

Truth On Fire

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The Coming Collision with God's Wrath!

Wednesday, June 28th, was quite a news day. At the forefront of national events were two significant Supreme Court decisions—one overturning a Nebraska law that banned partial birth abortions, another upholding the right of the Boy Scouts of America to restrict association membership based on ideological principle. The latter was a blessing. It is always cause for rejoicing (no matter how short-lived that may be) when morality and conscience withstand the juggernaut of homosexual rights. The abortion ruling, on the other hand, was a curse!

Key in the public debate over abortion is the issue of viability; that is, the point at which the fetus is deemed capable of surviving outside the womb. There is no debate with God! The Psalmist wrote, *"I am fearfully and wonderfully made...My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret...Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them"* (Psalm 139:14-16). The Lord told Jeremiah, *"Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee"* (Jeremiah 1:5). Can there be any doubt that life begins at conception?

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor (concurring) said the law infringed upon "a woman's right to terminate her pregnancy" and was therefore unconstitutional. Justice Scalia (dissenting) offered this rebuttal. "It is a value judgment" he said, "dependent upon how much one respects (or believes society ought to respect) the life of a partially delivered fetus, and how much one respects (or believes society ought to respect) the freedom of the woman who gave it life to kill it." He added, "The notion that the Constitution of the United States, designed, among other things, to 'establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,' prohibits the States from simply banning this visibly brutal means of eliminating our half-born posterity is quite simply absurd." May the Lord increase his tribe!

Brethren, I believe that government sanction of these two abominations—the execution of the unborn and the exoneration of sexual deviance—puts us on a collision course with God's wrath! We have become so proud of our liberality! We have broken the shackles of closed-minded restraint! God will break us with the liberality of His fierce wrath! Do not imagine for a moment that the LORD's anger will be assuaged by the outcome of a national election!

The Church is both the problem and the ultimate solution! God's people must rediscover a three thousand year-old promise: *"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land"* (II Chronicles 7:14). The Puritan John Owen wisely observed, "For the most part we live upon successes, not promises: unless we see and feel the print of victories, we will not believe." God is looking for a people willing to believe the promise, meet the conditions, and reap the benefits! If God spared Nineveh, there is hope for us!

The Theology of a Thief

What image comes to mind when you hear the word "theology"? Its strict definition is the study of God. In practical terms, it is the pursuit of God's truth as revealed in the inspired words of Scripture. One of the unfortunate realities of Church history is the virtual relegation of theological studies to institutional classrooms. Can you visualize the professor behind his lectern with a ream of meticulous notes? Do you envision the seminarian burning the midnight oil in preparation for the next rigorous doctrinal exam? These images are misleading!

I would like to reacquaint you with a man whose grasp of theological truth came at a most unique time in the least likely of circumstances. It resulted in his soul's salvation! He is not to be found in the halls of higher learning, but on the hill of deepest suffering. He is not a cultivated gentleman, but rather a convicted felon. He is one of two thieves crucified with the Lord Jesus Christ. His gruesome end became a glorious beginning!

In Luke 23:39-42 we read, "And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, 'If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.' But the other answering rebuked him, saying, 'Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.' And he said unto Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.' And Jesus said unto him, 'Verily I say unto thee, To day thou shalt be with me in paradise.'" The companion text of Matthew 27:38-44 tells us that (1) both malefactors were thieves, (2) the chief priests, scribes and elders had reviled and mocked him repeatedly, and (3) both thieves had cast the same in his teeth. The Father who covered the earth with darkness from the sixth hour until the ninth also commanded the light to shine in the heart of this repentant thief. What a transformation did grace perform!

Consider this thief's theology! He is aware that one's fear of (and standing with) God is paramount in importance. This brings forth a rebuke to the second thief, who, at the brink of eternal damnation, is concerned primarily with his physical life. He acknowledges the outworking of justice, and his punishment as the due reward of his sin. He testifies to the sinless nature of Christ, the Son of God, who has done nothing amiss. He called Jesus Lord. This indeed was a title of respect, but his request indicates recognition of sovereign authority. He knows that Jesus will die, but also believes that death will ultimately surrender all its rights to this sinless King. The words *remember me* appeal to His mercy as the Sinless Sovereign. In essence he is saying, "You are a King both mighty and merciful! I desire to be under your kingdom rule! I am requesting your merciful inclusion of my wretched soul in your future reign!" The request was granted and confirmed immediately!

Brethren, this is theology in shoe leather! Its possessors (not professors) can walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and fear no evil! Oh, that this thief's theology would populate the pews of America's Churches! Is it yours?

Amazed in the Presence

I am in total agreement with Charles Gabriel, who wrote these lyrics: "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, and wonder how He could love me, a sinner condemned unclean!" Each time I sing that Gospel favorite, I am reminded of the mind-boggling grace and longsuffering of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me! Serious reflection also prompts me to ask myself the inverse of that affirmation; that is, does Jesus stand amazed in my presence? At first blush that may sound like an oddity, but be assured it is Biblical!

The New Testament tells us that Jesus "marveled" (was struck with wonder and amazement) on two separate occasions. In Matthew 8:5-13, we find the record of the centurion's approach to Jesus at Capernaum. He explained that he had a palsied servant in grievous torment. Jesus offered to come to his house, and heal the man. The centurion countered that this was not necessary, insisting that a simple word of authority spoken by the One with ultimate authority would suffice. He continued to expound upon this conviction from his own experience as a military commander, wielding authority and exacting obedience via the spoken word! Jesus marveled at his discernment, and told His followers that He had not found "*so great faith, no, not in Israel*" (v.10). Jesus sent him on his way, saying, "*as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee*" (v.13). The wise man will find here a wealth of insight regarding the true nature of faith, and the Lord's strong emotional response to it!

Mark 6:1-6 records the second incident. Jesus returned for a visit to Nazareth, and taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. No doubt He had taught here on prior occasions. It is no stretch to assume that the boy of twelve who engaged the doctors of law at Jerusalem would continue to be about His Father's business throughout the next eighteen years until His baptism. The residents of Nazareth were both astonished and offended at His wisdom and mighty works! They knew Him so well, yet knew Him not at all! For nearly three decades the very righteousness of God had been lived out before them in sinless beauty and Divine perfection. It was now being rejected! In no place was Light more abundant, nor darkness more prevalent! Jesus "*marveled because of their unbelief*" (v.6).

I dare say that our meditations seldom take us into this spiritual arena. The Scriptures teach us that Jesus was (and can be) struck with amazement! In both instances it was faith (or the lack thereof) that evoked His response.

Brethren, perhaps we ought to ask ourselves this question: Is Jesus amazed in my presence? Does He marvel at me? If so, what is His provocation? Is it a robust faith anchored in Him that possesses all power (authority) in heaven and in earth? Or is it hardness of heart through unbelief, notwithstanding the goodness of God that leads men to repentance?

Here's the bottom line! No neutral ground exists between sinful man and Holy God! We are either believing or unbelieving! In either case, we will elicit a Divine response! How do you stand?

Stayed Upon Jehovah

God's promises are every bit as vast and amazing as His glorious Person! Those whom God has saved by grace have received a Divine allotment of exceeding great and precious promises (2 Peter 1:4) as a foundation for both spiritual stability and growth in Christ-likeness. In an effort to emphasize the value of those promises, the Puritan John Flavel said that it was better to be in Hell with a promise from God than to be in Paradise without one. The point is that God's promises are the bedrock of our security, providing an impetus for the exercise of faith. They summon the believer to rest in, and act upon, the certainties contained therein.

One such promise is found in Isaiah 26:3: "*Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed upon thee: because he trusteth in thee.*" The word *stayed* is from a Hebrew root meaning *to prop or support*. In the reflexive sense, it refers to someone leaning upon or taking hold of another object. In this case, the object is none other than Jehovah, revealed in the New Testament as the Lord Jesus Christ! The verb here has linear force, signifying consistency and continuity. Beyond the faith that brings justification is a pattern of daily reliance for sanctification. It is this stayed state of mind that unleashes God's power in His saints to keep them in a perfect spiritual calm in the midst of external chaos.

