

Truth On Fire

The Pastor's Pen Archives 2011

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Miked Up!

The 2010 NFL season is winding down with only the Super Bowl left to determine its Champion. In every NFL season players and coaches alike are “Miked Up” in order to capture field-and-sidelines verbiage that would be otherwise lost on limited audiences. These “colorful” comments range from insightful to comical to forgettable. But when skillfully edited in a compilation, they can be both enlightening and entertaining.

The value of these audio archives lies in what is a more accurate portrayal of a player or coach than one might get from a sports writer or other less-than-objective source. My personal perspective with regard to one former NFL coach was improved dramatically after viewing such a compilation. What I realized was that this miked-up man, contrary to media hype, genuinely cared for his players...some of whom earned two Super Bowl rings as part of the team he coached.

The scripture contains ‘written’ records of the words God spoke to various audiences. What would it be like to have had the Lord ‘miked up’ at times so that a few ‘audio’ records of his words were extant for us? To be sure, audio records of revelation would add not one iota of credibility to the written Word. The Spirit of God left it to sanctified imaginations to grasp the gravamen of his words in context. There are, however, a few utterances for which an audio account might be of some value to us.

The first might be the words God spoke to Adam in the Garden: “Where art thou?” (Genesis 3:9). Rather than a stern voice mingled with anger, I’m convinced we would have heard brokenness in that voice akin to a grief-stricken father discovering the lifeless body of his mangled son in a car crash. The man he fashioned in his own image was now encased in the wreckage of spiritual death and depravity. The Lord’s empathy for all who sinned with Adam (Romans 5:12) was so deep that it pleased him to bruise his Son Jesus and make his soul an offering for their sins (Isaiah 53:10). If we could but hear the brokenness in that voice as it echoed in the Garden, perhaps it would break our hearts at the foot of the Cross!

The second might be the voice of the Father as Jesus departed the baptismal waters: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). I’m convinced that we would have heard a ring of excitement in that voice. In the four-millennium wake of death, disaster and disappointment that characterized the descendants of the first Adam, the Father inaugurated the ministry of the second (or last) Adam with a word of divine approval for the perfect life that would now be on display...and ultimately surrender itself on the Cross on behalf of those who would take it from him. At the risk of sounding trivial, the Father declared: “That’s my boy...and I want all of you folks to know exactly how I feel about him!”

The third might be our Lord’s triumphant cry from the Cross: “It is finished!” (John 19:30). Imagine being in that setting with darkness overspreading the earth, disciples contemplating a future without him, and distracters celebrating the judgment of Rome upon a religious fraud. Yes, judgment was in play, but it was “the chastisement of our peace” that fell upon him (Isaiah 53:5). The perfect tense of that vociferous and emotion-laden cry meant that the work was

forever settled, and could NEVER be subject to augmentation...neither by works nor by meritorious religious exercise. Its redemptive benefits would be applied by the resurrected Saviour in response to faith in him by the repentant sinner!

I have a problem with the idea that Jesus endured the flames of hell as part of his atoning work. If that was the case, then (1) the work of atonement was NOT finished at Calvary, and (2) Jesus really meant that "this phase" or "phase one" was finished. In the spring of 1979, I was privileged to hear the late great B. R. Lakin (1901-1984) preach on God's love from John 3:16, in which he declared that Jesus went to hell to suffer for his sins. Lakin was a great man of God with few peers, but he was dead wrong theologically with that assertion...as are all who espouse vicarious work beyond the Cross.

The Lord God was not "miked up" for any of the above events. So we are left to immerse the imagination in a meditative kind of way with regard to God's utterances. But when the Lord Jesus comes for his Church, and the saints are caught up together ("Raptured") to meet him in the air, the words "Come up hither!" will constitute a virtual "miked up" event (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18; Revelation 4:1). I believe we'll hear the same excitement in that summons that was expressed at Jesus' baptism. We may be longing to see the Lord, but no more than he is longing to see all of us believers gathered together in one place at one time! Words are typically spoken, then written. But in this case God gave the written in advance of the spoken as a means of infusing us with hope and anticipation. Wherefore comfort one another with these words!

Christianity: Almost Radical?

A lot of effort is made these days to distinguish the religion of Islam from its radical element. Unless you just arrived from another planet, you know that Radical Islam is devoted to the destruction of America (the big Satan) and Israel (the little Satan). Hardly a week goes by that some faction of Radical Islam either attempts or succeeds at killing innocent victims with an improvised explosive device (IED). In a nutshell, the war on terror consists of killing or neutralizing the Radical Islamists by some form of interdiction before they kill us.

From a broader perspective, there's something within fallen men that is inclined to render powerless those with whom they disagree. In other words, beat them down with better (and if possible, irrefutable) arguments. This is especially true with religion and politics. And of those two subjects, religion—beliefs about things divine held with visceral fervor—tends to hyper-feed that inclination. Politics runs a close second.

Luke 9:49-56 records two back-to-back episodes that illustrate this inclination. We see it on display in men who spent the better part of three years in close proximity to the Lord Jesus. In 9:49-50, we are told that the disciples, having encountered a man casting out demons in Jesus' name, insisted that he join them. After turning down the offer, they ordered him to cease and desist. He refused...and continued pounding the kingdom of darkness with exorcisms. The disciples made Jesus aware of the encounter. Instead of, "Where is he? I'll make him an offer he can't refuse!" Jesus said, "Leave him alone! He's on God's side, and we're on the same side!" The Twelve were supposed to be the cream of the spiritual crop, yet exhibited raw intolerance for a fellow believer who would not conform to their dictates. They wanted no physical harm, but certainly desired a verbal harness of censorship!

In 9:51-56, the disciples are now ready to take off the proverbial gloves. As they passed through Samaria in route to Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus was totally focused on the incalculable trauma that awaited him. The Samaritan village, to which Jesus had sent an advance party, took his grave demeanor as a snub, and therefore withheld the welcome mat. James and John took offence, and asked the Lord for permission to consume them with fire from heaven in Elijah-like fashion.

They might have expected Jesus to say, "Go ahead! Nuke the stiffnecks!" But instead they drew a rebuke from Jesus: "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." Jesus had a burning passion for the salvation of the lost, and was just days away from becoming the propitiation for their sins. How unseemly then for these men to harbor such sinful sentiments in the presence of the sinless Lamb of God!

It is sad but true that these same sentiments still work their way to the surface of ecclesiastical life. Perhaps you can relate to this scenario. You're driving down a street in your town and pass, on your right, the Blessed Hope Baptist Church. A half mile down the road, on your left, you spot the New Blessed Hope Baptist Church. You connect the dots. At one time, the two churches were one. But at some point, a family of believers that was on God's side and the same side was torn apart by a difference of opinion. Sides were taken, the church split, and the "New"

congregation was born. You'd like to think it was a justifiable parting of ways over doctrine, But it was probably something like what color the sanctuary carpet should be ('Red' as representative of the blood of Christ or 'Blue' as symbolic of heaven). Sounds spiritual enough, right?

I have wondered whether this episode would have been a turning point toward Radical Christianity if Jesus had given the green light for James and John to wipe out that Samaritan village. We know for certain he would have NEVER allowed it for the reason he stated. But the fact is the attitude that James and John displayed was and is eerily similar to that of modern-day Radical Islam: "If you disavow-disrespect our god, his prophet or his book, you are worthy of death!" Christians, on the other hand, are instructed to pray for the salvation of their enemies.

It is indeed alarming that James and John could have spent so long in the presence of Jesus and still managed to entertain such intolerant-destructive thoughts. The lesson we learn from these two episodes is that such thinking, if allowed to fester and run its course, can badly distort the perspective of God's very best servants! A sobering message for us all, is it not?

Is Retribution Our Destination?

Where is our nation heading? This question is certain to dominate the 2012 Presidential debates for the next 18 months. Rasmussen Reports conducts a weekly telephone survey of likely voters that attempts to quantify public perception of that direction. For the week of May 2-7, 2011 that survey revealed that 29% thought America was heading in the "Right Direction" (RD) with 64% (nearly 2 out of 3) giving a "Wrong Track" (WT) response. For the week of April 18-24 (pre-Osama), the results were 21% RD and 71% WT (nearly 3 out of 4). We got a little Bin Laden bump...but not much.

Further analysis of those numbers would likely reveal a disparity of opinion as to what mix of factors constitutes a right direction and or a wrong track. It's clear to the vast majority of Americans that our current fiscal situation is a virtual train wreck. Any remedy that puts our nation back on better financial footing will no doubt produce a major inverse shift in the RD-WT numbers. If that happens, how much comfort should we take from it?

It would be a huge miscalculation to assume a direct correlation between the monetary problems of a nation and its spiritual ills. For it's entirely possible to fix the former and remain mired in the latter. A divine perspective is found in Psalm 9:17: "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God." Of the 64% WT respondents last week, how many considered our nation's general disposition toward God as a factor in the mix? How many dared think that America just might be on a track that leads to divine retribution?

As an expository exercise, we need to answer a few questions: (1) Who are the wicked? (2) What does it mean to forget God? (3) What does it mean to be turned into Hell? First, the wicked (Hebrew 'rasha') are spiritual criminals whose sin and guilt have made them liable to punishment. In our text, it is applied to both individuals and nations. Sin against God is criminality of the highest order and to the nth degree! God gave commandments so that sin might become exceeding sinful (Romans 7:13). But the concept of sin has been so 'dumbed down' these days that spiritual criminality is the LAST thing that concerns the average American.

Secondly, to forget God is failure to remember him. It implies that at some point God was part of one's thought processes. But in time the mental reservoir became a God vacuum. Again, David said: "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts" (Psalm 10:4). Forgetting God is a practical matter. Pride (ego) keeps a wicked man from seeking the God he knows he should seek, so that God ceases to be a factor in terms of life choices. The wicked relegate him to a place of zero impact. Congressional chaplains, for example, open each daily session with prayer. But how many members of Congress are positively impacted by it? This much is certain. No one can vote to fund the abortion (murder) of an unborn baby without first kicking God to the curb.

Thirdly, the verb turned is from a Hebrew root with several variant meanings: "to return, turn back, bring back, put back, allow to return, to restore." It generally signifies a return to a previous position or condition. In Psalm 9:17, a previous destination is in view. Hell is the Hebrew 'sheol', the dark subterranean underworld, the grave, the abode of the dead. In our text,

Sheol is that place of eternal darkness and separation from God. The ultimate irony is that those who finish out their lives avoiding thoughts of God will inhabit for all eternity a place void of God in every way possible.

It's not as if the wicked had a particular destination in mind and God stepped in to turn them from it. What we see in the word turned is the wicked being turned back to their former destination. When God intervenes in the life of the wicked with his love, mercy and grace, it's for the purpose of turning them from a course that ends in hell to one of salvation and eternal glory. A persistent dismissive view of God results in a reacquisition of their former course. All God has to do is withdraw his gracious influences, and the hell-bent life is reacquired. What is true for the individual is true for nations as well. It's not a pretty picture!

We must ask the question: What kind of turning is America engaged in these days? Will God who orchestrated the founding of our great nation grant us additional space to repent? Or are we closer to divine retribution, both figuratively and literally, than any of us realize? Nations are turned one individual at a time. It behooves us that know God to give him the preeminence in our thought lives, and do all we can to influence lost men and women toward the Lord Jesus Christ. A prophet of old tells us why: "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" (Jonah 3:9).

