit, the brothers agreed to give Dinah to Shechem in marriage pending circumcision. Three days later they killed with the sword all the males in the city, who were very sore and hard pressed to put up a defense. Jacob felt this act had ruined his reputation, making him "*stink among the inhabitants of the land*" (34:30). He carried that pain to his deathbed! Now, whether the brothers were justified in their actions is a debate for another time. But to be tagged as an instrument of cruelty and enshrined as such in Holy Writ is an epithet to be avoided at any cost!

Brethren, you and I are instruments—the sum total of our individual members. Let's take a little time to reflect upon the degree to which those members have been instruments of righteousness and or unrighteousness, and determine that we will yield ourselves afresh and continue to make progress in righteousness in the days to come!

God at Risk with a Righteous Man

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

A stewardship of this magnitude has never been equaled! No parental responsibility has ever been greater! The story of Christmas, unlike any other, illustrates the unfathomable relationship between divine sovereignty and human vulnerability! I call your attention to four distinctive character traits that were evident in Joseph the just man—one with whom God placed Himself at risk.

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

I recall a 1974 college chapel service in which the preacher (a soul-winning icon among Independent Baptists) spoke of his public rebuke of an usher who, in his opinion, was a little lethargic in getting an information card to a visitor in the congregation. He sought to justify his actions in terms of his spiritual authority as pastor. The fact is this “man of God” was behaving like a self-absorbed bully. He abused his position by humiliating a fellow believer in a public venue...something Joseph refused to do!

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

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

The fourth is sexual purity. We are told that these events took place before they came together (1:18). The virginity of Mary, as the biblical sign of Divine conception (Isaiah 7:14), usually overshadows the fact that Joseph himself was a sexually pure man—a virgin espoused to a virgin. There was neither promiscuity nor surrender to lust within this relationship. Joseph proceeded to marry his sweetheart in obedience to the Lord,

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

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

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