The antithesis of faith is a spirit of independence. It is exactly this mindset that becomes the wrecking ball of inner rest and tranquility. An analysis of the dialogue between Eve and the Serpent demonstrates that the enemy's subtle and supreme goal was to foster independent thinking—the worst kind of thinking! He succeeded in convincing her that a course of action independent of that prescribed by God would actually yield positive benefits. The disastrous results were death, darkness, and damnation. If Eve's mind had been *stayed*, she would not have *strayed*! In his generation, Noah alone had a mind that was stayed upon the Lord. The world that God destroyed with the Flood was filled with independent thinkers!

Brethren, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your peace quotient? How is your thinking? Is your mind stayed upon the Lord Jesus? Or does inner struggle and turmoil more accurately describe your experience? I encourage you to lay hold of this promise of God, and lean wholeheartedly upon the God of the promise!

Perfect peace is a commodity earnestly sought after by the lost men and women of this world. The proverbial wrench in their gears is independent thinking! Thus the prophet declared, "*There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked*" (Isaiah 57:21). May God grant us grace to exemplify His perfect peace through a stayed state of mind, and through lives that are fully surrendered to Him! And so may we join in this refrain with Frances Havergal:

***Stayed upon Jehovah, Hearts are fully blessed;
Finding as He promised, Perfect peace and rest.***

Where Is the "What If" Man?

If Tiger Woods is an unfamiliar name, perhaps you just arrived from another planet. This 24 year-old sports phenomenon has redefined the standard of golf excellence. His recent performances in the U.S. and British Opens have punctuated his prowess as the world's number one player. Tom Watson went on record saying that Tiger has raised the golfing standard to a level only he can reach.

The man who set the previous standard was of course Jack Nicklaus. For two decades it was assumed that there would never be another golfer to match or surpass either his playing record or his domination of the game. Speculation as to the possibility of that actually happening would always be couched in "What if...?" statements. For example, what if someone could consistently split the fairways with drives that were longer and straighter? What if someone possessed the precision ball-striking skills necessary to land approach shots relatively close to the pin for legitimate birdie putts. What if someone had such a deft putting stroke that he was able to drain the majority of putts within 15 feet for par-savers or birdies? What if someone was able to produce at will the optimum ball flight for any conceivable weather condition? You get the idea. If these skills were ever to be embodied in one person, then perhaps a greater than Nicklaus would emerge! On-course commentator Judy Rankin, during the third round of the U.S. Open at Pebble Beach, stated, "Tiger Woods is the 'What if...?' man!"

Since hearing her analysis, my thinking has transposed this concept into the realm of the heavenly. I have considered the spiritual giants that have preceded us—the Abraham's, the David's, the Elijah's, the Paul's, the David Livingston's, the Luther's, the Spurgeon's, etc. Their track records of spiritual achievement seem to be out of the realm of duplication for most of us. At this point, however, I begin to postulate. What if God had a man whose effectual fervent praying produced Elijah-like results? What if God had a man whose spirit exemplified the meekness and gentleness of Christ? What if God had a man who resisted the devil with the Word in every season of temptation? What if God had a man who had become all things to all men, that by all means he might save some? What if God had a man who loved his wife as Christ loved the Church? What if God had a man who was filled with all the fullness of God? What if God had a man like Moses, whose frequent appearances in the Divine presence established him as God's friend, and left the glory of his God upon his countenance?

Brethren, I wonder if any one of us are willing to be the "What if...?" man, the "What if...?" woman, or the "What if...?" church? In a recent conversation on the matter of revival, my evangelist friend Bill Chapman made this statement—"What *has been* done *can be* done!" Amen, and Amen!

Perhaps God is looking for that "What if...?" individual with whom He can get it done! Our untoward generation is crying out for the "What if...?" man to emerge! Will it be you?

The Value of the Soul

The Republican Party has officially kicked off its presidential quest. The theme of their convention was "Renewing America's Purpose: Together!" Personally, I would love to hear a prospective president expound upon America's purpose. Is it "One Nation, Under God"? Does the motto "Leave No Child Behind!" indicate a desire to instill a sense of God's sovereign majesty in the minds of our nation's youth?

George W. Bush is on record citing Jesus Christ as his favorite philosopher. In his Thursday evening address, he spoke of "toleration, not in spite of my faith, but because of it!" I asked myself, "Toleration of what?" Did Jesus of Nazareth ever offer an alternative to Himself as the way to the Father? These observations are not offered as criticism. The point is we should never expect Biblical solutions for America's moral corruption to proceed from a politician. What we can expect over the next three months is a barrage of verbiage over values!

The subject of values (or value) is one the Lord Jesus addressed in a very lucid manner. Jesus asked His followers, "*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*" (Mark 8:36-37). These words were spoken in the context of discipleship based upon self-denial (8:34). He affirmed that the human soul is the most valuable commodity on the face of the planet. The word *exchange* represents the price received as an equivalent of another object, or the price at which the exchange is effected. Is there a price that can be set for a soul? What is its exchange value? If one should gain the whole world—ownership and control of all its assets—and write a check for his soul, it would be returned for "Insufficient Funds"! Over against this world's wealth is the precious blood of Jesus Christ, a price sufficient to purchase eternal salvation for all who come to God by Him!

Have you placed a value upon your soul? Does the prospect of its eternal loss bring a solemnity to your disposition? My heart was stirred afresh this morning as I opened the Florida Times-Union. Front page photographs showed teenagers who had waited in line for literally days to purchase tickets for the 'N Sync concert. Photojournalists had successfully captured the full range of emotions between those who were able to secure tickets, and those who were a few places in line short of achieving their purpose. In one photo were teens with elation splashed from ear to ear. In the other were faces etched with painful disappointment and sorrow—all for the temporal loss of concert tickets for which they sacrificed!

I was reminded of Cain, who lost his soul over *the fruit of the ground* (Genesis 4:2). He *was very wrath, and his countenance fell* because the Lord had no respect for him or his offering (4:5). Brethren, if a man should forfeit acceptance with God through self-will, and lose his eternal soul, does it really matter what else he gains? Let us learn from Jesus the value of our soul, and set our course accordingly! The path to eternal profitability can only be found under His loving Lordship!

Jesus Went the Distance!

We discovered this last week what will be the reciprocal salvo offered by the Democrats regarding their campaign theme—"Going the Distance for America's Working Families." Depending on your political persuasion, you may or may not want the government "going the distance" for you. Perhaps their convention speechwriters will wordsmith the English language in such a way as to elucidate the meaning of that phrase. Frankly, the idea of a presidential hopeful going the distance for me has very little appeal. There is a King, however, Who did go the distance for me. His name is Emmanuel, God with us! His earthly identity is Jesus of Nazareth, the God-Man, Who went the distance for sinners!

The thirteenth chapter of John's Gospel depicts one of the most unique scenes in Scripture. Here is John's introductory statement—"Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (13:1). We find here all the imagery of the Exodus from Egypt, wherein the Death Angel passed over each and every household with lamb's blood sprinkled on the doorposts. *His hour* signifies a traumatic season of prayer in the garden, betrayal into the hands of sinners, an unlawful trial, false accusations, bitter mockings, a brutal scourging, and an excruciating death by crucifixion. This vicarious suffering included our sins, which He bore in His body on the tree (I Peter 2:24). He was made sin for us, Who knew no sin: that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (II Corinthians 5:21). *His hour* transformed an old rugged cross into the crux of redemptive history!

We also find victory here rather than victimization. The net result of *His hour* was not defeat, but departure *out of* this world *unto* the Father. He will remain seated at the Father's right hand until His enemies are made His footstool (Psalm 110:1). It is here He ever lives to make intercession for believers, thereby able to save them to the uttermost (Hebrews 7:25).

What I find especially intriguing is the dual usage of the Greek verb **agapao**. Its meaning is "to love sacrificially." *Having loved* (past participle) His own, *he loved* (past tense) them unto the end! Has redundancy ever caused such rejoicing? Think of it! Having loved, he loved! In this one phrase, the apostle takes us into eternity past, and stretches the love of Christ for His own into eternity future! While the words *unto the end* refer primarily to His earthly life, His resurrection signaled a beginning that guarantees the eternal salvation of all who believe! Glory to God!