Do Whatcha Know

Put yourself in the shoes of an employer for a few minutes. You have an open position in your department that you need to fill. You interview five candidates. One of them impresses you with his apparent knowledge and ability to articulate concepts. His knowledge set is exactly what you're looking for, so you extend a job offer. He accepts, and reports for work the next Monday.

A few weeks into the job you begin to hear complaints from his co-workers that he really cannot perform the tasks for which he was hired. After a few more weeks of input gathering it appears that you hired dead weight. In other words, there is a significant gap between what he KNOWS and what he DOES. So what are you going to do? Do you let your new hire go, or keep him around to eat up training resources?

We all know of workplace situations like this. But this kind of dynamic is rampant within the Kingdom of God. In fact, it could be argued that the greatest encumbrance to Kingdom influence and expansion is the people of God knowing much more than they are doing. The babe in Christ typically does more than he or she knows. Take the blind man in John 9. Within a few short hours of his encounter with Christ he found himself testifying before the religious leaders. His actions exceeded his knowledge. And so it is with most converts. But over time is the potential to know more things and do fewer things. And when a man or woman of faith drifts into the state of knowing more than they are doing, they have entered the realm of lukewarmness.

The Lord Jesus issued the following bottom-line analysis to his inner circle on the eve of his death: "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them: (John 13:17).. The context is one of servanthood as evidenced by Jesus washing the feet of the Twelve. Their "Lord and Master" had given them an example—a spiritual lesson—in the matter of serving others. Their future happiness would be contingent upon doing what they knew.

Two comments are in order. First, the "If" clause that Jesus used was a third-class condition where the condition is assumed to be true but the conclusion is in some degree of doubt. That is, Jesus assumed that they "Got It" in terms of the lesson given, but left in doubt whether they would actually translate that knowledge into action.

Secondly, our Lord's interaction with Peter affirms the spiritual nature of the lesson. Jesus was NOT instituting the ordinance of foot washing. He was illustrating the need for those whom he had totally cleansed from sin in the matter of salvation to be washed (in part) periodically and regularly in the matter of fellowship.

The spiritual lesson has not changed in two thousand years. When you and I soil our spiritual feet with the dirt of moral uncleanness, and approach the throne of grace for cleansing to restore a broken fellowship, we are in essence allowing Jesus to wash our feet in a manner consistent with his actions in the Upper Room. No place for pride. Jesus is still our Servant as well as Master and Lord. If we are to enjoy ongoing intimacy with him, we're going to have to submit to a spiritual foot washing that ONLY he can perform. Up for that?

Jesus taught the Twelve (soon to become the Eleven) that they should do to one another what

he had done unto them (13:14-15). What had Jesus done? He had extended a partial washing to those whom he had washed from head to foot with salvation for the purpose of maintaining fellowship. Now, you and I have zero power to affect salvation in others. But it IS within our power to extend forgiveness to fellow saints when the push and shove of life results in offence. If you see a fellow believer mired in an unhappy state, there's a distinct possibility that he or she is holding a grudge against, and withholding forgiveness from, another believer. They know they should serve that individual with a spiritual foot washing, but pride prevents it. The doing falls short of the knowing.

Failure to do what we know is not only a recipe for lukewarmness, but the precursor to spiritual liability as well. James stated it this way: "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (4:17). It has been said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Well, we know that's not necessarily true in the real world. But in spiritual terms, ANY knowledge of truth that fails to make its way into our actions can yield bitter fruit in the life. By biblical definition, failure to do what we know to do is a missing of the mark for which God will hold us to account.

The answer of the Lord Jesus to any of his children who find themselves languishing in the spiritual abyss of lukewarmness can be summed up in three words: Do Whatcha Know! Start there...and trust the Spirit of God to break additional light upon your mind and heart as you move forward off dead center. If a failure to Do Whatcha Know got you into spiritual trouble, then beginning afresh to Do Whatcha Know is the way to extricate yourself from that trouble and turn things around!

Endurance (Part 1)—First Mention

Merriam-Webster defines endurance as “the ability to withstand hardship or adversity; the ability to sustain a prolonged stressful effort or activity.” Most of us admire endurance and those who endure. One of my favorite Olympic events is the Marathon—the premier endurance race consisting of a grueling 26.2 miles at a sub-five-minute per mile pace. The upcoming 2012 Election season will require candidates to endure Media scrutiny, personal attacks by opponents and the mental-emotional-physical demands of the race. Conventional wisdom says that the ability to endure the rigors of a Presidential campaign is great preparation for the Oval Office.

As we embark upon our multi-missive study of endurance, we will discover that endurance ranks high on God’s list of fundamentals for personal success in things both spiritual and vocational. Endurance is the very essence of the nature of God! The Lord ONLY asks of you and me what he himself possesses in infinite abundance and provides with endless availability to those who rely upon him!

While the word ‘endurance’ does not appear in the KJV, its cousins ‘endure’ (29), ‘endured’ (8), ‘endureth’ (59) and ‘enduring’ (3) occur nearly 100 times. That’s fodder sufficient for a thousand-page commentary. Moreover, it signifies that something the Spirit of God references 100 times in scripture demands our attention. We’ll take the occasion of a few Pens to attempt to hit the high points. In this Pen, we’ll consider the first mention of the word ‘endure’ and its practical significance.

The first mention of ‘endure’ in scripture is an instructive one. The reference is not to soldiers, political leaders or athletes, but to children! The context finds Jacob and his familial entourage in an unavoidable encounter with elder brother Esau after two decades of estrangement (Genesis 33:1-17). Jacob would rather have had his molars extracted with pliers than to face Esau’s angry countenance again. But Esau was a different man. No longer does he harbor resentment and rage, but rather exhibits kindness—an absence of malice—toward his younger brother. Esau’s face was such a “pleasant” surprise to Jacob that he compared it to seeing the “face of God” (33:10).

Esau appears to have had a renewed cohabitation in mind, sort of like old times, when he says “let us take our journey, and let us go” (33:12). He’s willing to lead the way to Seir (33:14) with his 400 men (33:1). But Jacob reminds his brother that there is a danger in “overdriving” the children and the flock (33:13). He reasons that the pace of travel MUST be limited by the ability of the children and the flocks to endure it. His argument: “Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on softly, according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure, until I come unto my lord unto Seir” (33:14).

The word endure is from the Hebrew regel (a foot, to move). It signifies the ability to travel on foot. In Jacob’s mind, that ability would be lost if the pace set by the men ‘overdrove’ the ‘tender’ ones (33:13). Little did Jacob know that when he vocalized his thoughts to Esau about the ability of the children to endure foot travel that the Spirit of God would enshrine them in scripture for future generations, and teach us two important lessons.

First, God NEVER overdrives his children. Every child of God has a capacity for spiritual sojourning that can grow or diminish with time. An omniscient Father knows exactly the pace to set for each of them, and provides his own omnipotence as a source of strength for the journey. Thus God in his faithfulness does NOT allow his children to be tempted (tried, tested, pushed forward) above their ability to endure the pace, but will with every temptation also make a way of escape, that they might be able to bear it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Second, no congregation is able to move forward any faster than the ability of the spiritually 'tender' among them to manage the pace. One of the great values of discipleship is bringing the spiritual infants in a church (assuming there are some) up to a level of maturity that facilitates expeditious spiritual travel. The church that neglects or abandons discipleship will ultimately see its children fall by the wayside.

In our text, Esau apparently agreed with Jacob's logic. He and his 400 grown men beat feet for Seir and left Jacob, the kids and cattle to play catch up at their own pace. Esau offered to leave some of his 400 men to travel with Jacob, but he argued there was "no need" to do so (33:15). When the "soft" traveling pace of Jacob and kinfolk had created enough distance between the two companies, Jacob set his course toward Succoth (33:17). There is no indication the two brothers ever saw each other again.

I realize there is always a danger in trying to read too much into a passage of scripture. But I believe we are well within our limits in drawing these two lessons from the first biblical reference to endurance. It certainly gives us pause to reflect upon our ability (and that of those around us) to endure the pace our heavenly Father sets for us. In the final analysis, we are all foot soldiers of Christ and his Cross. It is NOT his will that ANY of our feet fail as we move along the way!

Endurance (Part 2)—The Wisdom of Jethro

Every U.S. President surrounds himself with advisors he believes have a high-level of expertise in a policy area vital to the success of his administration. Prominent among them are Economic Advisor, Secretary of State and Chief of Staff. It is the job of these advisors to keep their ears to the ground, report critical developments to the President, and enable him to take actions that will positively impact the nation. In the ideal scenario, a President gets good advice and makes good decisions from which the nation derives a benefit.

The second mention of the word endure in scripture occurs in a context where that scenario plays out exactly as scripted. Exodus 18:1-27 is a chapter of the Bible that records for us the practical outworking of wise advice, so that the advice culminated in policy formation-implementation from which the man of God and a nation under his leadership derived great benefit.

Moses met and married a woman named Zipporah during his fugitive days in Midian. Before the Burning Bush and his return to Egypt, Zipporah gave birth to two sons: Gershom and Eliezer (18:3-4). Zipporah and her sons remained in Midian with her father Jethro while Moses was about the business of delivering God's people from a 400-year Egyptian bondage. When Jethro heard of the great success of his son-in-law, he traveled to Sinai with daughter and grandsons to reunite them with husband-father Moses (18:6).

Jethro was on spiritual cloud nine after Moses shared all that God had done (18:7-12). He "rejoiced" and blessed the Lord and sacrificed to the God who is "greater than all gods" (18:11). At the conclusion of a celebratory day, Moses, Jethro, Aaron and the elders of Israel shared a meal together in honor of God's goodness. As a father-in-law, it brings great joy whenever my daughter's husband experiences a measure of success that directly benefits my daughter and two grandchildren. I can identify with the joy of Jethro!

As an aside (but not an insignificant one), the venue for this family reunion was "the wilderness" (18:5). That word typically makes one think about what is NOT there. But our text is careful to tell us who WAS there, for Moses had encamped "at the mount of God" and the meal shared by Jethro and Israel's leadership was "before God" (18:12). Only the presence of God can make the wilderness a wonderful place to be!

The next day was business as usual. Moses took his customary seat as judge to settle matters of dispute among the people from sunup to sundown (18:13-16). After observing the demands that the millions of dislocated Jews were placing upon Moses, Jethro concluded that he would "surely wear away" if the stress of his position went on unabated (18:18). So Jethro offered advice to Moses with a humility indicative of godliness (18:19-22).

Jethro saw Moses' job as consisting of three critical functions: Intercessor, Educator and Arbitrator. He insisted that NOTHING disrupt his intercessory work on behalf of Israel. Moses would continue to be "for the people to Godward" that he might bring their causes to God (18:19). In addition, NOTHING should hinder his education ministry. Moses would continue to

“teach them ordinances and laws, and shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do” (18:20). But Jethro insisted that SOMETHING be done about arbitration. This role should be delegated to other qualified men, who would deal with “every small matter” so that Moses would ONLY have to consider “every great matter” and the “hard causes” (18:22, 26).

Jethro laid out four qualifications for arbitrators (18:21). First, they must be “able men” (i.e., have the moral and mental firepower to discern right from wrong; connect dots in a dispute). Second, they must “fear God” (i.e., be aware of his presence-approval for decisions they render). Third, they must be “men of truth” (i.e., hate a lying tongue; possess the ability to sniff out liars in the litigation process). Fourth, they must be “hating covetousness” (i.e., incapable of being bought or bribed by litigants; immune from money motives in rendering verdicts). The list was not long, but certain to produce a godly judiciary system where “Right” would generally prevail.

Jethro thus concluded his advice: “If thou shalt do this thing, and God command thee so, then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people shall also go to their place in peace” (18:23). Endure is the Hebrew *amad* (“to stand firm or persist”). Translation: “Moses, if you heed my advice, your primary roles of Intercessor and Educator will not be affected or diminished over time. Moreover, this policy will promote peace among the people.”

One cannot read this story without contemplating the ability of America to endure long term without judgeships populated with the kinds of men Jethro recommended. The wisdom of Jethro was not only embraced by Moses, but by the Apostles as well, who refused to neglect prayer [intercession] and the ministry of the Word [education]” to serve tables (Acts 6:2-4). Men like Stephen and Philip stepped in to handle practical business matters. In the present age, pastors who have such men to help them bear the burdens of ministry are blessed indeed!

Endurance (Part 3)—Expressing the Inexpressible

Those familiar with the King James Version are familiar with the use of italics by the translators to express an underlying sense or meaning that was left unexpressed by its authors in the original text. The use of italics was deemed an intellectually honest vehicle for conveying what was clearly intended by an author even though it was not expressly stated. A case in point is Psalm 136—the classic passage regarding the mercy of God!

There is a phrase in Psalm 136 that is the most often-used phrase in all of scripture: “for his mercy endureth for ever.” The exact phrase is employed thirty-five times with twenty-six occurring in Psalm 136. Now, we would all agree that if God uses a word thirty-five times, it behooves us to study-enquire as to its significance. Should an entire phrase with thirty-five repetitions command any less of our attention? It tells me that God wants us to know with unequivocal certainty that at the very core of his being is a mercy that has no expiration date!

In Psalm 136, the word *endureth* is italicized, which means there is no actual Hebrew word for translation into English. What the translators faced was the Hebrew word *chesed* modified by the adjectival phrase “for ever.” Strict translation: “His mercy for ever.” Expanded translation: “His mercy [is a] for ever [kind of mercy].” Translator quandary: What word can we insert that both captures the writer’s intent and smoothes out a slavish translation without doing harm to the original text? In other words, how do we express the inexpressible? *Endureth* was the word they chose. It captures the durative nature of Divine mercy as well as the essence of a mercy that CANNOT be worn down, exhausted or depleted by fallen sinners and their collective demands upon it. It simply endures for ever!

The first mention of the phrase came from the mouth of David as the nation of Israel celebrated the return of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem after a hiatus among the Philistines (1 Chronicles 16:1-36). His oration to Israel took the form of a Psalm that would become a permanent part of Israel’s songbook (16:7). As he concluded his tribute, he said: “O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good, and his mercy endureth for ever” (16:34). David’s declaration is the basis for Psalm 136. Goodness and mercy have ALWAYS been traveling companions (Psalm 23:6). God DOES good to men because he IS good! If we connect the dots, we see that the mercy and goodness of God are both peas from the same pod, and will endure as long as the Godhead exists!

The phrase “for the mercy of God endureth for ever” is the refrain-chorus for each of the twenty-six affirmations made by the Psalmist. Each statement of fact serves as a basis for Israel to give thanks to their God for his mercy on their behalf (136:1). Psalm 136 encapsulates Israel’s history from its captivity in Egypt to its establishment in the land. Many have sought to draw a distinction between grace and mercy, saying that the former is God giving sinful men what they do NOT deserve while the latter is God withholding from them what they DO deserve. But Psalm 136 reveals that mercy is a larger umbrella with broader applications. Let’s consider a few.

First, the LORD is the God of gods, the Lord of lords (136:2-3). Egypt was full of gods. Many

cultures have a multiplicity of gods. Count them, round them up. They're ALL subservient to the ONE true God. The world is full of lords (men who exert authority over others). In every case, each operates under the ultimate authority of the LORD. The mercy in these realities lies in the fact that if I, as a sinner saved by grace, submit to and operate under the authority of the Lord Jesus, I need not fear another lord or god. I am free indeed because the LORD is who he is... and I am in him! If these great truths were the starting point for David in enumerating the mercies of God, they just might be a good place for all of us to start!

Second, the LORD "alone doeth great wonders" (136:4). The magicians in Egypt did wonders aplenty, but were trumped at every turn by God's greater wonders. In David's mind, no wonder can be considered great if another wonder is able to blow it away. Such are the wonders of God! Therefore we must conclude that God ALONE is capable of great wonders! The mercy here is that "greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Whatever the god of this world does to blow you away, the greater God is able to blow him away!

Lastly, the LORD "giveth food to all flesh" (136:25). He provides both bird and beast with their daily bread. He lavishes mercy upon them inasmuch as they are the work of his hand. Moreover, the "flesh" to which he gives food includes rebellious sinners, including those that crucified his Son. Thus the "goodness of God" is in active and full pursuit of lost men to lead them to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Our ability to endure whatever we encounter in life is contingent upon the endurance of God's mercy! We are ABLE to endure because his mercy DOES endure!. Take mercy out of the equation, and the game is over for us all! BUT his mercy endureth for ever! This was the word chosen by the KJV translators in their effort to express the inexpressible! And as you and I get together with family during this Thanksgiving season, let's be sure to put the mercy of God at the top of the list of things for which we are thankful!

Endurance (Part 4)—Considering Christ

Some of the most critical times in our lives are periods of consideration before points of decision. The standout high school athlete with five Division 1 college scholarship offers on the table will consider all options carefully before making a commitment. In better times, the college graduate with three standing job offers from Fortune 500 companies would carefully consider salary, benefits and work environment before choosing an employer. In the race called the Christian life, the disciple who runs is encouraged to consider Jesus, the Author and Finisher of faith, as the model for endurance (Hebrews 12:1-3).

The context has to do with the race that is set before us, of which it is said that we should “run with patience” (12:1). The text contains an exercise in redundancy for effect. The words “patience” (with respect to running), “endured” (with respect to the Cross), and “endured” (with respect to the contradiction of sinners) all come from the same Greek root. The noun “patience” is *hupomone*, “an abiding or remaining under.” The verb “endured” is *hupomeno*, “to abide or remain under.”

The word paints the picture of persistence, perseverance. It signifies God placing upon the shoulders of his people the burdens agreeable to his will and purpose. Our job is to stay under the load, continue to bear it, and persist and persevere when circumstances might dictate we jettison the burden and walk an easier, less arduous path. If the believer needs one or more points of reference as motivation, the writer offers (1) the cross that Jesus endured for our transgressions and (2) the contradictions of sinners he endured to get to that Hill of incalculable suffering. What more should a believer need in terms of example in order to endure the rigors of the race?

The verb tenses are instructive. When the writer says Jesus ‘endured’ the cross, he uses the aorist. When he says that Jesus ‘endured’ the contradictions of sinners against himself, he uses a perfect active participle. The use of active voice instead of passive portrays Jesus as a champion (one who actively took on his antagonists) instead of a victim (one forced to endure the contradictions). Expanded translation: “Having persevered through three years of locking horns with sinners with the result that he endured them to the very end, he finally endured that one last comprehensive act of suffering on behalf of the very sinners that opposed him.” Now that is endurance with an exclamation point!

These images in the forefront of our thinking are intended to be motivators to keep us focused upon the race at hand. Mental focus of this sort can serve either as preventive medicine or an antidote for weariness and faintness of mind that can weigh us down. If you and I run long and hard enough, it will likely serve as both!

What does it mean to consider Jesus? The verb “consider” is *analogizomai*. It’s the prefix *ana* (“above, over”) and the root *logizomai* (“to think, ponder”). Our word “logic” comes from this root. It means to think something over, ponder it, to make it an integral part of our thinking process. The noun “contradiction” is *antilogia*. It’s the prefix *anti* (“against”) together with *logia* (“mental processes”). It means to have a mindset contrary to another, thus creating rebellion, strife. It

means to gainsay (deny). Rebellion raises its ugly head whenever a subordinate develops a mindset that contradicts that of his superior. The scribes, Pharisees and religious elites crucified the Lord Jesus because they saw in him a superior authority whose thinking they chose to reject.

There is a subtle play on words between 'consider' (the mindset of believers toward Jesus) and 'contradiction' (the mindset of sinners toward Jesus). They have a common root, but prefixes that make them exact opposites. Thus Paul said: "the carnal mind is at enmity [warfare] with God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). And James: "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). Friends are friends because they share a commonality of thinking. Friendships typically disintegrate when a change in the thinking of either party makes a continued close association impossible.

Christian runners who consider Jesus as a pattern in their thinking will likely endure the same contradictions that Jesus endured. It's not something for which they must strive. It's just that the consistent godliness of life that the considering of Christ creates will, by its very nature, create the requisite friction and resultant contradiction.

There are three good reasons for considering Jesus. First, it's a reality check. The opposition he faced is exactly the kind we can expect if we walk in a godly manner. He is our motivation to keep on running! Second, it breeds a spirit of worship. Reflections on his steadfast love cause us to look upon him in awesome wonder. Third, it is therapeutic. Weariness and faintness of soul are the potential pitfalls that our consideration of Jesus are designed to prevent. The considering of Christ is a win-win. It gives glory to him...and grit to us!

Endurance (Part 5)—Mentor and Protégé

NFL fans are anticipating the “Luck Sweepstakes” in the next draft. Andrew Luck plays QB for the Stanford football team. He’s a Heisman Trophy candidate and potential number-one draft pick. Some say the winless Indianapolis Colts, if they pick first, will select Luck (the protégé) to play behind future Hall of Famer Peyton Manning (the mentor). It’s a scenario wherein Luck will receive the best QB mentoring the NFL has to offer.

The relationship between mentor and protégé is a powerful one! History is replete with examples of great men who developed their raw potential under the tutelage of a master. The relationship between Paul and Timothy was that of mentor and protégé...but much more. They served together in the Gospel as a father would with his son. In Second Timothy, Paul took the occasion of his Rome imprisonment to pen words of encouragement to his protégé, whose ministry would long outlive the apostle. The theme of “endurance” is again in the spotlight.

The mentor urges his protégé to “endure hardness” (2:3) and to “endure afflictions” (4:5). Both phrases are the translation of the Greek verb *kakopatheo*, the combination of *kakos* (“evil, bad things”) and the verb *patheo* (“to suffer”). The admonition packs power inasmuch as the mentor is serving prison time. He is imprisoned for one reason—the Gospel! One of the sobering surprises endured by young preachers, who envision themselves one day preaching the stars down to (and being loved by) their first church, is the harsh reality that many who name the name of Christ cannot and will not “endure sound doctrine” (4:3).

Thirty years ago I wrote the following adage in the cover of my Bible: “Beware of those who cast down the palm branches at your coming; for they will be the ones who drive the nails at your leaving.” Those who harbor disdain for the Gospel message will often attempt to destroy the messenger! If God has called you to preach the Word of God, and equipped you as a pastor-teacher, be prepared to do a little suffering along the way. It will come from places and in ways that you cannot imagine.