Brethren, if ever a definition for going the distance existed, Jesus personified it! In the text cited, Jesus removes His garments, stoops as a servant, and washes His disciple's feet. This is a service He renders unto His own unto the present hour! In the ages to come, this shall be the testimony of all those whom Jesus saves—"Having loved me, He loved me unto the end!" Friend, is this your testimony?

(In)Appropriate Affections

The apostle Paul was both missionary statesman and living sacrifice. Perhaps no one in Church history was better groomed to articulate the unsearchable riches of Christ in the presence of kings and governors. Yet we know of a certainly that no one—excepting his Lord—was better graced to suffer for righteousness sake. The power of God's Spirit buoyed him from the courthouse to the jailhouse, and then to his own private house until martyrdom took him to the Father's house! He counted as dung all the freedoms of Roman citizenship in order to win Christ, and become His prisoner. At the end of his own life, he also was betrayed by a close associate.

In his last epistle, Paul exhorted Timothy to come to Rome, and lamented the departure of a dear friend. He wrote, "*Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica*" (II Timothy 4:9-10a). Demas is mentioned three times by Paul in the New Testament. The first is in Philemon 24, where he is referred to as a fellowlabourer. You can be assured that this label was not one used carelessly by Paul. Demas was a kingdom worker, laboring side-by-side with the apostle to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. The second referral is found in Colossians 4:14, where greetings by both Luke and Demas were passed on to the letter's recipients. The fact that Paul mentions Demas in the same breath with Luke speaks volumes about the esteem in which he was held. The third and last mention is in our cited text.

Unger's Bible Handbook places the writing of both Philemon and Colossians @ 61-62 AD during his first Roman imprisonment. The dating of II Timothy varies from 64-67 AD, depending on how many imprisonments the apostle endured. The point is that during this 3-5 year time frame Demas changed—for the worse! This must have grieved Paul deeply! Remember that look of hurt and disappointment given to Peter by our Lord after he thrice denied Him? I believe Paul was affected in much the same way when Demas forsook him for this world!

I wonder if Paul discerned something years earlier in an attitude, a habit, or pattern of speech that might have indicated an underlying problem. We do not know when this love affair started, but we do know exactly how it ended! Is it not ironic that Paul refers to Demas in the same Colossian epistle that contains the command, "Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth" (3:2)? What this irony demonstrates is the danger inherent in verbalizing the truth without internalizing it!

Brethren, in pulpits across this nation today, men of God are pouring out their hearts to those they know are having a love affair with this world! They were at one time kingdom laborers, but now are governed by misplaced affections! Perhaps a little rough water, or the right set of circumstances, is all it will take to instigate an overt departure from the work of God's kingdom. I would challenge each of us to ask of ourselves, "Where have I set my affections?" The only correct answer is, "On things above!" Friend, is that your answer?

Kiss the Son

The Second Psalm provides a prophetic foretaste of the glorious and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ! The Lord Jesus is quoted as saying, "*I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, 'Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee'*" (2:7). The word *decree* means to engrave or enact. It was employed in primitive times with reference to laws carved in stone tablets or metal plates in order to stress their irrevocable nature. The resurrection was decreed by the LORD, and declared by the Son! It is impossible for man to disannul what God has decreed. The resurrection of the LORD's anointed (2:2) was therefore chiseled in historical stone before the world began.

The Psalmist describes all opposition to this decree as a *vain thing* (2:1). *Vain* signifies that which is futile, fruitless and empty (as to results). The Lord's enemies are referred to as *the heathen*. *Heathen* is an interesting word. It is the Hebrew **goy**, which speaks of the *masses*. In speaking to Israel, God equated it with the Gentile nations that surrounded them. It also speaks of the *back*—the idea of one person turning the back to another. Together they define the heathen as the masses who have turned their back toward God! This Psalm identifies the heathen as those responsible for Christ's death, such as Herod, Pilate, the religious leadership of Israel, and perhaps Judas. In this present hour they might consist of neighbors, co-workers, educators, politicians, and perhaps fellow church members.

The heathen (without regard for the generation in which they live) have this one thing in common—they *set themselves against the LORD and His anointed*, and desire to *break their bands asunder and cast away their cords* (2:2-3). In contrast, the LORD has *set His king upon the holy hill of Zion* (2:6). The heathen are no match for the heavens! The analogy of the immovable object versus the irresistible force does not apply here. In terms of His decrees, God is both immovable and irresistible!

The bottom line is the heathen have imperiled themselves by attitude and action, and have incurred God's sore displeasure (2:5)! They stand to be broken with an iron rod, and dashed in pieces like a potter's vessel (2:9). The LORD is just in doing so! Yet He extends a merciful invitation to His enemies, saying, "*Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and ye perish from the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him*" (2:12). God's enemies are exhorted to give the kiss of homage and affection to Him whom they have hated, and to place their trust in Him. How unfathomable is this grace that extends such a promise to profligates who are altogether deserving of wrath!

Brethren, I would urge you to kiss the Son, and trust the Lord Jesus without reservation if you have not yet done so! Charles Spurgeon wrote, "Our faith may be slender as a spider's thread; but if it be real, we are in our measure blessed. The more we trust, the more fully we shall know this blessedness." Amen, and Amen!

The Proper Perspective on Prayer

Prayer changes things! I accept that statement on its face, and the sentiment behind it. After all, which one of us would disavow the claim that time spent before the throne of grace affects us for the better? The fact that prayer effects change has become a more or less universally accepted premise these days. Even programs like NBC's Dateline and ABC's 20/20 have produced segments laced with testimonials regarding the physical, emotional, and psychological benefits of prayer as related by its practitioners. A naïve viewer might even conclude that the world was finally coming around to the Christian way of thinking. Such is not the case.

The problem with the secular notion of prayer is that the exercise amounts to little more than a form of transcendental meditation. The Bible places prayer in a theological context, as a means to an end, the One True God being its supreme and benevolent Object. The world sets prayer in a therapeutical context, as an end in itself, self-improvement being its chief aim.

These two views are world's apart! In prayer, God's people must remember to keep the Lord as the focus of their worship (adoration and petition), and prayer itself as the God-ordained means of approach. The Puritan John Trapp said, "The means must be neither trusted nor neglected." William Secker concurred, saying, "Neither be idle in the means, nor make an idol of the means." That is the proper balance between our God and our prayer life! We therefore conclude, upon deeper reflection, that prayer in itself changes nothing in terms of spiritual reality! It is God Himself that effects all true spiritual change, and grants mercy and grace to transform those who utilize the means provided!

The question often arises, "Does prayer actually move God?" Richard Baxter answered this query in a manner suitable to all that have a sanctified imagination. He said, "While God Himself is not changed by our praying, the changes wrought in us by prayer seem to infer a change in God. According to the tenor of His own covenant, God is engaged to punish the unbelieving, the prayerless, and disobedient, and to pardon them that are faithfully desirous and obedient. So that in prayer, faith and fervency are so far from being useless, that they as much prevail for the thing desired by *qualifying ourselves for it*, as if indeed they moved the mind of God to a real change. In like manner, he that is in a boat, who by his hook lays hold of the bank, doth as truly by his labor get nearer the bank, as if he drew the bank to him." Think about it!

Brethren, I would encourage all of us to renew our commitment to prayer, and draw nigh to the Lord Jesus. The Scripture says, "*Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need*" (Hebrews 4:16). And again, "*The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much*" (James 5:16). John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, reminded us that "you can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed." Amen!

Forsake Not the Assembling

Significant among the admonitions of Scripture are those that delineate our conduct regarding attendance at corporate church worship. We've all heard the argument that one does not have to be a church member to be saved. Then there is the idea that one can walk just as close to God in the woods as he or she can in a church service. I agree! But the problem with that premise is that God never offered a walk in the woods as an alternative to the meeting house of God's people.

The logic employed by some on this matter reminds me of Joe Six-Pack, slamming down his nightly quota of Lite, while citing Paul's words to Timothy ("Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake") as justification for his sinful self-indulgence. By the way, the word "woods" may be replaced with fishing hole, golf course, yard work, living room, professional sports arena, or the beach.