In keeping with what a mentor offers to a protégé, Paul cites his own example of endurance both as a model of consistency and a source of motivation. Paul said: “Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2:10). The ‘therefore’ points back to the gospel (the Word of God) and the fact that it CANNOT be bound or made subject to prison chains (see Acts 16). So, as the model Christian soldier, the mentor encourages the protégé to go and do likewise (2:3-4).

Who are the elect ones for whom Paul endured all things? The first possibility is Israel—God’s chosen people. Paul testified to the persistent sorrow and great heaviness of heart he endured for them as well as his willingness to be accursed from Christ for their salvation (Romans 9:3). Acts portrays the ministry of a man who lived out in its fullest sense “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” Moreover, Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles. For the most part, Gentiles heard him gladly in almost every city he visited. Most of the afflictions he endured came at the hands of reprobate Jews who were determined to discredit the message and destroy the messenger. The elect nation of Israel, in all likelihood, is what Paul had in mind. Timothy would have no

doubt connected the dots.

A second possibility is the Church. Members of that body are “in Christ” the Elect One. The context provides support for this view as well. In 2:2, Paul told Timothy to teach faithful men what he had learned, who would be able to teach others. Since Timothy was pastor of the church at Ephesus, these men would have been members of his church. A dozen verses later (2:14), Paul reiterates to Timothy his obligation to the people. He is to put THEM in remembrance of the “eternal glory” of their salvation (2:11-13), charging THEM to avoid strife about profitless words. Since 2:2 and 2:14 both refer to believers, why not interpret the elect of 2:10 as believers? In that case, the “salvation” is a “glory to glory” sanctification (2 Corinthians 3:18) with “eternal” rewards.

The elect ones of 2:10 could be understood to be inclusive of both Israel and the Church without doing violence to the context. Paul endured a myriad of hardships on behalf of both elect groups. What the context does NOT support is identifying the elect of 2:10 as a group of yet-to-be-justified sinners and proof text for unconditional election. However, if “salvation” in 2:10 is seen as a reference to justification, Paul no doubt had God’s chosen people Israel in mind. The fact is believers are elected “in Christ” to inherit everything. Lost men are elected to absolutely nothing! The Jew is elected by virtue of physical birth; the believer by virtue of spiritual birth.

There is no endurance so valuable as that which translates into the salvation of sinners and sanctification of the saints. May the Lord enable each of us to put ourselves in the shoes of the protégé, rally around the legacy of endurance that Paul the mentor left for us, and then go and do likewise!

Face to Face (Part 1)--Men with Men

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have provided for the media a certain kind of human interest story that almost always brings a warm-fuzzy feeling to the heart and sometimes a tear to the eye. These stories involve members of our military who have been deployed to a war theatre and separated from family for extended periods of time. Teleconferencing technology (e.g., Skype) enables these servicemen-women to set up video meetings with loved ones. When a news outlet covers one of these “virtual” encounters, the effect is both meaningful and emotional. A video conference, however, is never an adequate substitute for the real thing—a face to face!

The Bible has somewhat to say about face to face meetings. The phrase “face to face” is found eleven (11) times in scripture. Three of the usages portray interactions among men. The other eight make reference to men having an up-close-and-personal encounter with God. Let's consider first the references to human interaction.

Prior to Paul's appearance before King Agrippa at Caesarea, Festus conferred with the King to bring him up to speed on the circumstances behind Paul's imprisonment. In that meeting Festus cited a Roman legality requiring “that he which is accused have the accusers face to face, and have licence to answer for himself concerning the crime laid against him” (Acts 25:16). This legal rule opened the door for Paul to share his testimony and that of Christ with a regal audience. Paul's appeal to Agrippa's faith in the prophets and in Christ by extrapolation was the basis for this reply: “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (26:28). The Roman law requiring a face to face between an accused and accusers has survived to become a cornerstone of our own legal system!

Acts 26 encapsulates Paul's answer to Agrippa and entourage. One can read the entire chapter aloud in less than six minutes. It might well be called his “Five-Minute Message”. It was so effective that Agrippa was willing to dismiss the false charges and set him free (if not for his appeal to Caesar). The “long-winded” preacher can learn from this. If a congregation grants him a face to face hearing on Sunday, why bloviate for an hour when twenty minutes might be more effective? Ben Haden, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, TN for thirty-one years, is a case in point. His Changed Lives broadcast, consisting of 20-minute messages, garnered perennial high ratings from an international audience. Some suggest his oratorical discipline as a former attorney was the reason he preached every message as if delivering a closing argument to a jury. It might actually be possible for some pastors to double the size of their congregations by cutting their sermons in half using the Haden model.

John wrote his Second Epistle to “the elect lady and her children” (v. 1). The recipient is variously understood to be (1) a Christian family consisting of a mother and her children, (2) a particular local church and members, and or (3) the body of Christ at large and its spiritual members. In closing his brief epistle, John said he had much more to say, but desired a face to face rather than additional “paper and ink” to say it (v. 12). John obviously felt that a face to face with the things of Christ at center stage would generate a level of joy unobtainable through a

mere transcription.

Is not this principle still viable? Picture a Sunday School class that comes together to recount spiritual battles during the week and to share biblical insights during study-discussion time. In the class is a scribe who takes notes and prints-mails them in letter form to members not in attendance. Who derives greater benefit, attendees or letter recipients? The same principle might apply to a church service where God's Spirit inhabits the praises, the preacher declares God's truth in heaven-sent power with sinners and saints alike gathering at the altar for the purpose of petitioning the God of grace. No attendee would be able to adequately relate that experience to one who was not there. It would require a face to face to fully appreciate the event and the work of God therein!

John wrote his third epistle to "the wellbeloved Gaius" (3 John 1). As in his Second Epistle, there were many things he wanted to write, but would wait for a face to face to share them by personal dialogue rather than "ink and pen" (v. 14). It may be that John had led Gaius to faith in Christ, which is suggested by this affirmation: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (v. 4). Indeed, there is no greater joy for a child of God than to learn that one of his or her converts continues to walk in truth, grow in grace and bear spiritual fruit. If there is one, it would be a face to face with that same individual to see and hear first hand what God had wrought...which appears to be what John anticipated with Gaius. Every believer should experience this kind of joy at least once if not multiple times during his or her sojourn to heaven.

Dear friend, we should learn to cherish and embrace the face to face time we are afforded with fellow believers in this life. It is impossible to replicate those lost opportunities with pen-and-paper or word-of-mouth accounts. In the next Pen, we will consider the "face to face" references that speak of men having up-close-and-personal encounters with God.

Face to Face (Part 2)--Jacob Encounters God

Our study of the eleven (11) biblical occurrences of the phrase “face to face” began with the three (3) instances that deal with men interacting with other men. Paul’s face to face encounter with his accusers at Caesarea in the presence of Agrippa and Festus silenced his critics and garnered the favor of the king. The apostle John, in his last two epistles, spoke of the spiritual and personal joy he anticipated from face to face meetings with the elect lady and Gaius respectively. These would supercede communication of the pen-and-paper kind.

The remaining eight (8) usages of “face to face” occur in contexts that describe men having personal encounters with God. Long before Steven Spielberg gave us “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” (1977) as an exercise in science fiction, biblical writers were documenting close encounters of the divine kind that were as real as the air we breathe. Is there a more significant encounter that one can experience in this life?

The first mention of “face to face” involves a man we might have voted “Least Likely” to experience such an encounter. Consider briefly five of his predecessors, for whom “face to face” would have been an appropriate reference: Abel, for whose person and offering the Lord had respect (Genesis 4:4); Enos, the son of Seth, whose prayerful example led a generation of men to call upon the Lord’s name (4:26); Enoch, who walked with God until the Lord took him (5:22-24); Noah, who walked with God and found grace in the Lord’s eyes (6:8-9); and altar-building Abram, a righteous man to whom the Lord appeared multiple times on a personal level (12:7-8). Not one of these “Most Likely” candidates, however, was granted the first “face to face” reference. The Spirit of God reserved that unique distinction for the supplanter-in-chief—Jacob!

There a few individuals in scripture that better epitomize the grace of God toward sinners than does Jacob. He procured brother Esau’s birthright for a mess of pottage and later appropriated the blessing of his elder brother by fraudulent means. Esau’s subsequent anger forced Jacob into fugitive mode. It was shortly after hitting the road that the Lord appeared to him in a “ladder” dream with promises (28:10-22). Upon awaking, he concluded that Luz was “none other but the house of God” (28:17), named it Bethel (“house of God”), erected a pillar from the rocks he had used for pillows, and made vows contingent upon God’s faithfulness to his promises

Fast forward twenty years. Jacob has accrued four wives, eleven sons, one daughter and great wealth. The angel of the Lord appears to him in another dream, reminds him of the twenty-year-old promises made at Bethel, and tells him to “get thee out of this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred (31:11-13). Jacob complies, and once again is acutely aware that an unavoidable encounter with Esau lies ahead. He sends an advance “present” to Esau so as to “appease him” and find acceptance prior to seeing “his face” (32:20). As it turned out, the Lord was about to put Jacob’s concern over Esau’s face in proper perspective with a glimpse of his own.

On the eve of his meeting with Esau, Jacob made additional precautionary steps to protect his family. This left him alone for the night (32:24-32). It was there that he “wrestled with a man” until daybreak. There is no doubt in the minds of most Bible students that the “man” with whom Jacob wrestled—and effectively so—was none other than the Pre-Incarnate Christ. In order to

get the upper hand, the man touched-disjointed one of Jacob's hip sockets...a touch that left him with a perennial limp. Still Jacob refused to relinquish his grip until he had been blessed by the divine grappler. Jacob's grip on this man reminds me of the industrial product Non-serviceable Loctite. Once applied to threaded objects, only the extreme heat of a torch can break it loose.

The man who changed the name of Luz to Bethel was about to have his own name changed. God gave Jacob ("heel holder, supplanter, snare layer") the name Israel ("God prevails"). This happens to be the first occurrence of "Israel" in the biblical text. When Jacob asked the man for his name, he got a rhetorical response, which led him to the correct conclusion. Thus "Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (32:30). Peniel and Penuel (32:31) both have the same meaning: "facing God."

What conclusions can we draw from Jacob's face to face encounter? First, face to face encounters that involve believers always result in an alteration of one's identity and life. It's impossible to meet face to face with God without a change for the better...and holier. Second, no face we encounter in this life is of greater import than the face of God. The man or woman who meets God face to face need not fear the face of any man. Third, the promises of God have no expiration date. Whether decades or centuries, the passage of time cannot disannul them. Fourth, America's future may very well depend upon believers who are willing to grapple with God in Loctite fashion until they have secured a blessing from his merciful hand on behalf of their nation. Our next Pen will continue to examine those passages that describe face to face encounters with God.

Face to Face (Part 3)--Moses and Joshua

As we began our examination of the eight (8) usages of “face to face” that describe men interacting with God, we limited our focus to its first mention—Jacob. It included a high-level summary of events that culminated in his wrestling match at Peniel, after which he came to this conclusion: “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30). An additional word or two about his assessment are in order.

The primary sense of “my life is preserved” is awareness that he had survived exposure to God’s up-close-and-personal presence and lived to tell about it. That’s the ‘backward’ look. I believe those words had a ‘forward’ or prophetic look as well. “Is preserved” meant “has been” and “will be.” Jacob’s long-harbored fear of Esau was replaced by a confidence that nothing would or could nullify God’s promises or endanger his life. His face to face transitioned him from fear to faith to fearlessness! What would a similar encounter do for you and me?