What then saith the Scripture? In Hebrews 10:24-25, we find these words. "*And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as we see the day approaching*" (Hebrews 10:24-25). The word *consider* speaks of a thorough mental reflection upon an object. Godly concern over the spiritual welfare of our brethren in Christ is in view. The phrase *one another* speaks of reciprocal living. No believer is an island unto himself. God desires engagement for His people, not estrangement. He desires involvement, not isolation. Consideration for *one another* that brings us together for worship both nurtures victory and diminishes vulnerability! I am sure that David (who opted for his balcony rather than the battlefield) and Peter (who followed Jesus afar off) would be glad to validate that statement!

The goal of consideration is provocation. The word *provoke* is interesting! It is the Greek **paroxusmos**, meaning *to stimulate to anger*, or *sharpen*. The clear meaning is to stir the emotions of another so that a meaningful response is generated. Our English word *paroxysm*—a fit or attack—is derived from this Greek root. It was sometimes used (in a bad sense) to describe the sudden resurgence of the symptoms of a disease. Does anyone doubt the need in this hour for a resurgence of the symptoms of Pentecost?

Our writer envisions a provocation *unto love and to good works*. So simple, and yet so profound! This is God's bottom line! Love the Lord Jesus supremely and freely, love one another as we love ourselves, and do that which is right in the sight of both God and man! I do not believe many pastors would leave a church like this for greener pastures!

Brethren, this is our aim in assembling, in preaching God's truth, in testifying to God's good grace, and in congregational songs of praise! All are meant to provoke us unto love and good works, and to steer us away from sin and complacency! It is difficult to imagine a walk in the woods (or any of its aforementioned replacements) producing this kind of fruit in the life of God's church!

Virtues of a Victim

I would like to reacquaint you with a man whose character is the stuff of legends. His name is a synonym for *light*. As a member of his country's military, he was the quintessential soldier. No one exhibited more loyalty to his nation's cause. His behavior was governed by an uncommon degree of self-discipline. He was not a Jew by nature, but all indications are that he had joined the ranks of Rahab the harlot and Ruth the Moabitess in embracing Israel's God as his own. He was married to a beautiful woman, but widowed her as a young and childless man. His place in Scripture is the most conspicuous blemish upon his commander-in-chief's otherwise exemplary career. Our man in the spotlight is Uriah the Hittite.

His story is one of treachery and sadness (2 Samuel 11:1-17), yet serves as a refreshing breeze in this Age of the Victim. Uriah was a genuine victim. The culprit was his king! First, David commandeered his wife Bathsheba into an adulterous bed to satisfy his sexual lust. Second, he summoned this warrior from the field of battle, and enticed him to engage in marital pleasures that were rightfully his, in order to cover his own sin. In deference to his comrades, Uriah refused to indulge himself. Third, he was sent back to Joab carrying his own death sentence written by the king's hand. In the hottest battle, he was made vulnerable by the retirement of his fellow soldiers, and slain by the Ammonites at Rabbah.

I readily confess that Uriah the Hittite stirs me! If he walked into my presence today, I would come to attention, and salute! This man never flinched from duty! He was absolutely governed by principle! He had no interest in personal pleasure at the expense of his countrymen. In a word, he was committed! He is a disciplinary model for every believer who contemplates spiritual warfare with the powers of darkness! I'm afraid that most Christian men these days, with the same proffer, would have scurried home, offering a prayer of thanksgiving on the way.

In light of this episode, what do you suppose David might have had in mind when he wrote, "*Help, LORD; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men*" (Psalm 12:1)? He was clearly expressing perplexity over the steady and observable decline of godly and faithful men in the land. But perhaps this cry for Divine assistance was mingled with the memory that, at the most regrettable and forgettable season of his life, he himself had engineered the conspiracy that extinguished one of Israel's godly and faithful. In so doing, he had contributed to the very problem for which he now sought a solution!

Brethren, few traits are more essential to the viability and vitality of God's work than commitment, loyalty and self-denial! According to Jesus, these are the basic requirements of discipleship! Our Lord's commission was to *teach* (make disciples of) *all nations* (Matthew 28:19). It takes disciples to make disciples! Uriah the Hittite challenges all of us to examine ourselves for those qualities that distinguished him, and to become part of God's solution for this world!

Teachable or Gullible?

Do you consider yourself teachable or gullible? Admittedly, a fine line exists between these two concepts. If we say that one is teachable, we render a very positive assessment. We confer upon that individual openness to the truth, and the wherewithal to fortify oneself against falsehood. Few qualities are more vital to personal integrity and growth than a teachable spirit. If we say that one is gullible, we cast that person in a very negative light. We portray them as easy prey for the seller of snake oil. Adrift without a compass in the midst of life's ocean are the gullible. Like their counterparts, they are continually taking their bearings, but their sextants always seem to be aimed at the wrong stars.

The teachable and the gullible do share a common characteristic—openness. The OT Scriptures speak to this issue by the use of the Hebrew word **pathah** and its derivatives. The root means *to open*, or *to be (or make) roomy*, and conveys the idea of mental or moral openness. One of its derivatives means *silly* or *seducible*, and is translated in our English Bible as *simple*. It is found 17 times in the OT—6 times used in the context of teachability, and 11 times in a sinister way to speak of gullibility. It is used 3 times in the Psalms, where the simple ones are the teachable.

In Psalm 19:7, we read: "*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.*" Here the simple are those who exhibit openness to God's sure testimonies. *Sure* speaks of that which is permanent, true and trustworthy, and is therefore able to build up, support, and render firm. Those who are teachable regarding God's truth can expect both the mental and moral fabric of their lives to be impacted by the wisdom of God! In a world awash with quicksand philosophies, they become anchored on solid rock!

In Psalm 116:6, David said, "*The LORD preserveth the simple: I was brought low, and he helped me.*" The teachable are not impervious to peril. However, in the valleys of life they are assured of Divine assistance! *Preserveth* means *to hedge about* or *protect*. O what a blessed assurance this is for those who are simple in their attitude toward God! If the LORD is for them, who can be against them?

Psalm 119:130 says, "*The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple.*" *Understanding* is discernment—the mental ability to separate and distinguish. The teachable possess the God-given ability to separate wheat from chaff, good from evil, and even the good from the best! Again, it is the entrance of God's Word into the open mind and heart that makes the difference!

Brethren, the fact is we are all open to something! What we open ourselves to will determine the category into which we fall. The god of this world is fierce in bombarding the minds of men with falsehood and filth. His targets are the gullible! The way to counteract his wicked onslaught, and to obtain God's wisdom and protection for the spiritual war, is to make room for the daily entrance of God's truth! If we are teachable with respect to God, we will not be gullible regarding the ungodly and antichristian philosophy of this world!

Godly Ambition

Last Sunday evening, the world watched twenty-two year-old American Laura Wilkinson win the Olympic gold medal in the ten meter platform diving event. I was curious about this young lady each time she took her place on the platform. My curiosity was in her countenance, which exuded joy and contentment. The TV hosts described this as loving looks exchanged between an Olympian and her supportive parents. It looked deeper than that to me.

As the medal round played itself out, Laura found herself in possession of the gold! The poolside reporter, eager to get a word from the horse's mouth, placed the microphone in her face, and asked, "Laura, can you put into words the feelings you have at this moment?" Via satellite technology, these words from Laura's lips were beamed into hundreds of millions of homes worldwide—"*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!*" My gut feeling regarding her countenance was confirmed!

This quotation from Philippians 4:13, which was issued to an international audience, prompted me to consider afresh the matter of godly ambition. The apostle Paul penned these inspired words in a context dealing with contentment apart from his material state (4:11). The word *content* speaks of sufficiency, or the feeling that one has enough. If you have ever pushed yourself away from a Thanksgiving dinner table, you know exactly what this word means! Paul's sufficiency was bound up in Christ his Lord! Jesus was enough! Everything else was just gravy or the lack thereof. So whether he was *abounding* (generous love offerings for food, fares, missionary expenses, etc.) or *being abased* (more month than money, scraping the barrel's bottom, under rock piles, etc.), he had learned to draw from the sufficiency that was his in Christ! I wonder how many of us have learned to live on this same spiritual level?