We now turn our attention to a man—a prophet—that had no peers. That is what scripture tells us: “There arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10). So we observe once more that the life lived with habitual face-to-face interludes with God endows one with a spiritual prowess that is otherwise unobtainable. Did you get the phrasing? “Whom the Lord knew”! The fact that a man knows God is important; but God knowing the man is paramount!

Paul understood this truth well. In admonishing the Galatians and contrasting their former and current spiritual status, he wrote: “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements...? (Galatians 4:9). In fact, when final judgment comes and we all stand before the Lord to give account, any claim that one has known God will avail nothing! The only criterion that will matter is whether God ever knew the individual (see Matthew 7:23). According to Jesus, for the one who claims to know the Lord without the Lord knowing them, all of his or her religious activity done in God’s name will be counted as “iniquity.” Now that’s a sobering thought indeed! A spiritual relationship consists of two-way knowledge; but one-way knowledge leaves the claimant in a state of spiritual death! Got two-way knowledge?

The reference we cited from Deuteronomy 34:10-12 is essentially an epitaph for this great man of God. It speaks of “the signs and the wonders” that “the Lord sent him to do.” Pharaoh and his servants were witnesses to God’s great power as was Israel. The words “all the great terror” capture both the grand scale on which miracles were executed and the effect upon witnesses. A Moses-like lifestyle in our day might not produce spectacular results on a scale comparable to that of Moses, but I’d love to see what effect a generation of Moses-like pastors might have on their churches and upon a nation that would become eyewitness to God’s glory in those churches!

If we turn back the clock about four decades, we find this reference: “And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. And he turned again into the camp: but his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle” (Exodus

33:11). No pastor since Moses has had a tougher flock. Israel was plagued with lust, doubt and rebellion on a scale that included millions. Do you think any man packs the wisdom to pastor that many earthy folks without heavenly resources? For that matter, what man can claim self-sufficiency for a flock consisting of hundreds...or dozens?

For Moses, the answer for the infamy in the camp was the face-to-face intimacy he found in the tent. There the God of Israel granted an audience and his full attention to a single man—HIS man! Every turning again into the camp required a return trip to the tent for replenishment of divine resources. Nothing will frustrate, discourage and or “burn out” a man of God faster than neglect of the tent while making excursions into the camp!

We know that the young man Joshua would one day replace Moses and lead Israel into the promised land. Is it any wonder that Joshua was his successor? Joshua served Moses in the context of his service for God. And what a mentor was Moses! All of those face-to-face encounters rubbed off on protégé Joshua. I like to think Joshua might have looked Moses' way as he headed out to the camp, looking for an indication as to whether he should follow...hoping that Moses would go alone. Joshua cultivated a face-to-face lifestyle early on in his walk with God, and it served him well all his days! Perhaps Moses looked his way, and said: “Stay here, son of Nun! Get all the face to face you can get while you can get it! You're going to need it down the road!”

In conclusion, there is a question we must ask: Is our need for “face to face” encounters with God any less than it was for Moses and Joshua with regard to the race set before us? From the greatest to the least of God's people, we are all equally dependent upon divine resources to effectively execute the spiritual tasks God assigns. In the next Pen, we'll conclude our study of “face to face” encounters.

Face to Face (Part 4)--Venue of Intercession

Thus far in our study of “face to face” encounters with God we have considered Jacob, Moses and understudy Joshua. For Jacob, that face-to-face meeting signaled a transformation of life and designation as the progenitor of an entire nation. Moses the man of God engaged in routine face-to-face meetings with the Lord not only to nurture the most valuable of friendships but to draw from divine resources the wisdom and power required to provide leadership for Jacob’s descendants. In the young man Joshua, we saw that godly habits established early in life—especially regular face-to-face meetings with God—can serve one well for a lifetime.

Have you ever wondered why so many church-raised teens become dropouts after moving on to college and entering their twenties? One reason might be they never had a mentor like Moses in their life to set the proper influence. The face-to-face life can certainly be taught by exposition. But it must be caught by exposure. The greatest contribution any pastor can make to his generation is to live a face-to-face life that the young people in his flock can emulate. In the best of circumstances, however, we can expect to find Judas, who caught nothing after three years of exposure to the perfect face-to-face life!

The next biblical mention of “face to face” occurs in a rather amazing context (Numbers 14). The twelve men Moses sent to spy out the land had returned with an evil report...with the exception of Joshua and Caleb. (Does anyone doubt that Caleb was a face-to-face man?) These two men affirmed “We are well able” (14:30) to take the land and possess it whereas the gainsayers lamented “We are not able...” (14:31). The congregation at large subsequently embraced unbelief and basically questioned God’s ability to make good his promises. By God’s reckoning, this was the tenth time Israel had provoked him (14:22). Enough was enough!

As the mob-like congregation considered stoning Joshua and Caleb, the glory of God appeared in the tabernacle in a manner visible to all. (The “Hate the message, harm the messenger” mentality was in vogue long before the professional politician made it popular.) The Lord made known to Moses that he was on the brink of destroying his people by pestilence and disinheriting them. He would make Moses the progenitor of a “greater and mightier nation” (14:12). How incredibly easy it would have been for Moses to come back with, “Works for me! What’s next?!” A lot of pastors do essentially the same thing by leaving one congregation for what they believe will be a greener-pastured one. But that’s not what this man of God did!

Moses immediately broke into intercessory prayer mode (14:13-19), which had as its focus what was at stake Godward as opposed to manward. This is one of the key fruits of living a face-to-face life. It breeds within the spirit of its practitioner a high-level panoramic of the spiritual landscape that tends to dominate the perspective and promote spiritual agility. Israel and its survival were no doubt a concern for Moses. But of greater concern was the long-term impact on God’s reputation among the heathen (in this case, the Egyptians) if Israel should fall by the wayside. “What’s in it for me?” was and is trumped by “What’s in it for God?!”

Moses analyzed and itemized the issues. Among the various aspects of the divine reputation was this one: “Thou Lord art seen face to face” (14:14). This dynamic was and is unique to

God's people. Egypt had nothing more than physical objects—natural and man-made—for gods. Israel's God transcended the physical. He was the God of glory who, in his supernatural splendor, condescended to men of low estate. Unlike the heathen gods, he was approachable and merciful in addition to being all powerful. This is the reputation that the Lord held among the heathen. Moses reminded God of what it would cost HIM should he kill Israel as one man (14:15).

At stake: The Lord who brought his people out of Egypt “was not able to bring this people into the land which he swear unto them” (14:16). What a portentous indictment—INABILITY to DELIVER on a PROMISE! Thus Moses framed his argument. For a nation that enjoyed face-to-face intimacy with their God to suffer failure IN SPITE OF such favor would be catastrophic in terms of reputation. The concepts of “face to face” and “failure” are as incompatible as water and oil—an unseemly state of affairs! The Lord hearkened to Moses, and worked out his will without risk to his reputation. In fact, he enhanced it. For the God who brought his people OUT OF bondage was not only ABLE to bring them INTO the Promised Land, but ABLE also to SUSTAIN them during the forty years it took to get them there!

Dear friend, it is equally unseemly for a child of God who has met the Lord Jesus face to face via the born-again experience to fail in his or her quest for the life he promised—a Spirit-filled life of power and fruitfulness. This much is certain: Our Lord is sufficiently ABLE to bring every one of his children into that land flowing with the milk and honey of spiritual abundance. In our next Pen, we will continue to examine “face to Face” encounters of the divine kind.

Face to Face (Part 5)--A Godsend for Gideon

Our study of “face to face” encounters with God has given us a glimpse into his dealings with Jacob, Moses and successor Joshua. In Numbers 14, we considered the manner in which Moses—the one man that stood between an angry God and a provocative nation on the brink of annihilation by pestilence—interceded on their behalf to spare them such an end. The big stakes, however, had to do with the negative impact on God’s reputation among the heathen—namely, the Egyptians—that such an outcome would inflict.

The reputation of which Moses reminded the Lord was encapsulated in this statement: “Thou Lord art seen face to face” (14:14). No other nation could boast of such a privilege. In fact, Pharaoh and his army, as they pursued a delivered Israel to the banks of the Red Sea, had a little “face to face” of their own with the God of Israel, and met a watery grave as a result. All of these displays of power-protection were integral to the reputation God had garnered. If the Lord who brought his people out of Egypt “was not able to bring this people into the land which he swear unto them” (14:16), a portentous indictment of “INABILITY” was in the cards. We cannot overstate that a certain “wounding” of God’s reputation takes place every time a true believer in the Lord Jesus, who has experienced a regenerative face-to-face encounter with him, is guilty of overt spiritual-moral failure within view of an observant secular world—one that would love to hang that failure on God himself.

The next “face to face” mention takes us forty years into the future. The days of wilderness wandering had come to an end. Moses summoned Israel together to reiterate all that God had said and done as a manifestation of his precepts and power. In his introduction, Moses reminded them of their unique heritage: “The Lord talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire” (Deuteronomy 5:4). I believe those words were meant as a stake in the ground, an anchor for the soul. Israel’s greatest days—days of military conquest and acquisition of land in a theocratic context—were yet to come. Moses wanted that supernatural meeting at Mount Sinai to be indelibly etched in their minds. In like manner, we as believers should NEVER forget that the One who began a good work in us will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

In the post-Joshua era, there was an acting judge whom the Lord God visited on a “face to face” basis. Gideon lived in the time frame wherein the Midianites served as the bully de jour for seven years (Judges 6:1). Because of the harsh treatment, Israel resorted to dens and caves as strongholds, and was “greatly impoverished” (6:2, 6). A chastened people finally reached the breaking point, and cried unto the Lord for deliverance (6:7). As is often the case, God called a man of his own choosing to stand in the gap.

The Angel of the Lord (pre-Incarnate Christ) appeared to Gideon, promised his presence for the task ahead and confirmed the promise with signs. Before departing, the Angel consumed by fire the offering that Gideon had prepared. Gideon came to a full realization of whom he had met: “I have seen an angel of the LORD [Yahweh] face to face” (6:22). Two points of observation: (1) It was God in his mercy who had initiated this up-close-and-personal encounter. Gideon simply

responded in obedience to the grace God proffered. (2) A special encounter with God that he initiates in your life may very well be a prelude to and preparation for a much-needed spiritual breakthrough! God is always working and always up to something. Rejoice if his master plan includes you!

The next (and last) OT usage of “face to face” occurs in a prophetic context (Ezekiel 20). As the Lord’s prophet, Ezekiel casts his eyes into the latter days to describe the manner in which God will deal with the wickedness of his wayward people. The Lord warned: “And I will bring you into the wilderness of the people, and there will I plead with you face to face” (20:35). The word “plead” typically signifies an advocatorial role as in attorney for the defense. In this context, however, the pleading God has in mind is prosecutorial, meaning that Israel will be without a defense! No believer ever wants this kind of face-to-face encounter with his or her God. For it means the Lord that bought you with his precious blood is fed up with your rebellion and about to clean your clock!

Our final “face to face” reference is also prophetic in nature. As Paul put the final inspired touches to the great love chapter of scripture (1 Corinthians 13), he penned these words of anticipation: “For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known” (13:12). Is it not rather amazing that we will know God to the extent he now knows us? The obscurities we encounter in theological terms will one day give way to a level of comprehension hitherto unattainable. That initial face-to-face moment of full disclosure shall mark the beginning of an eternity of fullness void of limitations. Glory!

In closing, I invite you to consider afresh the familiar lyrics written by Mrs. Frank A. Breck and put to music in 1898 by Grant Colfax Tullarin: “Face to face with Christ, my Savior, Face to face —what will it be? When with rapture I behold Him, Jesus Christ who died for me. Face to face I shall behold Him, Far beyond the starry sky; Face to face in all His glory, I shall see Him by and by!” And all God’s people said...”Amen!”

How's that Yoke Workin' for Ya?

One of the great issues of our generation has been that of Global Warming with the winter of 2010-2011 being one of the coldest on record. Those who repudiate the Global Warming theory as a “hoax” perpetuated by the proponents of a New World Order, choosing rather to believe that planet earth moves through regular cycles of heating-cooling over which man has zero control, have found numerous occasions of late to issue the following query to the warming crowd: “How’s that Global Warming workin’ for ya?”

A similar question might be asked when we consider one of the most fundamental issues in scripture. It has to do with whom or what one serves in this life. Jesus expressed it this way: “Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24). Mammon extends beyond mere materialism to include anything that a man or woman deems more valuable to his or her existence than God himself. It could be love of self and or fleshly appetites, which Paul referred to when he warned against those “whose God is their belly” (Philippians 3:17-18).

In another text, Jesus invited those who “labour and are heavy laden” to come to him, and exchange the onerous yoke under which they served for his yoke—a yoke they would find to be “easy” and represent a load that was “light” by comparison (Matthew 11:28-30). In a nutshell, the Gospel of Jesus Christ bids lost men and women to take upon them the yoke of Christ and disavow the former yoke. Sadly, there are relatively “few” that take his yoke and “many” that opt not to relinquish the old (Matthew 7:13). What yoke are you wearing? If not the yoke of Christ, here’s an appropriate query: “How’s that yoke workin’ for ya?”

When Jesus said “my yoke” he was not implying that the hearers were yokeless. Every man and women wears a yoke of one sort or another. Jesus was confronting the laboring and heavy laden in his audience with the reality that their yoke was not working for them in a manner they might have desired. He then described the yoke that he was offering—easy versus laborious, light versus heavy. Would that kind of yoke exchange appeal to you?

The word “labour” is from the verb *kopiaio* (“to toil with wearisome or exhaustive effect”). It is a present active participle in nominative case. The words “heavy laden” are from *phortizo* (“to place a burden upon, to load one with a burden”). It’s a perfect passive participle in nominative case. Expanded translation: “Come unto me all of you who are continually toiling to the point of weariness, ones having been burdenized to a point where it seems like escape and relief are impossible.” The lading of which Jesus spoke most certainly included the regimen of illegitimate religious rules imposed by the Pharisees as well as the smothering political rule of Rome. There is another burden, however, that always exacts from its bearers a higher price than they would ever be willing to pay—the burden of sin! It is the one yoke that, if left in place, will abandon its bearers to an irreparable state of eternal suffering. Sin is a yoke that ultimately works for no one!

By contrast, Jesus said his yoke was easy and his burden light. The adjective “easy” is *chrestos*, signifying that which is “fit for good uses, manageable, mild as opposed to harsh.” The adjective “light” is *elaphros*, and refers to that which is “light in weight, quick, agile.” The yoke of

the Lord Jesus, as he described it, opens up a whole new world of freedom for the bearer so that he or she can serve God as he intended and experience his pleasure in the process. There is no greater joy for a sinner than to have his or her sin burden lifted by the Lord Jesus and to experience the gentle peace that takes its place! The Lordship of Christ is a yoke that works for one-hundred percent of those who take it up in exchange for the old. Moreover, taking up the yoke of Christ is a deliberate act at a specific point in time...not a process with multiple religious steps.

Once the yoking is done, the learning can begin. Jesus urged: "Learn of me" (11:29). What he said his followers would learn is that he was "meek and lowly in heart." "Meek" is praos ("gentle, mild"). An exchange of yokes would not usher in another harsh taskmaster, but rather a kind-gentle master who gathers his children together as a hen would gather her chickens under her wings (23:37). Such is the winsome appeal of the gospel! And for the weary and heavy-laden sinner, the offer of the yoke of Christ is a difficult one to turn down. Yet many stumble over its simplicity and take the burden of sin to the grave...and beyond.

There is but one path to true spiritual rest in this life, and that is the yoke of the Lord Jesus. Dear friend, is that the yoke that you wear at this hour? If not, and you're still laboring under and loaded down with the burdens of a life without Christ, we must ask: "How's that yoke workin' for ya?"

Jesus' Name

Your name is one of your most valuable possessions. As you and I sojourn through this life with all of its twists and turns, decisions and disappointments, troubles and triumphs, we are subject to observation by all those with whom we interact and come into contact. What people observe in us inevitably results in a general assessment of our character, stature and trustworthiness, which is inextricably tied to our name.

The scriptures speak clearly with regard to the value of a name. The inspired record contains the following two statements from Solomon, the sage of sages: "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches" (Proverbs 22:1a). And again: "A good name is better than precious ointment" (Ecclesiastes 7:1a). The Hebrew etymology of the words "good name" suggests a conspicuousness that one achieves for all the right reasons.

No man who has ever walked the planet has achieved a better name than Jesus of Nazareth. And to be certain, no man has ever borne a name that was more consistent with his character and the impact he has had on those with whom he interacted. Prior to Jesus' birth, the angel of the Lord spoke these words to Joseph: "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Matthew continues his narrative by citing the prophet Isaiah: "and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (1.23). No one but God can forgive sins. Jesus forgives sins and saves believers from them! Jesus' name says everything about his character, his stature, and his ability to save to the uttermost those who trust him.

For this reason, salvation is unavailable to sinners "in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). His life of perfect obedience included obedience unto death, even the death of the cross. There he died, not for crimes he had done, but as a substitute for us and our sins. "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:8-11). And because Jesus is the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2:9), bowing at the mere mention of his name is equivalent to worshipping the glorious Person behind the name.

The exclusivity of Jesus' name where salvation from sin is concerned has given him a bad name in America's current amoral and pluralistic culture. I can still remember a Jerry Falwell appearance on Phil Donahue many years ago. In the name of "balance" Donahue had a second guest—a liberal Episcopal scholar. This so-called "scholar" was a defender of homosexuality and spent a good portion of the program bastardizing the Word of God. Donahue spent his share of time attacking the "narrow" and "myopic" view that Jesus was the ONLY way to heaven. Donahue and the Episcopal charlatan were on the same page. Their clear intent was to gang tackle Falwell and portray him as a narrow-minded bigot.

The pervasiveness of anti-Christian sentiment in America has grown exponentially over the

decades since I first watched that episode. It's at the point now where the inclusion of "in Jesus' name" at the conclusion of a public prayer can trigger litigation. And for all that the politically correct among us have ballyhooed about Islam being "peaceful" and "tolerant", the mere mention of Jesus' name or the possession of a Bible in a Muslim country can cost one his or her head in the name of Allah. Now, things may never get so bad in America that the mention of Jesus' name a public forum becomes a capital offense. But we ARE at the misdemeanor threshold and well on our way to an array of fines and incarcerations for invoking the name that's above every name! If you think the current leadership in Washington, D.C. has any concern for the Constitution and its First Amendment rights, you would be sadly mistaken!

Feel the frustration? Listen to this three-millennia-old lament: "O God, how long shall the adversary reproach? Shall the enemy blaspheme thy name forever?" (Psalm 74:10). The answer to that second question is "No!" By-and-by all of God's foes will fold, and bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ. But until that blessed day arrives, we as God's people must join Asaph in approaching the throne of grace with this petition: "Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of thy name: and deliver us, and purge away our sins, for thy name's sake" (Psalm 79:9). The counterbalance to worldly opposition is godly adoration. The world isn't going to slow down its opposition to Jesus' name any time soon. Nor should we in our adoration of it!

No Place of Repentance

The technical definition of repentance is “a change of mind.” Its contextual usage in scripture goes beyond its basic etymological meaning to include an altered disposition of the will that translates into a change in one’s behavior. Moreover, the scriptures teach us that while repentance is a prerequisite for forgiveness, it does NOT necessarily guarantee restoration of that which might have been forfeited or lost as the result of a sinful act.

In Hebrews 12:16-17, the writer warned readers about the danger of being a “profane person”, and cited Esau as an example: “Who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.” No place of repentance! Esau lost something personal and precious that he could never recover.

There is a distinct difference between repentance and the place of repentance. Repentance is that change of mind following an act of sin that realigns the mind of the perpetrator with the mind of God accompanied by a measure of godly sorrow. The ‘place’ of repentance is the actual condition or status that existed prior to being altered by the profane act. It does NOT mean that Esau was incapable of repentance. Nor does it mean he could not have received forgiveness for his profane act. What it DOES mean is that it was impossible for Esau to recover what he had lost. The birthright was gone. Remission of sin is no guarantee that a place of recovery will follow.

The twelfth chapter of Hebrews has been variously interpreted as to its application. Some allege the primary application to be Jewish brethren who had professed Christ without possessing Christ. It seems to me that its content is applicable to both true and faux believers alike. If the shoe fits, wear it! A genuine child of God can struggle with profane tendencies (that formerly ruled his or her life) long after conversion. The context identifies two other potential trouble spots—bitterness and fornication. What a trifecta! They are itemized in connection with profanity for good reason. Some who named the name of Christ were fornicating, allowing themselves to become embittered, and defiling others in the process.

The scripture teaches us that the underlying cause for Esau’s forfeiture of blessing to younger brother Jacob was a profane streak. One is profane when he or she relegates the sacred to common status. Profanity is essentially a distorted value system that alters one’s perception of reality. Esau was profane long before he returned hungry from his hunt. So when faced with the option of abating his appetite by selling his birthright, it was no more difficult than flipping a switch. His choice was made in a moment of time, but changed his future for all time.

Esau “sought” to recover his inheritance “carefully with tears” (12:17). The words “sought carefully” are the translation of the verb *ekzeteo* (“to seek out”). The prefix *ek* intensifies the verb to indicate a vigilant search. Esau’s search was an exhaustive one. It was no nonchalant inquiry from which the unsuccessful petitioner might walk away saying, “Oh well!” Peter used the very same verb to describe the OT prophets who “enquired” and searched the scriptures diligently to learn all they could about the salvation to come (1 Peter 1:10). The fact that Esau

sought a remedy for his dilemma with energy comparable to that of truth-hungry prophets says it all.

The word “afterward” tells a sad story. It represents the time when the blessing should have been inherited. No individual has ever been more qualified for the “Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda” lament. But thoughts of “afterward” never entered Esau’s mind as he opted for that one morsel of meat. He sacrificed his future upon the altar of the immediate. Have you ever patronized your favorite BBQ joint or Buffet and wondered “Why did I do that?!” AFTER wiping out your third plate of all-you-can-eat ribs or fried chicken? Most of us have done so multiple times. Twenty-four hours afterward your bloated stomach is no longer an issue. But trading a birthright (or other precious possession) for a mess of pottage (or other fleeting pleasure) will have you asking that heart-sickening query for the remainder of your life!