The words *I can do all things through Christ* are an expression of godly ambition. Paul the apostle, in concert with his calling and gifts, was ambitious for Christ! He discovered that fine balance between egotism and defeatism. He was content, but not complacent! He was crucified with Christ and courageous for Christ! Never has a dead man been more dynamic! He endured multiple hardships so both Jews and Gentiles could hear the gospel of God's grace, and experience forgiveness and life. His mission was to plant a local church in every city he visited, even if it consisted of one family under one roof! He had both intermediate and long-term goals. He was determined to appear before Caesar, and ultimately succeeded! His life was set on a course driven by godly ambition!

Brethren, what is the extent of our ambition for God? This matter is worthy of our consideration! Make no mistake! The Lord Jesus will empower His people to achieve *all things* that are for His glory, and in agreement with the good pleasure of His will! Few of us will ever plant a church, and fewer still will ever garner Olympic gold. But we all, according to our calling and gifts, can determine to redeem the time, and be the best we can be for the Lord Jesus Christ!

In Search of Righteousness

Three thousand years before the media stumbled upon the sound bite, inspired writers of Old Testament literature were encapsulating bedrock truth in the form of proverbs. The book of Proverbs is a virtual treasure chest of Divine wisdom. Its spiritual and moral principles are both immutable and eternal! In this election year, with our nation faced once more with the task of installing a new administration in Washington, the following proverb looms large in my thinking—"Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverbs 14:34).

The Old Testament concept of *righteousness* signifies *rectitude* in all matters spiritual, moral, ethical, or legal, including the administration of justice. The word *righteousness* has been defined as (1) the behavior of God, (2) the standard of character and conduct reflected in the Ten Commandments, (3) doing that which is right in every situation, and (4) the dispensation of justice upon mankind. The word *exalteth* means to be *raised high*, to be *promoted*. The Scripture teaches us that nations committed to righteousness can expect God's sanction and approval as He elevates them to prominence. The question that must be asked is this: Is there any evidence forthcoming from the top levels of our government to suggest that a hunger for righteousness exists?

This last week, citizens who opted to do so witnessed debates between the presidential and vice-presidential candidates of both major parties. While I am not a political junkie, I do have a keen interest in the platforms adopted and advanced by each side. After all, one or the other of those two opinions will prevail, and squarely impact the spiritual and moral climate of our culture. So I watched and listened intently for the slightest indication that righteousness might be the benefactor in the outcome of this election. No blips appeared on my radar screen.

One significant issue with which all four men had to deal was the recent FDA approval of the RU-486 abortion pill. Third party candidate Pat Buchanan has rightly labeled it a "human pesticide". The contenders were all asked whether they would do anything to oppose its implementation as a birth control device. In my opinion, they all blundered! I would love to have heard an answer like this. "I want the citizens of this great nation to know assuredly that I believe life begins at conception. If elected President, I will exercise every option afforded me by the Constitution to rid this country of legalized murder, including the ban of this damnable pill, and the overturn of *Rowe vs. Wade*. I will appoint no Supreme Court Justice that does not share this fundamental view of the sanctity of life." Unfortunately, no such intestinal fortitude was found.

Brethren, we need to pray earnestly for our nation. One of the signs of God's judgment upon a people is leadership that lacks a moral compass, and the courage to do right, even when right is unpopular! In such societies, righteousness is always a casualty! We are there!

Loyalty to Israel

Israel has once again taken the world's center stage. Expect this to be a regular occurrence as prophetic history unfolds. This is no surprise to Bible students. The Jews are God's elect people. In this unique role among the nations, they have been both custodians of revelation and couriers of redemption! In this present hour, they are reckoned as enemies of the Gospel and yet beloved of God (Romans 11:28). The course of history will culminate with the Second Coming of Christ, at which time the Jewish nation will embrace the Lord Jesus as their Messiah (Romans 11:26). There is a Divine work of salvation yet to be accomplished in Israel. Words cannot describe the privilege that is ours to be eyewitnesses to God's sovereign orchestration of end-time events.

I have found that prophetic journeymen are more or less in agreement regarding America's role in the last days. Simply stated, there is little or none! Most postulate that the United States will be reduced to less-than-superpower status. Our ability to influence world affairs will wane as European nations consolidate political and economic resources. This loss of international supremacy presupposes a dramatic deterioration in America's economic and military power. Such a portentous eschatological forecast raises this question: how will this happen?

The answer is not apparent, but consider these facts. First, Japan's economy is a time bomb waiting to explode. Second, the illusion of a budget surplus has come at the expense of our military, whose moral and readiness are at all-time lows. Third, God is no doubt angry over the legalization of infanticide and the legitimization of Sodomites. Fourth, Middle East policy has placed inordinate pressure upon Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians for the sake of peace. Israel has reluctantly cooperated. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, however, refuses to be satisfied. He and his people have their sights set on the most valuable piece of real estate on this planet—the thirty-two acres referred to as the Dome of the Rock. This is precisely the place where Jehovah's glory filled Solomon's temple, and where prophecy dictates that Israel will one day rebuild the temple and resume the sacrifices.

The challenge America faces is one of loyalty. Israel is considered by many to be the fly in the Middle East ointment. Many in America are sympathetic to that view. Yasser Arafat has the Arab oil-producing nations (OPEC) in his corner. We rely heavily upon oil imports from OPEC. In the event of war, will our government continue to support and defend Israel against its foes? Would we be willing to risk our national security and imperil our economy for Israel's survival?

Brethren, I believe the mercy that God has extended to America is due in large part to our alliance with Israel. Our future may depend upon continued allegiance. It is time for every intercessor to plead our nation's cause, and pray for the courage to do what is right without regard for the cost! The Lord promised Abraham the Hebrew that He would bless those who blessed him, and curse those who cursed him. No political body on this earth can disannul God's promise!

The Preaching of Doctrine

I was reminded this last week of an admonition given by the apostle Paul to Timothy, his son in the faith, and the pastoral appointee of the church at Ephesus. In the last chapter of his last epistle, Paul issued this challenge: "*Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables*" (II Timothy 4:2-4). In our era, we have a tendency to understand this charge in a highly prophetic way that reaches out across the centuries of time. It is obvious from the context, however, that Paul was preparing Timothy for his own ministerial experience.

In the phrase *they will not endure sound doctrine*, the word *they* signifies his church membership, those who heard him expound the Scriptures on a regular basis. Prophetically, it refers to every member of every congregation in the church age. This world could not care less about sound doctrine, nor should we expect them to care. The concern Paul registers with Timothy is that of the church assimilating the spirit of this world, and turning its ears away from the truth. It is this corruptive influence that imperils the church!

The occasion that prompted this reflection was the post-debate analysis offered by political operatives and gurus after the third and final presidential debate. It was agreed that George W. held a slight edge over Al Gore. One reason given was the rhetorical appeal of George W. when he spoke of *bringing people (Democrats and Republicans) together to get things done*. In stark contrast was Al Gore promising to *fight* for the people. So here was conciliation set against confrontation. Real politics, in its purest form, is all about expounding and defending one's ideological principles, dismantling those of the opponent, and challenging the voter to think like you, and elect you to office. Unfortunately, politics is no longer politics.

There seems to be a striking parallel between the poll-driven opinions expressed by the so-called experts and the prevailing attitude in the church toward theological preaching. The doctrines of Scripture are our ideological foundation. The pastor is to expound them, affirm them, expose every system of error that comes against them, and challenge God's people to embrace them, internalize them, and be governed by them! Unfortunately for many, preaching is no longer preaching, and doctrine is no longer doctrine!

Brethren, there is a declining appetite for theological fodder in the Lord's church. This downgrading of doctrinal distinctives is producing a generation of believers whose lives are governed by sentimentality. Those willing to accentuate the truth above the need for unity (whether ecclesiastical or political) are looked upon as the real impediments to peace. My rejoinder is simply this—"Peace with who, God or man?" Personally, I am not willing to abandon the proclamation of theological truth to accommodate the crowd. How about you?

End of a Working Relationship

Working relationships are a necessity of life! In terms of personal survival, they rank right up there with oxygen. They are absolutely vital! What constitutes a working relationship? That question might be answered better by illustration than by definition. Examples include husbands and wives, parents and their children, employers and employees, teachers and students, pastors and congregations. The list is virtually endless. Strictly speaking, it is the cooperative interaction between two or more parties for the purpose of achieving a specific outcome or goal.

Many companies consider an employee's ability to work effectively with team members to be every bit as critical to the corporate mission as technical skills. This dynamic also applies in a church context. The apostle Paul rebuked the Corinthians in this very matter. A divisive spirit had caused their working relationships to suffer despite a plentitude of spiritual gifts. Paul instructed all of his churches that the way to nurture working relationships was through "*forbearing one another, and forgiving one another*" (Colossians 3:13). Do you long to become a spiritual team player? Do you desire to build strong working relationships in the Kingdom? Seek and practice the graces of forbearance and forgiveness!

Working relationships can be as fragile as they are vital! Take the example of Paul and Barnabas as recorded in Acts 15:36-40. As they prepared to embark upon the second missionary journey, a difference of opinion arose in the matter of John Mark, who prematurely departed from the first mission. The Bible says Barnabas *was determined* (v.37) to take Mark, while Paul *thought not good to take him* (v.38). The phrase *was determined* indicates resolute purpose of mind. The words *thought not good* mean to deem unsuitable (unworthy). Both verbs are imperfect, which tells us this debate was lengthy. Barnabas resolved to give Mark another shot. Paul reckoned that a second chance was a bad risk. The *contention* became *so sharp* between them that *they departed asunder one from the other* (v.39). The working relationship was over!

My purpose is to demonstrate that honest differences can and do exist between good and godly men. Is it possible to say whether either of these two men was operating in the Spirit, or in the flesh? I think not! These two spiritual soldiers, driven by love of others, had irreconcilable agendas. Both men lived out their commitments, and enjoyed spiritual success. Paul's legacy is recorded in the last thirteen chapters of the book of Acts. The legacy of Barnabas was written by Paul's own hand—"Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry" (II Timothy 4:11). Is it possible to say which of these legacies will be found more valuable at the Judgment Seat of Christ?

Brethren, working relationships in the Kingdom do come to an end from time to time. The parting of Paul and Barnabas was a contentious one. They can and should be gracious, with both parties anticipating fruitfulness on their journey to the Father's house! Amen!

A Generational Faith

It is virtually impossible to overstate the importance of parental influence in spiritual matters. The familiar saying, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world," is an adage clearly intended to emphasize maternal ability to shape young lives. The Scriptures provide ample testimony to the validity of that statement. Paul's reflections upon Timothy and his godly heritage were expressed as follows: "*When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also*" (II Timothy 1:5). Two godly women had nurtured him in the things of God long before he met the apostle Paul, and laid the groundwork for faith.

What are we told about Timothy's faith? First, it was a **genuine** faith. The Scripture says it was *unfeigned*, meaning a *lack of pretense*, an *absence of hypocrisy*. Its background was the theatrical arts, where actors absorbed themselves in a role to portray someone they were not. It refers to that which is a true expression of one's inner person as opposed to that which a person might take to himself or herself as part of an outer religious identity. In short, Timothy was the real deal! This genuine faith was *in* all three individuals—Lois, Eunice, and Timothy. Jesus' main bone of contention with the scribes and Pharisees was their obsession with the externals of religion, which left them internally destitute of genuine faith. Genuine faith will not bring accolades from society, nor acclaim from the academic community. It will, however, provide the one essential of life—an audience with God!

Second, it was a **gentle** faith. Paul had a great desire to see Timothy, and spend time with him. They were like-minded! Like-hearted! The phrase *being mindful of thy tears* (1:4) suggests a tenderness of heart and the bearing of burdens. It speaks of compassion and gentleness of soul. The words *that I may be filled with joy* (1:4) suggest to us that, in Paul's mind, the next best thing to spending time with Jesus was spending time with those who were like Him! The net result is the same—fulness of joy! Gentle faith, as both tender and compassionate, is a joy to be around!

Third, it was a **generational** faith. It was robust and operative in two prior generations. Generational faith is a proven Biblical concept. Adam, Abel, Seth, and Enos shared a common affinity for God, and called upon His name. Abraham's influence upon Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph is legendary. Consider David and Solomon who came from the loins of Jesse. I firmly believe that God desires all faith to be unfeigned, and to impact successive generations!

Brethren, there is perhaps no greater heritage to be left by a father or mother than that of a generational faith that is both genuine and gentle in nature. In all of our efforts to build wealth, and pass on to our children the benefits of our labor, let us be careful to maintain a godly influence, and a faith that is both genuine and gentle!

No Double-Punched Ballots!

The forces of political correctness in America have created yet another victim—the voter. It appears that some nineteen thousand ballots cast in Palm Beach County were invalidated due to multiple selections for the same office. Election laws in every state disallow double-punched ballots. The offenders are disqualified. Post-election claims of confusion over the "butterfly" ballot have produced a whole new class of litigants. They are demanding recounts and (in some cases) new elections. The fact is that ballots are not technically cast until they are dropped into the ballot box by the voter's own hand. Up to that point, an elector may request any number of new cards if he or she believes an error has been made in their selections. There is ample opportunity for confusion or rule infraction to be remedied before the ballot is cast.

This electoral cliffhanger has created an opportunity for every citizen to reflect upon the spiritual ballots that they are casting in this life. The choice of one's God is infinitely more weighty than that of president. The latter binds us for four years, while the former binds us for eternity! The Bible dispels all confusion in the matter of spiritual choice. Jesus said, "*No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon*" (Matthew 6:24). Jesus taught the impossibility of a double-punched ballot. He ruled out multiple selections. He disqualified the offenders!

Joshua sounded a similar refrain in his final appeal to Israel. He declared, "*Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve Him in sincerity and in truth...And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*" (Joshua 24:14-15). The burden of spiritual choice was placed squarely on their shoulders. It was an either or (not both and) ultimatum. It is also important to recognize that both Jesus and Joshua spoke of service as being directly linked to choice and allegiance. They are inseparable!

Friend, how are you casting your spiritual ballot these days? Is it double-punched? Are you attempting in vain that which Jesus said was impossible? If so, keep in mind that there will be no avenues of advocacy or recourse at the Judgment! No man will be able to claim that God gave him a butterfly ballot! All claims of confusion will be disallowed! There will be no opportunity for a recount or a new election! Your ballot will have been cast!

The good news, however, is that you are still in the precinct, and Jesus is the Supervisor of elections. I would recommend that you approach Him humbly, acknowledge the sin of a double-punched life, and appeal to His mercy for a new ballot. Jesus gave this assurance: "*And he that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out*" (John 6:37). His precious blood can cleanse the deepest and darkest stains of sin! The power of His resurrection can regenerate the soul, and transform the most untoward life! Amen!

Bought with a Price!

It has been said that the most successful individuals in this world have built their lives upon a handful of core beliefs or governing principles. One of my seminary professors proposed to our homiletics class that most preachers in a lifetime receive perhaps a dozen truly profound messages from God out of Scripture, and that these become the guiding force behind all sermon preparation throughout their ministry, weaving themselves into the fabric of other messages.

I am convinced that this is (to a significant extent) true for believers who walk in fellowship with God. One such core belief is the conviction that God holds the title deed to my eternal soul, and is the preeminent Proprietor of my person and possessions! In the parlance of Paul the apostle, I am bought with a price, and should therefore glorify God in both body and spirit because they belong to God (I Corinthians 6:20). This governing truth, once embraced by the mind and embedded in the heart, permeates every other area of Christian discipline!

The phrase *bought with a price* contains two words that command our attention. The verb *bought* is the Greek **agorazo**, which means *to frequent the marketplace* (agora) for the purpose of buying and selling. It is past tense and passive voice. The point in time was the Cross of Calvary, where Jesus transacted the purchase of His church *with His own blood* (Acts 20:28). God Himself was the active party in pursuit of helpless sinners dead in their trespasses and sins!