How can one avoid tendencies toward the profane? Or if one has been guilty of a profane act and lost something of inestimable worth in the process, how can he or she avoid a repeat performance? The answer can be found in regular ingestions of the truth coupled with prayer and meditation—a godly exercise that brings and keeps the mind in sync with the mind of God. Synchronization of this sort arms the believer with wisdom and strength that he or she can tap into at the moment of temptation. The wherewithal to nurture a profane-free character via daily vigils at the throne of grace is a sacred privilege no believer should neglect. Failure to do can cause us to “fail of the grace of God” (12:15) and set us up to forfeit something irreplaceable after a profane act has run its course.

No Technological Replacement

The sundry ways in which technology has changed and defined our world is encyclopedic. One of the greatest technological advances (some would argue THE Greatest) was the Printing Press by Johannes Gutenberg circa 1440 A.D. The printing press replaced the painstaking work of scribes in copying written materials. Gutenberg's technological advance made possible the mass production-distribution of the Scriptures.

The twentieth century was the story of three remarkable technological advancements: the internal combustion engine, the transistor and the wireless revolution. A history of these technologies demonstrates that a particular product can be rendered obsolete in a matter of months by the next technological iteration. On Friday, October 14, 2011 tens of thousands of iPhone3 and Blackberry loyalists formed lines outside of wireless vendors to get the latest and greatest iPhone4 as a replacement.

The twenty-first century will no doubt tell the story of more technological advancements with such and such a product replacing this or that clunker. But there's one commodity on this earth for which there never has been and never will be a technological replacement. That, my friend, is the God-anointed preacher!

In the last century of church history, denominational bodies have modified the manner in which they organize themselves to better 'accommodate' the needs of the flock. We now have 'Senior' pastors, 'Worship' leaders, 'Program' administrators and any number of other monikers to delineate roles. Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with organizational structure. God is a God of order. Our problem is feeling like we're 'good to go' when we have a peg in every hole of the organizational chart. It's like a captain feeling he can now take his ship to sea because it has a full complement of crewmembers. That might work for our ship captain and the course he's charted for his vessel, but will prove inadequate for the Church and the mission for which God has tasked her. For the work of the captain is nautical; but that of the Church is supernatural!

Hebrews 4:12: "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." The Word of God is supernatural! It needs no embellishment from man to be what it is! It can meet a man or woman in their private devotions with the same dynamic impact one might experience in a congregational meeting. It's alive, full of power, and with a sharper cutting edge than any earthly artisan is able to produce. It penetrates the spirit of man and impacts his physical body. It can get into his mind and expose the substance of his thoughts and motivations of heart. It has the power to turn your world and mine upside down!

So how does the supernatural Word relate to the God-anointed preacher? The logic takes the form of a question: Should the man of God who handles the truth be any less lively, any less endowed with power, any less sharp than the truth he is handling? How incongruent for the handler of supernatural truth to proclaim it within the confines of natural ability! The apostle Paul said: "...for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). In the context, Paul is

contrasting the law of Moses with the gospel. But as a matter of application, is the powerless preacher who handles the letter of scripture without the life-giving force of the Spirit any less fatal?

In Acts 6:1–8:8, we find a narrative that tells how one God-anointed preacher replaced another. It is a story that involved two men of the early Church—Stephen and Philip. Luke mentioned them together in Acts 6:5. He says Stephen was a man “full of faith and of the Holy Ghost” (6:5), “full of faith and power” (6:8). It’s no injustice to scripture to extrapolate those qualities to Philip inasmuch as he demonstrated them in Acts 8. Stephen was NOT an apostle, but he operated in apostolic power...as did Philip. Stephen was a master orator and miracle worker in the early Church. His death was mourned with “great lamentation” (8:2). Perhaps some asked: “Is there any way to replace this man of God? Who’s going to fill his shoes?” Enter Philip.

The persecution that scattered the Church sent Philip to Samaria, where a few years earlier Jesus had sown the gospel seed in the heart of a woman who was a five-time marital loser. Apparently the fields that Jesus said were “white already to harvest” (John 4:35) were STILL ready for harvesting, for “the people with one accord gave heed to the things that Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did” (Acts 8:6). The Church is in good hands when the passing of one God-anointed preacher sets the stage for another of equal caliber!

The technological age in which we live has given Church leaders a bevy of tools for ministry. The busy pastor now has electronic resources in the form of concordances, Greek-Hebrew lexicons and hundreds of thousands of books on CD, making other hard-copy assets virtually obsolete. He can develop superior sermon content at any local McDonalds with laptop, CD collection and free Wi-Fi. There is one commodity, however, for which there is no technological replacement—the God-anointed preacher!

The Political Bands Are Back!

As we celebrate our 235th year of separation from British rule and our subsequent independence as a nation, it might be a worthwhile exercise to think about where we are and where we're heading as our history continues to unfold. Consider briefly the first paragraph of the Declaration of Independence that was ratified by the original Thirteen States on July 4, 1776. The text reads as follows:

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

Human events do indeed run a course determined largely by the decisions of governments. The dictates of the British government regarding its subjects are what fueled the perceived need for separation. That need is what gave birth to America. And now, in 2011, there is a loudening refrain among Americans that the government in Washington, D.C. is beginning to bear a striking resemblance to the Political Bands of its former boss. The Tea Party movement was, in a microcosm, an expression of that same need for a degree of dissolution.

The other side of the dissolution coin is the assumption of a separate and equal status among nations. That is what the Founders sought and secured for us. It was something to which they felt “entitled” by both nature and nature's God. It's noteworthy that the Founder's idea of “entitlement” meant freedom and INDEPENDENCE FROM government. Now 235 years hence it signifies DEPENDENCE UPON government. And we all know that those who are dependent upon government are CONTROLLED BY government. This is where America is today with half of its citizenry dependent upon a government subsidy and adamant about their entitlement to it.

The phrase “a decent respect for the opinions of mankind” is what the Founders had for the inhabitants of the Thirteen States they represented, and therefore felt impelled to declare their noble causes (opinions) as a basis for separation. Its British taskmasters lacked such respect. The fact that Britain LACKED it was NO EXCUSE for not having it. In like manner, the U.S. government has demonstrated repeatedly—especially since January 2009—its total LACK of DECENT RESPECT for the opinions of Americans. And any government void of such decent respect is INDECENT government! We need go no further than the first paragraph of the document we are celebrating this weekend to realize the dangers we face. What we once were is NOT what we now are! The Political Bands are back!

The dissolution of Political Bands is a relevant biblical topic. In the law God gave Israel at its formation as “one nation under God” was the Year of Jubilee. That statute is found in Leviticus 25:10: “And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.” The various causes and reasons for an indentured condition are not within our scope here. But the fact is servitude of men to other

men was a reality the Lord anticipated and for which he gave a specific directive.

I am not certain why the Lord sanctified the Fiftieth Year. But if we take seventy years as a general time frame for life expectancy (Psalm 90:10), it may very well be that God chose fifty to virtually guarantee that every man, at some point in his lifetime, would experience a quality of life representative of genuine freedom! And the Lord was serious about the leadership of Israel ensuring that Jubilee was carried out in accordance with his directive.

When Jeremiah (often referred to as "The Weeping Prophet" because of his "laments" about backslidden Israel) spoke of judgment, one of the reasons he cited was failure to keep Jubilee as the sacred event God meant it to be (Jeremiah 34:15-17). The word "liberty" is found four times in those verses with the first three constituting an indictment against masters for denying to indentured Israelites that taste of liberty God commanded for them. In his indictment, the Lord rebuked Jewish masters for basically doing to their servants what Pharaoh attempted to do to the Jews after releasing them from Egyptian bondage: BRING THEM BACK INTO BONDAGE!

Of this much I am certain. Jubilee prefigured the spiritual freedom that IS the birthright of every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. By granting and then retracting that liberty, Israel's leadership blurred that sacred picture and incurred the displeasure of Almighty God. If only America's leadership could see the dangers of bringing back the Political Bands from which once we were loosed!

A Post Mortem Message from OBL

The current calendar year is 2011 A.D. But it is also 48 A.O.B.L. The first is reckoned in years relative to the death of our Lord Jesus Christ; the second in hours relative to the extermination of the vermin Osama bin Laden. He left this world roughly 48 hours ago, and learned more about the True and Living God in his first post-death hour than he did his entire lifetime on planet earth.

Throughout the course of my life I have listened to and watched atheists, moral perverts and blasphemers thumb their noses at God and utter obscenities with apparent impunity. At their passing, I often wondered what their reaction was a few moments after that last breath, realizing they had fallen into the hands of the Living God and were stricken with unimaginable fear as a result (Hebrews 10:31). Prominent in my mind are atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair (1919-1995), actor Burt Lancaster (1913-1994), comedian George Carlin (1937-2008), and astrophysicist Carl Sagan (1934-1996). On numerous occasions, I heard all four of these individuals speak with degrees of disdain concerning a sovereign and loving Creator that man the creature should trust and obey. Now we can add Osama bin Laden (1957-2011) to that infamous list.

There are at least three (3) words that we should associate with death. The first is finality. Yogi Berra said "It ain't over 'til it's over!" At death, it's over! No turning back, no second chances, no more choices, no court of appeal, no place of repentance! The second is eternity. Death signifies an ending and a beginning. The body ceases to function, and surrenders the soul, which carries on in the afterlife in a state of full awareness. The state in which a departed soul finds itself is a perpetual one where time is no longer applicable. The third is clarity. Death ushers in the ultimate reality. All of the religious fog that blinded and clouded the earth-bound mind is vanquished...and replaced with the purist reality.

What is Osama bin Laden experiencing at 48 A.O.B.L.? Well, Jesus gave us a glimpse into the clarity that defines the next world (Luke 16:19-31). In the Luke narrative, our Lord described the experience of a lost rich man who died, went to hell, and was tormented in the flames. He lifted his eyes, saw Abraham, and begged for mercy in the form of water from the tip of Lazarus' finger to be placed on his tongue. Request denied. He then asked that Lazarus be sent to testify to and warn his five brothers so they might repent and avoid the same flames. Request denied. Those brothers had the scriptures as a valid witness. The rich man insisted that if one arose from the dead, surely they would listen and respond. Request denied. Why? Because the Word of God, according to Jesus, is a more credible witness than even a resurrected Lazarus would be! If they don't believe the scriptures (the greater witness), neither will they believe a resurrected man (the lesser witness)!

What would Osama say if he had just 60 seconds of resurrected time to say it? No doubt in my mind that the content would sound something like this: "My dear Muslim brethren! Listen to me! There is no Allah. There are no virgins! We were all deceived! Islam is a religion of demons! Satan is its founder! Flush the Koran, embrace the Bible! Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord! Believe on Him! Avoid the hell that Mohammed and I now share! Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ! Only

his blood can atone for sins! Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ! Believe on the..." [time expires].

Osama bin Laden, like all his godless predecessors, has experienced the finality of death, embarked upon a Christ-less eternity, and discovered the ultimate clarity...a clarity found too late. Please do not let it come too late for you, my friend. If you have not yet trusted the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of eternal life, why not do so today? Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your heart. The mercy and grace available to you at this hour, if neglected-rejected, will be forever unavailable after you draw your last breath. Just ask Osama bin Laden.