The word *price* is the Greek **time**, signifying the honorable and fixed price agreed upon by both parties in a transaction. The two parties involved in this transaction were the Father and the Son, prefigured and portrayed in the Old Testament as a *smoking furnace* and a *burning lamp* (Gen. 15:17; Gal. 3:17). The covenant made between these two members of the Godhead secured the eternal salvation of all who would follow the example of Abraham's faith apart from works! The price paid to purchase us was the Divine and sinless blood of God Incarnate! No lesser remedy could have satisfied the holiness of God! Is there a price more honorable or valuable than this that God provided for Himself on our behalf?

The practical ramifications of this glorious truth as a core belief are abundant! Believers who submit themselves to this governing principle in both body and spirit find it far easier to fend off the temptation to deviate from God's prescribed will. This is more fundamental than the "What Would Jesus Do?" quip. It involves a clear sense of Divine ownership—a submission of my rights and prerogatives to His! It settles up front a multitude of life issues! It keeps virginity intact until marriage! It transforms tippers into tithers! It elevates a mere career to a ministry! It steers the eyes away from lust! It brings a sweet savor of Christ to the entire being, promoting obedience and purity of life! Its importance as a building block cannot be overstated!

Brethren, it is impossible to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and grow into His likeness, without first resolving the issue of God's ownership! Has this truth ever embedded itself within your being? Is it a core belief that defines both who you are and what you do? Has

your spiritual life suffered in recent days simply because this precept is no longer at center stage? Genuine joy and inner peace, my friend, is the exclusive domain of those individuals who have these four words—BOUGHT WITH A PRICE—chiseled on the cornerstone of their hearts!

Consolation in Christ's Troubles

My soul is troubled these days. Allow me to enunciate a few of the contributing factors. The clarion calls being issued by liberalism to transform our *duly* constituted republic into a pure democracy are alarming. Senator-elect Hillary Clinton has become the most notable and notorious proponent. The "will of the people" has become the proverbial poster child for this subversive movement. But it is "the rule of law" that has always distinguished our nation, the people's will being subject to it! The intentional blurring of this distinction is at the core of the current electoral crisis!

No group should possess a better grasp of this principle than believers. The essence of the kingdom is the rule of Christ and the disciple being subject to Him. If the minions of liberalism succeed in this effort, it will inflict irreparable harm to our nation as a republic. Moreover, the latter-day Laodicean church will be emboldened to install a spiritual deadbolt lock to its already closed door, where Jesus stands outside knocking, and seeking an entrance (Revelation 3:20).

The pervasive apathy of the electorate is also disheartening. Once again the leader of the free world will be elected by twenty-five or so percent of eligible voters, half of which opted for mindless indifference. Such *laissez faire* attitudes will ultimately result in the forfeiture of precious freedoms, including tax-exempt status for churches and the right to bear arms. Those who are burdened for genuine revival in America are keenly aware of the consequences of abdicated duty by the church—spiritual penury and powerlessness!

In the midst of the inaugural fanfare that ran rampant during His ride through the streets of Jerusalem, and as part of His response to certain Greeks that sought Him, the Lord Jesus said, "*Now is my soul is troubled*" (John 12:27). The verb *troubled* means *to agitate* or *disturb*, and the tense is perfect passive. An expanded translation might read, "*In this the hour for which I came into the world is my soul one having been brought to a state of holy agitation and disturbance.*" What do you suppose were the contributing factors behind the troubling of His soul? The list includes these realities. (1) This same crowd would soon abandon the cry of "*Hosanna!*" and take up "*Crucify Him!*" (2) Judas the betrayer would soon deliver Him to the authorities for thirty pieces of silver. (3) Pilate and his political cohorts would soon set aside the rule of law for the will of the people. (4) He would soon be the Truth on trial in a court of falsehood. (5) He would soon endure public humiliation and excruciating physical pain. (6) He was just a few days away from bearing the iniquity of sinners in His body on the tree. (7) An eternal fellowship with the Father would be broken for three dark and lonely hours.

Brethren, while I am somewhat troubled by the malevolent forces at work in our electoral process, I am seeking to find consolation in the troubles of Christ! He is the One that spoiled those same principalities and powers, and made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it (Colossians 2:15). It is He that sits at the Father's right hand, until His enemies are made His footstool! (Hebrews 1:13). He is the Judge that promotes presidents, putting down one, and setting up another! (Psalm 75:6-7). Our hope must ever be in the preeminent Christ!

Thankful for His Goodness

A genuine spirit of gratitude for God's goodness is perhaps the most desirable and practical of personal traits. No one exemplified this grace more than did the Lord Jesus. The Bible teaches us that a lack of thankfulness for the goodness of God produces *vain* (empty and profitless) *imaginings* and *darkened hearts*, and transforms would-be *wise* men into *fools* (Romans 1:21-22). God's people are instructed to give thanks *in every thing*, and so fulfill a key aspect of His *will* for their lives (I Thessalonians 5:18).

The human propensity for ingratitude was vividly illustrated in Luke 17:11-19. Ten lepers pled for and received the Lord's healing mercy. Only one recipient--a Samaritan--returned to give glory to God. In a public place and without shame, he took a prostrate position at the feet of Christ, and offered his thanks with a loud voice. In His response, Jesus defined this display as indicative of faith--a faith that made him whole. No doubt more than physical healing was implied. The question "Where are the nine?" still demands an answer as it echoes through the centuries!

It is noteworthy that the NT words *thanks* and *grace* have the same Greek derivative--the word **charis**. When this word is translated grace, it denotes unmerited favor bestowed upon the recipient by the Giver. In a context where the meaning is thanks, it suggests a reciprocation of that favor that acknowledges the beneficence of the Giver with appropriate praise. Thus as we bow our heads to offer thanks to God, we acknowledge His benevolent and gracious hand in the provisions we have received. We literally grace His name in return for grace received! And so it is in all that we reckon as grace from His hand. Therefore it is no wonder that the apostle Paul, in concluding a context on the grace of giving, broke into doxology, declaring, "*Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift!*" (II Corinthians 9:15).

Brethren, the strains and stresses of our national and personal life should never be allowed to obscure the everlasting graces that are ours in the Lord Jesus Christ. We must spend time daily recounting His goodness, gracing His name, and lavishing praise upon Him. Such discipline keeps the mind focused and the heart tender. Moreover, it evokes the pleasure of Him Who loved us, and gave Himself for us!

The Father's Business

The electoral clock continues to tick for the presidential contestants. Anxiety levels are rising on both sides of the political divide over the election contest, ballot recounts, transition plans, etc. One potential concern has been the diminished capacity of the next administration to transact *the people's business* effectively due to time constraints in setting up a new government. In the midst of this battle for the White House, God's people must remain focused on *the Father's business*. I submit to you that the business of the Father does not consist of political activism, protesting, picketing, or surrender of the pulpit to a political pundit.

What is the Father's business? Well, the Lord Jesus provided a most practical and illustrative definition of this phrase during His Passover visit to the Temple at age twelve (Luke 2:46-49). Joseph and Mary had traveled a day's journey north of Jerusalem before His absence in the company was discovered (v.44). In response to their query upon finding Him, Jesus asked, "*Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?*" (v.49). Thus Jesus assigned this label to what Luke says He was doing!

Remarkable in Luke's account are the three days spent searching in places *other than* the temple, and Jesus' depth of preoccupation with temple ministry that preempted any search for His parents. May God in this hour grant the same preemptive grace to all who would preoccupy themselves with Kingdom matters!

What was Jesus doing? First, he was "*sitting in the midst of the doctors*" (v.46). The word *doctors* is **didaskolos**, a common NT word meaning *teachers*. Alfred Edersheim suggests that these were eminent Rabbi's celebrated for their mastery of Jewish Canon Law. What we have here is the Divine adolescent engaging the greatest scholastic minds in bold and calm assurance without intimidation. Second, He was also "*hearing them, and asking them questions*" (v.46). Both verbs are present active participles, indicating prolonged activity without coercion from either side. *Asking* has an intensive prefix that suggests a series of questions--literally, questions upon questions. There can be no doubt that, in this historical context, Jesus was seeking to elicit from these teachers their understanding of both the deeper typical significance of the Passover and its actual fulfillment in the course of redemptive history, and to elucidate His own understanding of this event for their consideration. He, of course, was the fulfillment!

Brethren, there are no Biblical prohibitions against political activism. In a democratic republic such as ours, the argument could be made that active engagement in the political process is in fact a rendering (at least in part) unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. The Father's business, however, is distinctively different. It is boldly and calmly engaging the minds of men in constructive dialogue that places truth at the center with a view to influencing them toward a justifying and sanctifying faith in Jesus Christ! This, my friend, is the greatest business in the world! Have you been engaged lately?

Intercessors for Our Time

The churches of our Lord in this great nation have seldom seen such a demonstrative need for intercession on behalf of those who are in authority. We are witnessing a post-election dynamic that is unprecedented in U. S. election history. Every branch of government—judicial, legislative and executive—is thoroughly (if not willingly) engaged in this process. It is safe to assume that the course of history will be charted based upon the outcome of the current contest. It is clear that all God's people (without regard for political stripe) must engage (or re-engage) themselves in Biblical obedience with reference to prayer.

Nearly two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul delivered these inspired instructions to Timothy, pastor of the church at Ephesus: "*I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty*" (1 Timothy 2:1-2). The phrase *first of all* indicates that prayer is the first business of the church, and tops the list of its priorities. *Supplication* speaks of those requests that have an urgent sense of need attached to them. *Prayers* calls attention to the object of our petitions—God Himself! *Intercession* portrays the blood-bought church as an intermediary, approaching the throne of grace on behalf of others who may have no such access. *Giving of thanks* recognizes the sovereignty of Him Who holds nations in the palm of His hand, and His predisposition to answer those who humble themselves before Him.

The phrase *all men* should be understood as meaning *all manner of men without distinction*. In my understanding, the apostle was challenging the pastor to think out of the box, so to speak, regarding the scope of the church's prayer life. Intercession should include every echelon of society, and exclude none outside of its particular caste. God's redemptive will and compassion extend to *all kinds of men*—government officials included! The stated effect upon the intercessor is *godliness* and *honesty*, resulting in a *quiet and peaceable life*. Would you not agree with me that these kinds of benefits are worth whatever price is paid? Do you suppose we have taken for granted the relative peace and quiet we have enjoyed as a church in America? Have we squandered a window of opportunity?

We are told in Scripture that, after Saul's conversion, the churches experienced *rest*, were *edified*, and were *multiplied*, *walking in the fear of the Lord* and *comfort of the Holy Ghost* (Acts 9:31). This is exactly the scenario that Paul envisioned for prayer-oriented churches. There are many who opine that what the church in America needs is a good dose of persecution to purify and grow it. I disagree, and would argue that the greatest potential for church growth exists in quiet and peaceable societies where properly prioritized churches are engaged with God both in supplication and in the salvation of His elect. Brethren, as the potential for great national unrest lurks on our horizon, the church must reaffirm its God-given role as the intercessor for all that are in authority!

No "Undo" Button

A minor incident in my life this last week prompted serious reflection upon a major issue. If you have any experience with computers and word processing, you will immediately identify with the scenario I am about to describe. I was working on my desktop, and executed the wrong keystroke with text selected in the document. Poof! The text was deleted! Problem? Hardly! A simple click on the **Undo** button restored all that I had momentarily lost!

This common and fixable error in the computing world reminded me of the critical nature of decision-making in the real world. Kindled within my imagination was a fresh consciousness of the devastating effects of sin and disobedience against God. In this regard, walking the path of life is dissimilar to working with a word processor. In other words, there is no Undo button for a bad decision!

Consider for a moment the men and women of Scripture who might have received enormous benefit from such a device. Adam, for example, became complicit with Eve in eating the forbidden fruit. His entire being was instantaneously corrupted. Innocence was suddenly vanquished and permanently lost, replaced by an ungodly and uncommon aversion for God his Creator. Nothing less than the precious blood of God Incarnate would be required to atone for the sins of Adam, his wife, and us their children.

Unfortunately, the Undo button has never been an option for the unwise and the disobedient. If so, it is doubtful that Lot would have pitched his tent a second time toward Sodom. Achan would have avoided the accursed thing in the city of Ai like a contagious disease. David would have refused to allow an inadvertent glance at Bathsheba to become an inappropriate gaze. Esau would have reconsidered the sanctity of his birthright. Samson perhaps would have renounced vanity, embraced virtue, and fulfilled his Nazarite vow. Can you identify with these Bible characters? I certainly do! While I rejoice in the forgiveness of sin so abundantly provided me by the Lord Jesus Christ, I am reminded daily of the lingering ill effects of sinful choices.

The Scripture teaches us that the way to avoid *fulfilling the lust of the flesh* is to disallow any *provision* for it by *putting on the Lord Jesus Christ* (Romans 13:14). *Provision* is the Greek **pronoia**, a combination of **pro** (before) and **noia** (a thought). It signifies *forethought*—that which is contemplated by the mind before an action (i.e., decision). We make *provision for the flesh* by allowing our thoughts to entertain or contemplate evil beforehand. Contrariwise, we put on the Lord Jesus by permeating our thought life with the Word of truth, and embedding it there through meditation and prayer so that it wields a dominating effect upon our conduct.

Brethren, in the spiritual realm, the best defense against sin and its dismal aftermath is a mind on offense, pursuing the truth as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. Evangelist R. A. Torrey often described it as "searching the Scriptures daily to discover the will of God, and doing that will every time you find it!" Amen! And so we understand that it is the DO of discipleship that precludes any need for the UNDO of disobedience!

God's Great Salvage Operation

The sales forecast for retailers this last week was rather dismal. Personal income is up while personal spending is down. In an effort to squelch the fears inherent in such a statistical analysis, a spokesperson for a national marketing organization came forward Friday to predict that these cash-laden shoppers would flood stores the week after Christmas in search of bargains, and thus allow retailers to salvage the Christmas season. Make no mistake! Christmas is all about salvage, but not in terms with which this world is familiar!

The intervention of God into the course of human history was indeed a salvage mission. The birth of Christ was a matter of mercy, not money! Propitiation, not profits! Reconciliation, not retail! The dictionary defines salvage as "the rescue of a ship, its crew, or its cargo from fire or shipwreck," or "the act of saving imperiled property from loss." Christmas represents God's great salvage operation! The angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph, saying, "*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). The Son of God came to salvage His people from that which had imperiled their souls and threatened them with eternal loss--their sins!

Critical to a proper understanding of Christmas is the truth that it was Jehovah Himself Who was robed in human flesh. In short, Jesus is Jehovah incarnate! Proof lies in the comparison of passages from both Old and New Testaments. On several occasions, *the LORD God of Israel* is referred to as the *Saviour* of His people (Isaiah 43:3; 45:15; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8). Furthermore, He affirmed the exclusive nature of that role, saying, "*I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour*" (Isaiah 43:11). And again, "*And there is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all ye ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else*" (Isaiah 45:21-22). And again, "*Yet I am the Lord thy God from the land of Egypt...for there is no saviour beside me*" (Hosea 13:4). It would therefore constitute the worst form of blasphemy to assign the title of Saviour to anyone but Jehovah Himself.

In the New Testament, the angel of the Lord spoke these words to shepherds who watched their flocks by night, saying, "*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord*" (Luke 2:10-11). The word *Saviour* is used twenty-four times in the NT. Sixteen times it is assigned directly to the Lord Jesus Christ. In the presence of a hostile Jewish council, Peter declared "*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). Those who would deny the Deity of Christ (i.e., that Jesus is God) are faced with these irrefutable facts--there is none but Jehovah Who can salvage a sinner, and Jesus is the chief and solitary salvager!

Dear friend, this is the time of year for the redeemed of the Lord to celebrate His great salvage operation on behalf of sinners! Oh, what a Saviour is ours in the Lord Jesus Christ! Oh, what a great salvation is ours in Him! Can you say with absolute assurance, "Praise God! I have been salvaged by the Saviour!"?