The Repurposed Life

A few months ago I caught a segment of a home-and-garden type program on PBS wherein a landowner had transported an archaic corn crib from the old family farm to her new digs and transformed it into an arbor with prolific flowering vines. Inside was a stone floor with wooden bench. What once served as a structure for grain storage was now a meditative retreat. In a word, the landowner had repurposed the corn crib.

We've all done it in some form or another. On my dresser is a large Folgers coffee container that now serves as a collection point for the pennies in my pocket change. Glass jelly jars now collect dimes and quarters while an old relish jar collects the nickels. I recently enjoyed grilled hamburgers at the home of Evangelist Bill Chapman and wife Peggy (www.billchapmanevangelism.org). The spinach leaves on my burgers were grown in half-keg planters that once served as vehicles for Jack Daniels whiskey...a repurposing of the first order!

The onset of 2011 might be a good time for us to consider repurposing our lives with regard to those things that pertain to godliness. In the above examples, repurposing constituted a divergence from the original intent of the designer. In the spiritual realm, however, repurposing is simply the reaffirmation of and recommitment to those purposes for which the Lord Jesus redeemed us. Here are three (3) relevant areas for our consideration.

The first pertains to things visceral. When the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to Antioch to observe first-hand the Gentile salvation explosion (Acts 11:19-24), he was elated over God's operative grace, and exhorted the new converts that they should continue to "cleave" unto the Lord "with purpose of heart" (11:23). Genuine salvation is always a visceral matter, eliciting total dependence upon the Lord Jesus from the very core of the sinner. An ongoing dependence from that same core is an absolute essential for discipleship and spiritual growth.

The word "cleave" is *prosmeno* (*pros*= 'towards', *meno*= 'remain' or 'abide'). It signifies a holding fast to (or a continuing with) someone or something that is indicative of steadfast devotion. And such rock-solid devotion is something that the believer must purpose to do with the same visceral energy that led to his or her salvation. If and when slackness of devotion precipitates spiritual drift, dullness and disobedience, a visceral repurposing of the life to the Lord Jesus is in order. It's worth noting that cleaving begets cleaving because "much people was added to the Lord" on the heels of his exhortation (11:24). No church can grow beyond its capacity to cleave!

The second involves things verbal. In Psalm 17:3, David expressed in prayer the following confidence: "Thou hast proved my heart; thou hast visited me in the night; thou hast tried me, and shalt find nothing; I am purposed that my mouth shalt not transgress." This man of God, who had laid himself open to unabridged scrutiny by the Holiest, knew that purposeful discipline of his mouth to avoid transgressions of the verbal kind would lead to a broader holiness of life that would pass Divine muster. Thus James wrote: "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body" (James 3:2). A verbal transgression just might be the indicator of a moral violation. In any case, if a verbal or moral flaw exists, a Holy God will find it!

The third pertains to things visual. Although there are no biblical passages linking “purpose” with the eyes, we certainly find the concept: “I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me” (Psalm 101:3). The phrases “wicked thing” and “turn aside” suggest idol worship (at least in my mind) as the primary reference. David’s visceral devotion (cleaving) to the Lord precluded all false gods and associated images. The same was not true for many of his fellow countrymen, who turned aside and thus violated the Second Commandment.

If we accept the primary meaning of “wicked thing” to be manmade idols-images, there is legitimate room for any number of secondary applications where the introduction of an untoward visual stimulant leads to a turning aside from the path of righteousness. The greatest spiritual blunders in David’s own life (adultery and murder) came about as the result of a visual focus upon a bathing woman who was wed to another. The lust of his eyes gave birth to a scheme for fulfillment with lethal consequences. And there’s not a nickel’s worth of difference between David’s visual fixation upon Bathsheba and the believer who, through insufficient visual purpose in life, exposes him- or herself to the readily available cesspool of Internet pornography and or other visual vices.

Dear friend, are there areas of your life and mine that need to be repurposed in order to comply with our Lord’s redemptive purposes? If so, may the Lord Jesus, who is well acquainted with our passions and frailties, grant us grace sufficient to repurpose ourselves where applicable to make these “earthen vessels” all they can be for His glory...and make 2011 the year of the repurposed life!

Samson-Like Desperation

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

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

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

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

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

Phase four, which was devastation, followed quickly on its heels! The former champion of God and Israel was now grinding in the Philistine prison house with empty eye sockets, and "bound

with fetters of brass" (16:21). Samson was the epitome of personal devastation! He had given the enemies of the Lord an occasion to blaspheme (16:23-24). It was in the prison house that he realized, perhaps for the first time, the seriousness of his vows! It was here, however, that "the hair of his head began to grow again" (16:22). There is indeed blessedness in the blindness that restores to a believer the condition for power with God!

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

America has now passed the half-way point of 2011. The leadership in both political parties appears to be asleep at the switch, especially with the recent downgrade of our debt by S&P...a downgrade that was easily avoidable. There is plenty of blame to be assigned across the political spectrum. But the pertinent question regarding the spiritual condition and direction of America is this: Where is the Church? Is she grinding in the prison house of self-indulgence and broken vows? Many Americans have a tough time understanding the willingness of Islamic terrorists to die for their religious cause. They are unaccustomed to such fervor and desperation to achieve a set of goals. Could this be due in part to the fact that true believers in this age have provided no such example? Isn't it high time for the People of God to exhibit afresh a Samson-like desperation for the anointing of God?

Significance of the Signage

Several centuries before the birth of Christ, the prophet Isaiah gave a signature prophecy to Israel, saying: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Matthew's narrative confirms that sign: "When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 1:18).

Matthew includes what the angel told Joseph: "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS" (Matthew 1:20-25).

What scripture makes abundantly clear is that Christmas is as much about the Virgin CONCEPTION as it is the Virgin BIRTH! There are four historical events that trump ALL others: (1) The DEATH of Jesus, whereby God provided atonement for the sins of the whole world; (2) The RESURRECTION of Jesus, whereby God provided validation for the substitutionary nature of his death; (3) The BIRTH of Jesus, whereby God provided the body that would become the sinless sacrifice for our sin, and (4) The CONCEPTION of Jesus in the womb of a virgin named Mary, whereby God provided the Holy Ghost seed that would make his prenatal development and his birth as the God-Man possible.

Some Liberal theologians have argued that the virgin birth is NOT fundamental to the Christian faith. Their case is one based on physiology and reason. In terms of female physiology, once a woman's egg is fertilized (conception), the ovulation cycle shuts down, making another conception impossible until she is postpartum. Thus reason dictates that Mary and Joseph could have physically consummated their relationship ANY time after the virgin conception without tainting the sinless-divine nature of Jesus.

It sounds reasonable enough on a physiological basis, and is hypothetically true. After all, the virgin conception is the REAL sign. The problem is this. We as believers are bound to embrace revelation over reason. What might pass muster in the arena of reason can fail miserably in terms of revelation. What saith revelation? "And KNEW HER NOT TILL she had brought forth her firstborn son" (1:25). That one sentence serves as the death knell for the Liberal argument!

Other theologians of the ranker sort deny both the virgin conception and subsequent virgin birth. They argue that Jesus was conceived and born via natural processes but was endowed with a divine nature at some point after his birth...perhaps at his baptism. Space does not allow us to discuss all of the mental gymnastics employed by Liberals to gainsay the truth. Again, revelation makes the case with crystal clarity: "BEFORE THEY CAME TOGETHER, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost" (1:18). That's ALL the confirmation we need to validate the signage

fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14.

Jesus was Virgin Conceived AND Virgin Born. Our redemption requires that both are true; revelation affirms that they are! As you and I celebrate on this day the birth of our King, let us also give thanks for the SIGN of the Virgin CONCEPTION, without which NONE of the other events, by which Jesus is able to save us sinners from our sins, would have been possible! Thank you, Lord, for the signage!

True Christianity

Dr. Robert Jeffress is pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, TX. On Friday, October 7, 2011 he got his fifteen minutes of fame by trying to explain to CNN reporters why he called Mormonism a 'Cult' The comment was rooted in the fact that GOP Candidate Mitt Romney is a Mormon. CNN began running "Religious Battle in the GOP" as Headline News.

In my mind, the ruckus raised by Pastor Jeffress regarding the 'Cult' status of Mormonism demands a definition of True Christianity. There is no better way to identify the false than by knowing the True. So, let's give it a rip. True Christianity can be summed up in these three words: REVELATION, REDEMPTION and RECEPTION.

Revelation has to do with the manner in which God has revealed Himself to mankind. The first is in the Inspired Scriptures. The second is in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. No book but the Bible can claim to be inspired of God—Absolute Truth. No man but Jesus can claim to be God in the flesh—Embodiment of Truth! Jesus did not become God. He was and is God! The Bible is God's written revelation. Jesus is His living revelation. The man or woman who seeks to find the True God outside these two sources of revelation will end up with a false god. Or as Paul said it: "Another Jesus...another spirit...another Gospel."(2 Corinthians 11:4).

Redemption has to do with God doing something about the sins of mankind—both collectively and individually! The imagery is that of a benevolent and capable Master purchasing a slave and setting him free from his former taskmaster. Man is born a slave to sin. Jesus shed his precious blood as the purchase price to redeem men from that slavery. Almost without exception, all religions have a redemptive element. In True Christianity, ONLY the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ can atone for sin and redeem men (set them free) from sin and death.

Reception has to do with how sinful man appropriates the redemptive power that lies in the Lord Jesus and His precious blood. The method of reception is expressed in eight simple words: By GRACE through FAITH and NOT of WORKS! It is coming humbly before God with empty hands, and receiving from His Hand forgiveness of sins and eternal life as free gifts. The fact is True Christianity is fundamentally a matter of being alive rather than dead. It is NOT (as the world reckons) being good as opposed to being bad.

Men and women who are dead in trespasses and sins MUST be Born Again. No degree of compliance with religious laws can produce spiritual life. It's a Gift only God can give! And it is received, never earned! It is more than just having eternal life. True Christianity is Christ living in His People! The Jesus who is received by faith actually becomes the life of the believer!

Now that we have defined the TRUE, it's rather easy to identify the False. ANY Religious System that ADDS to or TAKES AWAY from the three fundamentals of Revelation, Redemption or Reception is a FALSE Religion, a FALSE Christianity. And false religion need not offend in all three areas! Does it really matter whether False Religion is called a Cult, a Sect or something else? False is false!

If you apply the template of the True to the plethora of Religions at large, you will come up with

a laundry list of the False. Both Islam and Mormonism would appear on that list, along with Roman Catholicism, Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses and Humanism. Some of the world's larger denominational bodies would also appear on that list, but you can apply the template on your own to determine who they are.

The critical question for each of us is how we line up with the Truth Template on a personal level. Is your stake firmly driven in the ground with respect to Christ and the Bible, the Person and Work of Christ, and a child-like faith that has brought to you the forgiveness of sins and eternal life from God's gracious hand? How each of us answers these questions will determine where we spend eternity. The God who ordained the fundamentals of Revelation, Redemption and Reception wants us to spend it with Him!

Pastor Jeffress took the occasion of a CNN camera to inform viewers that he would be preaching a message on Sunday entitled, "How a Christian Should Vote." In the context of his remarks about Romney, Mormonism and Cults, it might have been better for the pastor to have announced that he would be preaching a message entitled "True Christianity" since he claimed that Mormonism was false. I would have gladly given him these notes. If I was a lost man or woman living in Dallas, a message on what I should believe would have been far more useful to me than how I should vote!